Women, the Road Narrative, and American Culture

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In his book *Romance of the Road*, Ronald Primeau says that the genre of the road trip thrives because of a culture in which “writers and readers share clearly articulated literary techniques to question, reaffirm, and explore who they are and where they are going.” In America, the road genre has evolved into a highly popular form of fiction. The idea of the open road, a fast car, and what might happen along the way has always fascinated Americans presumably because it brings with it a sense of adventure and freedom from ordinary life.

John Steinbeck wrote in *Travels with Charley* that people he met on his journey had “in their eyes something [he] was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here” (6). Given this great love affair with the road and the freedom to explore, evolve, or escape that a journey allows, the road narrative remains a staple of American literature. Since the automobile revolution, this obsession has only grown. Primeau writes that “Americans have treated the highway as sacred space” (2). It is not surprising that Americans have therefore treated the road trip as a quest for transcendentalism—and the road narrative as a guide.

The road narrative is a combination of earlier genres, such as the travelogue and picaresque¹, that has evolved into a highly popular form of literature in America. Our cultural heritage and literature demonstrates this obsession with travelers in countless books and films that idealize pioneers, cowboys, and characters such as Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, who drove cross-country together in Jack Kerouac’s highly influential novel, *On the Road*. A road trip is a fantasy that gives its readers and writers liberty to declare their desires. These trips encourage independence and strength of will, which make the road the perfect setting for a *Bildungsroman*², especially one that embodies the transitioning world around the protagonist. Primeau says “the American road genre expresses this kind of emergence, reflecting in the road hero evolving social and cultural values and beliefs” (3). If it is true that the American road narrative expresses the changes within our society and culture, then the women’s road narrative does this even more dramatically than the men’s road narratives. Just as there have been radical changes in the roles of women over the last 200 years, changes in the narrative and the critical theory of narrative also rapidly evolved. In particular, the

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¹ A form of prose fiction, originally developed in Spain, in which the adventures of an engagingly roguish hero are described in a series of usually humorous or satiric episodes that often depict, in realistic detail, the everyday life of the common people.

² A type of novel concerned with the education, development, and maturing of a young protagonist.
women’s road narrative moved from a stifled role in men’s narratives into their own modern interpretations that give more accurate representations of women as they are today.

**The Tradition of the Road Narrative**

Traditionally, the protagonists of these idealized road trips were middle-class men who were free to embark on these spontaneous and occasionally reckless journeys, like Sal and Dean in *On the Road*. Women, if they appear in these road narratives at all, are depicted as abstractions or playthings that can be tossed aside when the road calls. Women on the road take a back seat to the men’s adventures. It was not until suffragettes and, later, feminists began to assert more pressure on society for equality that this established standard began to shift. The rights that allowed women more freedom to choose how to live their lives also gave women more freedom to travel and discover who they were, just as men had been doing. In the emerging road texts, the female-driven narrative and its evolution in how women are represented allow us to see how the feminist movement has affected women and our culture. Women have had to assert themselves in order to be accepted as equals in this genre, and since it is such an important aspect of our cultural heritage, this acceptance makes them equals in our society as well.

One of the first authors to explore the female perspective of the American journey was Annette Kolodny. In her book *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and the Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Kolodny explores how throughout history women have been the ones who stay at home, waiting for their adventuring “Adams” to return (5). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were expected to live at home until they married, at which time they would assume the role of keepers of the hearth and be the spiritual and moral guides for their husbands and children. Their society wanted them to stay at home and expected them to be naturally moral enough to be a strong compass for their husbands, who were assumed to be more wayward. Their society did not give them the freedom to explore as it would have their husbands. As Kolodny points out, “life rarely comported with these patterns, [but] they were nonetheless the only patterns the culture offered as desirable” (110). Even when the feminist movement began to gain momentum during this time, most early feminists did not question the validity of these roles. Popular culture made this model the only one desired for women, and if that did not succeed, it would become the model for fantasies of what *should* be. As women began to move westward, these fantasies were projected onto the prairies where a new way of life might be possible.
When colonization of America began and the first frontiers were established, the early women writers felt that they were “threatened by a ‘vast and desolate Wilderness’” (Kolodny 6), and they struggled to find a way to make their own unique set of images about the New World, when the only spaces allowed to them were their homes and cultivated gardens. Kolodny uses the early writers Washington Irving and Frederick Jackson Turner to show how this wilderness mastered the male colonist by “strip[p]ing off the garments of civilization,” (5) while the female colonist was left at home. However, despite these restrictions on her space, women’s public and private documents began to slowly claim the new terrain and make it into images of their own fantasy: “[E]ighteenth- and nineteenth-century women utilized what they could of their surroundings—as men had always done—to announce their presence and imprint their dreams” (Kolodny 12). For these pioneer women, the dream of the West was as an idealized community. They did not travel to escape from civilization in a lone cabin in the wilderness; instead, they looked forward to building a community where they could begin anew and continue the past traditions.

