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# Therapeutic journeys: subversion of archetypal convention in women's travel narrative

Dawn Eyestone  
*Iowa State University*

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**Therapeutic journeys: Subversion of archetypal convention in women's travel narrative**

by

**Dawn Eyestone**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Jane Davis, Major Professor  
Kathy Hickok  
Debra Marquart

Iowa State University

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## PART ONE: CRITICAL EXAMINATION

### What is Travel Writing?

Travel writing is a complicated genre, rich with many authors and styles, all varieties of landscapes, descriptions, and viewpoints on cultures, as well as journeys, both within and without. Criticism on travel writing, however, has curtailed the complexity of the genre and reduced the canon of writing to work which fits within prescribed archetypes, archetypes which promote images of the traveler as monochromatic: the white western male. Recent contributions to the genre have challenged this narrowed idea of the traveler but have not all been recognized critically. A serious critical gap appears at the point where the genre intersects with gender—the point at which strong travel writing fails to meet prescribed archetypal narration.

#### *Definitions and Problems*

Before any significant exploration of specifics of gender and genre can be completed, I felt it necessary to define what I am calling the genre of travel writing. Specifically, I am referring to works of creative nonfiction in which travelers create a written record of an actual journey the writers, themselves, have taken. Writing fitting this general description can be described with a variety of terms without differentiation, including *travel writing*, *travel narrative*, *travelogue*, and *travel memoir*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At a few points throughout this essay, works of fiction are referenced. While these fictional texts do not fit into this particular definition of travel writing, they are used as examples containing traditional (and usually male) archetypal roles like “adventurer” or “conqueror” within literature. While such works are outside of the genre of travel writing and are not meant to be part of the examination, they fit in the context of the essay by demonstrating that literature is a mode of fixing gender-differentiated roles.

A critical exploration of what belongs within the genre of travel writing is what this examination is all about. Currently, the genre is filled with a variety of voices but critical awareness of those voices is difficult to access due to their failure to meet archetypal standards that have been imposed by critics of the genre. In her essay “The Metamorphosis of the Travel Book,” Vita Fortunati examines the evolution of travel writing as represented in the works of Vita Sackville-West. Fortunati’s investigation suggests Sackville-West herself questioned what travel writing actually was when she says, “Sackville-West asks some crucial questions: is it possible to write a travel book? And what is the difference between writing a travel book and writing letters?” (68). Since Sackville-West both records her journey through Persia in her book *A Passenger to Teheran* and records her thoughts on the journey in letters to her friend Virginia Woolf, Fortunati notes Sackville-West was trying “to find a precarious balance between a didactic-scientific scope and entertainment” (68) pointedly highlighting how wide the genre of travel writing actually is, and foreshadowing the difficulty and confusion in recognizing the multiplicity of voices within the genre.

Within the broad definition I use here, a number of subcategories could be created. Some authors employ a diary style, recording their thoughts with dated journal entries, others write down their trip from memory after having returned from the journey. Still others record very detailed and scientific information while their contraries spend little or no time trifling with such minutia. Since this genre does stretch, proverbially, from coast to coast, the use of the term *travel writing* in this context covers all of these possible manifestations of the work. For the purpose of this inquiry, such differentiation within the genre is significant within the framework of the inquiry itself rather than as a way to subcategorize the genre. Thus, any

work of nonfiction written by an author who made the journey recorded in the text counts as travel writing in this context.

Defining an entire genre is a deceptively simple task. Many of the critics of travel writing begin their texts with a similar desire to define the genre, some doing so in a way which severely limits what would “count” as travel writing, either through overt declarations of what is required or through more subtle assumptions about the narrative voice and/or the recounting of the journey. For some, like Michael Kowalewski, strictly defining the genre is necessary to his consideration of works to be regarded as serious literature worthy of canonical inclusion and criticism.