The women Kolodny studies also show a strong desire to preserve family ties, which is a primary tenet of the female road trip. One of the most difficult parts of traveling in the 18th and 19th century was the permanent separation from friends and family. It was because of this separation that prairie women began appealing to their own sex to join them, by promoting the prairie in their writing. However, another reason to write was to prepare their fellow prairie women for the realities of such loneliness. Kolodny writes that even if women described their surroundings in similar ways and for similar purposes as men, their accounts differed from men’s because they were writing for other women since “only another woman, apparently, could appreciate the importance of preparing a sister for the realities of the wished-for transition from log cabin to framed house” (Kolodny 98). Another way women assuaged the pain of separation was by finding surrogate sisters to help them recreate the sense of community they had lost. Perhaps this need for community is what leads Primeau to assume that women only sought a place to settle down. At this time, establishing homes and towns meant that family and community were part of one’s life, and therefore having an arrangement where families were nearby was more desirable when travel was difficult.
Pioneer women understood that the West they were journeying to was a fantasy, but it was one that they embraced, hoping to turn it into a reality. The women writers Kolodny studies fantasized of building a community, but these ideas were in direct opposition to the men’s fantasies of the journey westward. This dichotomy shows that even at the beginning of the women’s road narrative, they were trying to change the course and the masculine narrative into one that fit their own desires. At the time, these desires centered on the home and the family, because that is what women were allowed to control. Society only gave women the role of homemakers, and that is what the majority of their writing focused upon. The women represented an idealized domesticity and sanctuary for the civilizing forces that were often absent in frontier life. But these women—and their successors—soon began to show the reality of their hard lives in the West. They reveal that the realities of women’s travels do not fit well with idealized versions of femininity and that women’s travels were just as important to the development of the country as men’s.

Ronald Primeau uses Kolodny’s book as a source in his study of women on the road. Even though he applies her theories to modern road narratives, he says that “what Kolodny observes about pioneer literature has continued to be true today: ‘Women’s fantasies about the West took shape within a culture in which men’s fantasies had already attained the status of cultural myth’” (109). These male fantasies include seeking the freedom and lack of responsibility that comes with travel. The sense of possibility and the adventures that come from these episodes would also be part of the fantasy. Given the fact that many of women’s narratives would also seek similar freedoms and adventures, it is obvious that women’s fantasies did take shape after the men’s had gained control of the culture’s imagination, but women’s fantasies have not remained consistent; they have evolved with the culture, while the men’s have stayed relatively static. Primeau claims that men’s road narratives continue along the same course they always have: “Dean Moriarty [in On the Road] crashing through the landscape took over where the frontier explorer’s conquest of the virgin land left off” (109). Primeau feels that women have not been properly addressed in road narratives and are mostly left as generalizations that can be thrown aside when the call of the open road gets to be too strong. Unfortunately, Primeau doesn’t use examples of contemporary literature to show how this might be changing. He does recognize some strong female travelers, such as Steinbeck’s matriarch, Ma Joad, from The Grapes of Wrath, who coerces and inspires the men in the family to keep traveling and hope for a better future. However, this example comes from a 1939 novel by a man, and the rest of Primeau’s analysis seems similarly dated despite the fact that his book was published in 1996.
Women’s Evolving Role in Twentieth Century Road Narratives

In his chapter on women’s road narratives, Primeau moves from Kolodny’s pioneer women onto women in the twentieth century (particularly Ma Joad) in order to show how women carried community with them and how their presence acted as a remedy to the isolation and fragmentation of the family. Primeau states that women who followed Ma Joad’s lead on the road changed the metaphors of the landscape “from abrupt spurts to a smoother and more enduring flow” (110). Their journeys are about reconnecting with their families, and Primeau contends that just like the women Kolodny studied, the women in these narratives “show less need to keep moving, or to conquer the unknown than their male counterparts” (115).

Primeau uses Mona Simpson’s 1987 novel Anywhere but Here as an example of the way the road narrative brings mothers and daughters back together. Simpson’s novel tells the story of a young girl, Ann, and her free-spirited, enthusiastic and complicated mother, Adele, as they chase the American dream across the country to California and perpetually move to fulfill their fantasies of a good life. Primeau says that the novel is about “movement itself and perpetually leaving to stay in motion… [it] exploits the richness of America’s metaphor of motion but warns also of its limitations and dangers” (113). But, Primeau contends, Ann and Adele’s desire to achieve their goals in Hollywood is “overshadowed by what Kolodny calls a woman’s desire for relationships and stability” (114). Primeau contradicts himself when he states that Ann and Adele are in perpetual motion, and then later that they find kindred spirits in the women of the last century “who show less need to keep moving…to continue and even hallow the past” (115). With such statements, it is evident that Primeau does not acknowledge the changes that began in the twentieth century; otherwise, he would not relegate Ann and Adele to the same roles played by the pioneer women over 200 years ago. He does not address the fact that Adele never settles down into a home of her own once she reaches California, preferring to live in pre-furnished apartments and rejecting the traditional role of homemaker. Primeau does not speak to the current state of women’s road trips, but instead still shows women as the caretakers for men and their families while traveling and constantly seeking to settle down and maintain a sense of order.

Partially in response to the gaps she observes in The Romance of the Road, Deborah Paes de Barros undertakes the defense of modern women’s road narratives, and specifically Adele, in her
2004 book, *Fast Cars and Bad Girls*. Paes de Barros disagrees with Primeau’s assessment of women’s road narratives. She quotes and then refutes his statement that women in journeys:

> slow the pace, rechart the itineraries, and reassess the goals within the conventions of the typical road quest...women bring a calming influence to the American road. With not as many highs to seek and maintain, the accompanying lows are modulated. The quest is not so manic... (115-116).

Paes de Barros claims that when women are considered in this genre, their stories do not exist within the conventions of the male-dominated literature; instead, they “alter the very geography of the road” (3). Unlike the masculine heroes of most road narratives who are focused on achieving their goals, freedom, and celebrated deeds, women are nomadic subjects. The nomad, writes Paes de Barros, “operates in opposition to the migrant who moves from one clearly defined destination to another, who retains nostalgia for his ‘origins,’ as he pursues a purposeful progress” (7). She says the nomadic woman exists outside of society, resisting the structuring of desire that forces people into traditional couplings. The road woman “rejects all universal rules and categories,” including those of “feminist” or conventional ideas of “woman” (17). This assessment of the women’s road narrative is derived from earlier feminist theory that is only possible because of the changes that have come from women’s liberation. Without the feminist movement, women would not have the ability to move around in the way that Paes de Barros embraces unless, like Ma Joad, they are forced to travel in order to find a place to live or a better job. The women in Kolodny’s narratives only embark on journeys to follow their husbands. The changes in the way women travel—in being able to take any type of journey she might wish—show that a substantial change in the culture has occurred.

For Paes de Barros, another trait of the nomadic woman includes what she brings with her on these journeys. Because the nomadic woman does not exist within traditional civilization, she is responsible for carrying her own form of society with her, or else she must create community wherever she goes. Unlike most masculine heroes, the nomadic woman does not travel alone but usually has her family with her. Paes de Barros declares that the modern woman does not “seek to make new terrain safe for future domesticity” (18) like the pioneer woman. Instead, she “resists the claims of patriarchy that provide name, family and national identity” (18), and her only attachments are ones of love. Kolodny’s focus on the need for family in the women’s road narrative can be seen early in her work, and Primeau also addresses it when writing about mother-daughter trips and the way Ma Joad takes control of the family. However, it had not been defined in such terms until Paes de Barros describes it as ‘nomadic’ and says that it resists the claims of male authority. This description of the nomadic woman traveler may be an extension of Primeau’s earlier assertion that
women’s road trips flow more smoothly than men’s, but Paes de Barros continues past this analysis to make her own, more distinctive break from the men’s road narratives.