In his 1992 critical text, Temperamental Journeys, Kowalewski begins with a note about problems recognizing travel writing as a literary genre deserving of critical attention:

In the last ten years there has been a resurgence of interest in travel writing unequalled since the twenties and thirties. This revival is evident not only in the recent reprinting of travel classics but in the remarkable number of new travel writers and otherwise established authors who try their hand at the genre, both commanding sizable popular audiences. Despite this fact, however, criticism of modern (by which I mean twentieth century) travel writing has been scanty, especially in regard to American travel narratives. There has been very little critical effort to incorporate this burgeoning body of work into the literary canon or even to investigate why it resists incorporation. (1)

His introduction clearly indicates the literature itself is available but for some reason is not receiving proper attention. He goes on to identify one possible cause for this to be that

“many” refuse to take the works seriously (1). The problem, he asserts, is that “adventure and risk-taking have been transformed...into commodities that have more to do with status anxieties and utopian longings than genuine interest in other cultures” (1). Kowalewski has identified what he requires of the genre of travel writing, though he does not give specific examples or define who the “many” are. He has made several claims, each of which I wish to point out more specifically.

He states a “transformation” has occurred in the writing. His belief is that the work is transforming into something therapeutic and that the therapeutic aspect of travel writing is bad for the genre and to be avoided. He identifies adventure and risk-taking as paradigms of the genre that are being thus transformed. He states the “escape-motive” in travel writing should be avoided and goes on to claim that to be literature, travel writing should, in part, tell the story as Robert Frost claimed was necessary in good fiction: through reporting on the events as though they happened to another (Kowalewski 2). The implication is that the writing does not contain too much internal personalization or private interpretation.

Throughout Kowalewski’s introduction, he repeats these key ideas, some of which I will return to in more depth later in this essay, but the idea he repeats most frequently is best summarized by his statement at the conclusion of the introduction when he says “travel writing promises both adventure and return, escape and homecoming” (14). This claim represents a consistent assumption about what is required in a work to make it “count” as travel writing—adventure—and Kowalewski is not the only critic making this assumption. The problem, of course, is just what exactly does he mean by adventure? Although Kowalewski is not specific on his definition of adventure, other critics are.

Christopher Brown begins his Encyclopedia of Travel Literature by attempting to give the nebulous “adventure” a more particular shape. He says that to be valuable, travel literature must “teach us about courage, about determination, about those abstract traits that may be called the ‘human spirit’” and adds that his encyclopedia includes only “the most famous travelers...and the most well-known accounts of travel, exploration, and adventure” (viii). Here, Brown goes one step beyond Kowalewski by actually giving some specific characteristics to what makes up a traveler and thus what belongs in a book about a journey. It seems the definition has evolved from adventure to something more like “epic adventure.”

The critics agree that within travel literature, the author must undertake a journey which places emphasis on the exterior physical aspects of the journey while de-emphasizing the more internal or emotional ones. What this consensus amounts to is the creation of an archetypal figure of the traveler. This typically male figure is the legendary Odysseus, on an epic quest, battling monsters, overpowering nature and the gods, to triumph over his foes, win back his kingdom, and return to his faithful wife, Penelope. This archetype is inherently masculine, inherently an explorer, a conqueror. As Karen Lawrence notes in her preface to Penelope Voyages, “it is a Western cultural truism that Penelope waits while Odysseus voyages” and she wonders “what happens when Penelope voyages?” (ix-x). One answer to this metaphorical question might be: it depends on whose map she uses. These often masculine characteristics of adventure are what Lawrence calls the basic trope of the traveler (2) and what I refer to as the Odysseus archetype. This archetype creates an artificial standard within the genre which, by its very self-definition, prevents any non-white western male narrator from achieving recognizable status.

In Tourists With Typewriters, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan confirm this trope in their curiously titled chapter “Gender and Other Troubles” when they begin by noting that “travel and travel writing are saturated with mythology, but more often than not the myths they invoke are predominately male” and add that “the rhetoric of travel is shot through with metaphors that reinforce male prerogatives to wander and conquer as they please” (111). This prerogative has been challenged in recent decades by authors of travel narrative, many of them females, who travel and write with a voice that evokes a different mythology.

The last three decades have seen an explosion of writing in the genre of travel memoir. So many books and collected anthologies line the shelves of local bookstores and libraries that it is impossible to catalogue the sheer numbers of available works. Despite the amount of available travel writing, much of it by women, however, the works and the authors themselves seem to be beneath the radar of serious literary criticism. The material is available but the criticism is absent.