Paes de Barros focuses on the ideas of mobility and family in Anywhere but Here, and she writes that it is clear the mother and daughter are nomadic by the way they function in the novel. Ann and Adele remain perpetually in motion and “never make choices because, nomad-like, they can never reconcile themselves to giving up one of their options. They drift” (108). Even though they live in several pre-furnished apartments, they are most comfortable in their car. The white Cadillac becomes a symbol to Adele of her freedom and her dreams. The mother-daughter aspect of Anywhere but Here reflects Paes de Barros’ vision of nomadic women with their familial ties. Throughout their journey, the two are bound to one another despite their conflicts. Eventually, it is the road that brings them back together after five years of estrangement. In the novel, Adele exists as Paes de Barros’ quintessential nomadic woman. She and Ann inhabit a marginalized space, never conforming to traditional migration or lives. Adele needs the open road because “[The] way she looks, lives and acts is determined by the particulars of the individual space she momentarily inhabits. Adele’s identity is derived from her situation, and is therefore mutant” (111). She has rejected her marriage and her home; the only ties that remain are to her daughter.

Just as the mother-daughter journey emphasizes family, the friend road trips emphasize community—another important characteristic of the women’s narrative. These road trips are less concerned with the emotional journey of the characters and more concerned with the strengthening of friendships and confidence in womanhood. These road trips are also about rejections of patriarchal societies and the freedom of the road. One such story in this form is the popular film Thelma & Louise (1991), which struck a chord with audiences throughout the country because of its attack on conventional behavior by depicting freedom from male-driven laws and society. Thelma & Louise is a film that revolves around Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) as they embark on a road trip and escape their
troubled home lives; along the way, they become more empowered and turn into outlaws, killing a man who tries to rape Thelma, then robbing and exacting their own form of justice against men. The film, which goes beyond a simple story of female friendship, establishes a new form of the male “buddy” film and remains a prime example of how the road trip genre has been regendered in recent years.

Jessica Enevold examines this cultural event and the ways in which it has altered the road trip genre in her essay, “The Daughters of Thelma & Louise: New? Aesthetics of the Road.” She shows how the characters of Thelma and Louise are substituted in place of the masculine friends in “buddy genre” film, but that this substitution does more than just reverse the roles—it “radically altered the genre’s premises” (Enevold 76-77). The typical premise would consist of an escape from societal constraints represented by women of domesticity, commitment, and civilization. Instead, it is the women who are escaping from the obligations of work, marriage, and home that allow other women to see similar possibilities for freedom and thus alter what is expected of women’s road narratives. The reversal of women and men in this film is consistent with Paes de Barros’ ideas that modern women alter the geography of the course they take and reject male domination. Just like Paes de Barros’ nomadic subjects, Thelma and Louise are on a journey that has no definite course. Their choices are made in the spur of the moment, rather than from thought-out plans. This is reminiscent of the way Adele and Ann act when on the road.

Enevold discusses examples of stories and novels that followed the film Thelma & Louise in order to show how the film renewed the road genre. The characters in the stories she quotes thrive off the freedom they see in the film, and even directly reference it in their own road trips. These examples of modern road genres show that the female version of the genre does not follow the male road genre; instead, it has finally begun to create the female mythological characters that Kolodny did not find in the earlier women’s writings. Men’s road narratives tend to have a stock character that can be seen throughout, in different phases. The women’s road narrative continues to create different sorts of mothers and daughters to populate their stories. Many of the women also make their journeys with other women besides daughters, showing that while freedom is something to seek, the ties of community are never cut.

**Challenges for Women in Road Narratives**

Deborah Clarke seems to agree with Enevold about the challenges to the form of the road narrative that women present. Clarke says that authors of these narratives show that “women on the
These challenges require “significant re-theorizing and re-contextualizing of concerns of mobility” because they are fields that are just beginning to be explored (102). She considers how the automobile affects the women’s road narrative by discussing how femininity is constructed when it is taken from the home and put into a car (102). Just as Paes de Barros claims that women take civilization with them on their journeys rather than run from it, Clarke suggests that not only do they take it with them, they also subvert the traditional ideas about women and domesticity by combining the home and the automobile into a form of transitory domesticity. She says that “road trips undertaken in contemporary women’s fiction…reveal the uneasy contradictions underlying women’s mobility: the possibility of freedom and the constraints of domesticity, the ability to escape the physical confines of the home and the reconfiguration of home as mobile” (103). Clarke discusses the stereotype that women tend to “domesticate the car,” turning it into something reminding her of the home to which she will return. By writing about the car as a symbol of women’s emancipation, modern writers challenge these assumptions and still never take for granted the independence it lends.