Kowalewski has also observed that a large portion of the genre of travel writing, especially work from recent decades, is being critically overlooked. He does not, however, offer a sufficient explanation for this critical gap. I offer my own. Travelers not writing within the traditionally accepted parameters of the genre—the Odysseus archetype—are getting misplaced outside of the genre because they fail to establish a “suitable” narrative voice. By not writing about conventionally themed stories of adventure, they are being excluded from what is considered travel writing. Though the works themselves are available, they are being categorized as something other than travel writing and left for someone else to examine. Often that “someone else” is no one.

*Critical Requirements for the Travel Writing Canon*

Why is this exclusion of certain texts from travel writing a problem? Kowalewski wants to incorporate more travel writing into the literary canon but does not present a way to proceed towards that goal. Examining the pre-existing canon would seem to be a good place to start. The authors included here are noted precisely because they have been traditionally examined and included in the canon. The list was created from the critical texts discussed here as well as other anthologies and critical texts on travel writing.

Authors included in these texts vary but some names make frequent appearances such as those in volumes dealing with earlier writing like Travel Writing 1700-1830 or Return Passages: Great American Travel Writing, 1780-1910, as well as modern anthologies including the annual The Best American Travel Writing and the anthology specifically mentioned by Kowalewski, The Norton Book of Travel. Texts focusing on work before about 1900 are much more prevalent as is the criticism of such texts, which often focuses on colonization and post-colonialism. Such volumes include authors like Charles Darwin<sup>2</sup>, James Cook, Henry Morton Stanley, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Mary Kingsley, while later texts frequently name Henry Miller, John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux, Peter Matthiessen, Pico Iyer, and Joan Didion<sup>3</sup>. This

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Darwin's 1859 scientific text, Origin of Species, is the first of what I would classify as scientific travel writing. He painstakingly records the facts and observations of the foreign place with accuracy and attention to detail which leaves no room for personal feeling, abstract conversation, or connection to his personal life or a public politic. While this was Darwin's goal and his scientific methodology is essential to modern science, it does create a precedent for writing and travel as scientific and unbiased, correct in its meticulous record-keeping, absence of emotion, and secular position.

<sup>3</sup> In Maiden Voyages, editor Mary Morris chooses to include excerpts by both Joan Didion and another well-known author Annie Dillard. In the introduction to that volume, Morris concedes that including these two women in an anthology of travel writing might not be completely accurate for the genre but notes the two "serve as a catalyst to broader musings about the world" because of their sense of place (xxi). Joan Didion is frequently included in other travel writing anthologies as well and I wish to distinguish here between critical works written about an author and critical works written about an author within the genre of travel writing. Although a vast amount of criticism does exist on Joan Didion and her work; most of this

is by no means a comprehensive list of travel writers; however, the authors on this list have consistently been recognized as writers within the travel genre and have each had criticism written specifically about their individual works. Despite Kowalewski's concern that travel writing is missing from the canon, it appears as though the authors included here are quite easily accessible and canonically recognized.

I wish to emphasize the singular phrase "travel writing" in compiling this list because other authors are frequently available but require additional modifiers for the search, including "women" or "black." It is quite obvious from the above list that people representing a cross-section of genders, races, and classes are noticeably absent. The few women included in the canon are all of the same race and class. In the introduction to her anthology of women's travel writing, Maiden Voyages, Mary Morris quotes Mabel Sharman Crawford when she says the authors included in her anthology are "women of independent means without domestic ties" and Morris adds that "this trend has not shifted greatly in the past two hundred years as we are left with a legacy of colonialism" (xxi). The travel writing canon is clearly lacking authors of color.

As the list of authors demonstrates, the canon of this genre is dominated by authors of a certain gender, race, and class. Morris noted that "travel literature by both men and women awaits its full range of multicultural voices and perspectives" (Maiden Voyages xxi). Her note is disturbing and myopic since these multicultural voices are not absent from the genre, rather they are unacknowledged by the canon. Morris's act of "awaiting those voices" was insufficient to explain away the absence of these other writers. Instead of waiting, I wanted to

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criticism does not deal with her as a travel writer per se but as a noted author and journalist in general. More on Didion follows later in this essay.

actively search them out. My research led to the discovery of a single anthology, Go Girl, among hundreds listed as *women's* travel writing that included writing by authors of color.

Though some of the works in Go Girl might not fit easily into the definition of travel writing given at the beginning of this essay, as they are sometimes fictional or speculative, widening the circle of what can be included in the genre of travel writing is important to the larger argument I am making because neglecting authors whose works “don't quite fit” is exactly what I find problematic about the genre. This one volume from 1997 included travel writing such as Maya Angelou's “All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes”, Audre Lorde's “Is Your Hair Still Political?”, and Gwendolyn Brooks' “Black Woman in Russia” I found it interesting to discover that Alice Walker, an author I have read and admired, kept journals about her travels in Indonesia in 1987, later published as “Ubud, Bali” but that such works are not generally included in the travel writing canon. Why isn't Alice Walker's work included in critical examinations of travel writing? Perhaps Alice Walker isn't “supposed to be” writing travel narrative.

This critical absence is central to my argument. It's not difficult (in 2008) to find literature written by Alice Walker, but that literature is catalogued as a certain genre of work which doesn't include travel narrative. With the exception noted above, the rest of the material I could find discussing travel narratives by anyone not matching a white, middle class image was not included in the travel writing category, but in an/other section. For example, Richard Wright's Travel Writings does not appear on any searches for travel writing despite the fact that the key word in the search is also in the title of the text. As the abstract for Virginia Whately Smith's book confirms: “Wright's travel writings shows [sic] how in his hands the genre of travel writing resisted, adapted, or modified the forms and

formats practiced by white authors” (Smith front flap), Wright’s work is clearly travel writing even though it deviates from canonized work. Wright wrote a number of books on his experiences traveling in various parts of the world, including Pagan Spain in which Wright details the political unrest and human condition in a foreign country, but his work is absent from any critical discussion of travel writing.

In addition to the difficulty in uncovering criticism which includes authors of color intentionally writing travel narratives of their own, the canon has excluded authors writing narratives of travel which don’t fit the prescriptions at all because they completely deviate from the Odyssean archetype. Such texts include but are not limited to slave narratives, by authors like Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Jacobs, as well as works like the 1850 memoir The Narrative of Nancy Prince, a tale of a free black woman’s journey across Russia, Jamaica, and the United States. In metaphorical terms, the archetypal narrator in an epic adventure is the captain of the ship wandering above deck, while the “savages” on the distant shores or the “cargo” locked in the hold are the objects to be overcome by the narrator. By re-telling the tale of the voyage from this new perspective, the archetype is completely discarded and invalidated; however, the narrative is still a travel narrative. The canon has silenced these alternate views of the journey through euphemistically titled “aesthetic” concerns which focus on exterior thematic issues instead of listening to the multiplicity of voices that have made a journey, whether above deck or below.

I challenge Morris’s claims that the genre is awaiting multicultural voices. More accurately stated, those voices await the acknowledgement of the genre. The writing isn’t missing, it’s the narrow definition of what “counts” as travel writing that is problematic. Often, these “waiting voices” are intentionally subverting the dominant archetype, as Richard

Wright does in his travel writing. Morris, herself, despite her “waiting” is attempting to acknowledge the problem. Other critics also attempt to address the problems with the conventional canon.

Unfortunately, even critics like Casey Blanton, who acknowledges that writers exhibiting “more subversive voices used to resist these conventions” of the white, male dominated narrator-adventurer archetype “ought to be considered and read as complex, new contributions to the genre” (Blanton 57), still restrict the genre by failing to include any authors of color in the discussion; and Blanton limits his discussion of female authors to a single chapter focusing on Mary Kingsley, an author who already fits within the accepted conventions.