However, Clarke concedes that women do not escape from domestication entirely with the car. Instead, she shows how two writers, Bobby Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver, explore the boundaries between home and car, opening up the “possibilities of reconfiguring women’s place as both situated and mobile, both domestic and independent” (105). Mason’s In Country (1985) and Kingsolver’s The Bean Trees (1988) show how family and the automobile combine to create a distinctly female journey. The protagonists in these novels do not try to follow in Jack Kerouac’s footsteps. They understand that these road trips do not promise the transcendental answers sought by Kerouac or his characters. They do not try to escape their attachments or responsibilities.

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3 Jack Kerouac, one of the most influential members of the Beat Generation, wrote On the Road, an autobiographical novel about his road trips across America during the 1940s and 1950s. The novel influenced poets, musicians and countless others, especially young people, as they sought the America and the freedom Kerouac embraced in his journeys. It is seen as a template for other road trip novels that have followed in the 50 years since it was written.
women in these novels are mothers or become mothers, and therefore cannot begin their trips spontaneously or without considering money and family. But they do alter the traditional associations of women as home and place in order to become both domestic and independent. They also exist within the mother-daughter narratives that are a theme of women’s road narratives.

Clarke also quotes the same passage that Paes de Barros borrows from Primeau, that women slow the course of the journey, but she goes farther, adding to it Karen Lawrence’s argument from Penelope Voyages. Lawrence says that women’s travel writing “includes a strong sense of the constraints on self propelled movement and mistrust of the quest and its purposeful destination” (qtd. in Clarke 111). This statement, which reflects both Paes de Barros’ and Primeau’s statements, seems to play the middle ground between them. Instead of countering his statement, Clarke shows how women may slow the pace, but they do so because they are negotiating the balance between travel and domesticity of family. The women are changing the road trip into something that is more integrated into their lives. Rather than a classic escapade before adulthood—the fling that transports one into manhood—the woman’s road narrative seeks to determine the woman’s relationship to the world and the community. It is about knowing one’s self and strengthening the bonds between the self and community, even if it involves loss or failure rather than adventure.

**Women Alter the Road Narrative Culture**

By asserting their voice in the road narrative, women have changed the way our culture perceives the road trip and its purpose. They continue to make it modern and open to other minorities as well. Applying the same analysis of traditional women’s road narratives to the 2005 film, *Transamerica*, we can see that evolution at work. In this film, a transgendered woman is forced to recognize and address the family that she does not necessarily want. The son she did not know she had, from when she was still living as a man, accompanies her on a journey cross-country that forces both of them to see each other as family.

In the beginning of the film we see Bree, the protagonist, cut off from her past life and from the family who cannot understand her transgender choice. Having no ties to anyone and working as a dishwasher in a Mexican restaurant, Bree is afraid of how people perceive her and displays a stilted mimicry of womanly traits. It is through the events of her journey that Bree begins to show signs of truly being comfortable as a woman. By taking her son on a road trip, Bree inadvertently carries family with her; this in turn helps her reconnect with her estranged parents. The film also displays the circular route of a women’s road narrative, as Bree does not take a straight path but one that
circles from Los Angeles to New York City and back. The journey forces Bree to face her past and her fears, and also helps her find a place in a family and a community. It is because of a road trip that Bree is able to find herself and a voice that no longer conforms to her view of how a woman should behave, but how a woman actually does behave. This film takes its cues from the women’s road narratives, but also alters the characteristics in its own way by having as its protagonist a transgendered woman. It is another example of how the women’s road narrative continues to evolve and explore the trends in today’s culture. It reflects back to us the changes we are going through as a society and the challenges women continue to face as they work toward finding a balance between the freedom of the open road and the responsibilities society places on them.

Women writers in this century seized upon the road narrative in order to express a form of identity and to experience freedom from controlling society. By taking typically masculine experiences and altering them to include things that matter to women, they fundamentally changed the writing, adding layers to the subgenres that were not present before. The road narrative’s importance in America has always been important to our culture; we see it as a symbol of the freedom and adventures our country has always embraced since its discovery. But now the road narrative also encompasses writing that has distinctly American and feminine characteristics. It moves from the fantasies of domesticity in the wilderness, where women were the social order, to fantasies of escape from the constraints of immobility. By exploring how women have been able to find a distinctive voice in this American cultural phenomenon, we see how our society has shifted and allowed women to assert their desires and determine their place in our country and communities.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