My point here is that women and authors of color are not absent from the travel writing available for reading, but the work is absent from the criticism on travel writing because, through their failure to conform, they have been categorized as something else. Other authors are travelling and writing about their travels and the work is being published and is available (if you know where to look) but the criticism of the work is absent. Dominant critics of the genre are resistant to including these alternate voices in the discussion of travel writing because the work itself contains themes and imagery which do not fit with the established archetype. By writing in a way that is outside of established standards for the genre, these authors have been, critically speaking, placed “somewhere else” and often, that placement is a political rather than an aesthetic one.

Meeting established standards is hardly unique to travel writing. In fact, the sanctioning of appropriate characteristics by the literary academy for a particular genre is exactly what creates a canon. Traditionally, who fits as a “major writer” in a particular genre

is dependent upon how well that writer merges the work within narrowly prescriptive parameters. But, as W. Lawrence Hogue notes in Discourse and the Other, this canonical fitting-in is not scientific, it is political. Hogue says that the production of critical works is “an active and ongoing part of literature and the cultural apparatus as they produce objects whose ‘effects’ function to reproduce a particular literary experience, or particular literary conventions or stereotypes” and concludes that “those literary texts that reproduce particular literary ‘experiences’ are promoted and certified. Those that do not reproduce certain ‘experiences’ or ideological effects are repressed or subordinated” (5). In travel writing, the reproduced experience is Caucasian and masculine. This process of subordination, often, is subtle, unknown even to the critics who perpetuate it.

Kowalewski, for example, acknowledges limitations in the canon when he comments on the lack of female voices in the genre. He notes that the 1986 Norton Book of Travel includes only 3 female authors in 56, and calls the exclusion “unjust.” He therefore includes an essay in his text by Mary Morris to address these “questions pertaining to gender” in travel writing (14). Kowalewski has observed that a gap exists between the literature that has been written and the criticism on the literature, even noting that categorizing travel writing as a genre is exceedingly difficult, in part, due to some of the same problems mentioned earlier by Vita Fortunati relating to its “dauntingly heterogeneous character” that defies easy categorization or analysis (Kowalewski 7). He approaches the knot of subordination, identifies issues of difference within gendered voices, but hesitates to untangle this knot himself, instead leaving the task to Morris, a woman.

Other critics, like Christopher Brown, simply ignore gender altogether, instead falling back on the definition of “good” travel literature. His compiled encyclopedia of authors,

which does include women, deals with each author in terms of how well he or she measures up to the adventure ideal. For example, in his entry for Robyn Davidson, an Australian author of travel literature including Tracks, Brown refers to Davidson's "toughness" and says her works recount "epic adventures" which he describes with terms like "solo trek," "enduring scorching heat," "dauntless spirit," and self-reliance" (71). Although Davidson certainly is worthy of critical examination as a travel writer, the fact that Brown's inclusion of her in his encyclopedia was based on certain characteristics that fit an established paradigm demonstrates the limits he has placed on the genre itself.

Brown's encyclopedia, at only 240 pages, curiously short for something called an encyclopedia, excludes any mention of Mary Morris, who by the time the volume was published, had herself written and published two full-length travel books and edited an anthology of travel writing by women. Brown's parameters for "good" literature are exceedingly difficult to comprehend, as he not only excludes major female authors I would expect to find, but he also excludes authors like Peter Matthiessen, whose absence from Brown's work is nothing short of bizarre. I wondered if these authors' resistance to convention, however subtle, explained their absence.

In fact, Peter Matthiessen is a good example of a travel writer who fits the established traditions of the genre while still resisting many conventions of travel narrative. In The Snow Leopard, Matthiessen narrates his days of sitting on ledges watching sheep. In these records, the reader gets a very scientific record of the place, the animals and plants, the physical report of what it was like to be in Nepal. Similarly, he records physical and cultural information about the people who inhabit these places from a distance; his interactions with them are frequently limited to getting his basic needs met rather than a full exchange of

friendship. Matthiessen upholds a certain position of race, class, and gender that establish him as an adventurer: he is a man recounting an epic tale of conquest over nature while he subverts that dominant position through his non-Christian spirituality and internal dialogues about his personal struggles with home and family. Despite his departure from some of the conventions of the travel narrative, Matthiessen meets enough of the “requirements” to be placed within the genre, at least by critics like Kowalewski and Blanton. However, authors who fail to meet too many conventional requirements, many of them women, get stuck at home, at least critically speaking, and, like Lawrence’s Penelope, to be stuck at home is to be silenced.

In fact, the criticism on women writing in the travel genre from the turn of the twentieth century to the present is strangely silent. Credit for their travel writing comes sparingly and late. Jessica Enevold reports in “The Daughters of Thelma and Louise: New? Aesthetics of the Road” that in 1952, Simone de Beauvoir penned her travel narrative, America Day by Day, about her experiences crossing the United States by car in 1947. This thoughtful piece of writing, which conveys the travelling experiences of an intentionally and self-proclaimed early feminist theorist, was all but ignored by critics at the time. In 1997, Douglas Brinkley finally gives Beauvoir credit for writing the “supremely erudite American road book” (Brinkley qtd. in Enevold 75), comparing what she has written with Jack Kerouac’s road classic, On the Road and William Least Heat-Moon’s narrative Blue Highways, which appeared ten and forty years later, respectively (Enevold 75). It took nearly fifty years for Beauvoir to be noticed as a writer of travel narrative though her name is hardly unfamiliar to scholars of women’s literature. A discord exists between the genre and gender which accounts for this.

Sara Mills, in her text Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism, begins her discussion of the genre by acknowledging the difficulties in reconciling gender and genre. Referring specifically to an examination of travel writing in relationship to gender differences, she notes "the reduction of the complexity of the text to one main parameter [gender] usually means that a large number of other features in the text which do not fit into that schema have to be ignored" (29). Here, Mills admits that overgeneralization about gender differences within writing becomes problematic for the same reasons I discovered: the exceptions to the hoped-for rule. Mills concedes that it is her goal in the remainder of the text to "construct a unified field of 'women's travel writing'" through an examination of both male and female writing (29). Interestingly, Mills' discussion at this point moves into colonialism and what she calls "proto-feminism" which focuses on authors writing between the turn of the century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. She does not discuss modern women's writing.

Since Mills so specifically targets a particular time period of women's writing to examine, I think this time marker is also relevant and useful to examine more closely. Instead of repeating the work Mills has done, the examination must move forward in time. With an additional fifty years of writing, a proto-feminist approach is no longer suitable for authors working in the last quarter century. Interestingly, the female authors being critically examined in travel writing drop off about the same time that second wave feminism picks up steam.

This temporal correlation seems unusually coincidental. Morris's first travel writing work takes place shortly after a great deal of second wave feminist theory became available. In Morris's introduction to the anthology of women travel writers, Maiden Voyages, she

even quotes Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own. Clearly, Morris has given thought to feminist theory in her travel writing and the travel writing of other women. This may help explain the lack of criticism of women's travel writing in the last thirty years; the existing critics of travel writing may be leaving feminist authors, such as Beauvoir, out of their discussion because she is associated with another genre of writing. Essentially, work which fits within multiple genres gets ignored by critics of all genres. The evidence of this is in the lack of criticism of travel texts by otherwise well-known authors, usually categorized as feminists or authors of color, such as the previously mentioned Walker, Wright, and Beauvoir.

Mills' case studies include turn-of-the-century authors like Mary Kingsley and Alexandra David-Neel, important women travel writers, not to be ignored. In fact, many examinations of the genre of travel writing centers on writers from this time period, often within a colonial or post-colonial framework. Mary Kingsley's work Travels in West Africa especially is frequently noted as the "female" contribution to the genre. It is important to note when Kingsley's work is referenced in this context critics of travel narrative and colonialism are not making a distinction between the work of women and the work of men. Frequently, the references to Mary Kingsley are offered as the token female to diversify the criticism a little bit. Mary Kingsley traveled alone, without family or a husband, "roughing it" through African swamps while battling crocodiles and meeting tribesmen. Her perceptions and her writing were shaped by this traditionally masculine paradigm of "adventurer." Ten Who Dared, by Desmond Wilcox, the companion book to the popular PBS television series on world exploration (conquest?), gives nine of its ten slots to males. Kingsley, it seems, can

represent all female explorers as the tenth slot-filler because she fits the archetype of adventurer.

In the introduction to Ten Who Dared, written by David Niven, the text touts that these explorers “were brilliant, idiosyncratic people, men and women [woman, to be accurate] of imagination, curiosity, force, determination and, above all, courage. Theirs were ultimate adventures, carved out by single human beings unguarded against the elements and the unknown” (9). Here, Niven summarizes the entire paradigm of what it means to be an explorer—he (or occasionally, an androgynous she) is a trailblazer, someone of superior abilities, cutting a path through the *uncharted* and *uninhabited* wilderness to conquer the natural world. It isn’t that Kingsley is notable as doing something innovative, it’s that she’s a female Odysseus, doing what the men have been doing all along: “taking civilization to the natives” which separates her from the places where she travels. Numbers of other surveys of the genre and criticism on travel writing as a whole repeat this pattern of naming a single female author as a representative example in the particular text.

In Casey Blanton’s text Travel Writing: The Self and the World, he finds fault with Morris’s claim in the introduction to Maiden Voyages that women’s travel writing is different than men’s. Morris, he points out, focuses on the “internal journey” of women and Blanton says this “critical stance is ultimately dangerous, since it still serves to marginalize women as writers of the confessional mode, rather than allowing us to see them as a part of the conversation that is travel writing, a discourse that includes the confessional and the autobiographical” (58). He goes on to admit that despite his disagreement with her feminist stance on the literature, her anthology is “nonetheless valuable because it introduces remarkable writers whose travel books should never have been overlooked: Flora Tristan,

Mary Wollstonecraft, Isabella Bird, Anna Leonowens, Gertrude Bell, Kate Marsden, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Isak Dinnessen, Rebecca West, Beryl Markham, Dervla Murphy, Joan Didion, and Annie Dillard” (58).

But preceding his criticism of Morris, Blanton emphasizes a point made by Sara Mills in Discourse of Difference, that the traditional “adventurer” voice of the male traveler is not necessarily the chosen voice of female narrators; however, these “more subversive voices used to subvert convention are not lesser voices because they are not male, but ought to be considered and read as complex, new contributions to the genre” (57). Here, Blanton makes the assertion that criticism should make room for the consideration of new female voices but, with the exception of the Victorian traveler, Mary Kingsley, who upholds the traditional adventure archetype, he does not do so himself.

Blanton seems to have blinders on here as he disproves his own point. This passage is the only place in the entire book where he mentions these “overlooked” writers. Six of his seven remaining chapters focus on male writers of the genre. Only one chapter is dedicated to a female, that being Mary Kingsley, who he notes in his chronology died in 1900.

In fact, his “chronology” at the beginning of the book gives a gendered timeline of important events in the history of travel writing. After Mary Kingsley’s death in 1900, he does not note a single contribution by a woman in the genre for the entire twentieth century, stretching from 1900 to 1991. Apparently no additional events of consequence involved women travelers after 1900, though Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Peter Matthiessen, Graham Greene, and other males are featured heavily. At least Mary Morris, et al. got their names in print somewhere in Blanton’s book. I can’t help but point out Blanton’s note about one particular study on travel writing. Of this study, he comments that “only one woman is

awarded a full chapter” (58). He makes this hypocritical observation in his one chapter dedicated to female authors.

Where Blanton calls for the inclusion of female authors in the conversation, Kowalewski observes that “the hybrid, ‘androgynous’ qualities of travel writing” are already included and that those unusual qualities “are precisely those which deserve to be studied” (8). While I do agree that the peculiarities of the genre which place it in an unusual critical position are worthy of study, I don’t believe that travel writing as a genre is at all androgynous. (Given the context of his statement, I suspect his word choice here may have been poor—he may have meant diverse rather than androgynous—but I am taking him at face-value.) In fact, I argue that travel writing by men and women differs a great deal and readers can get a sense of the gender of the traveler through the narrative voice even if the actual gender of the author is not known. As Jessica Enevold put it when thinking about travel writing, “an author’s role becomes particularly urgent to consider as he or she, as writer and sometimes narrative subject, can be understood both metaphorically and literally as the navigator of the ship” (74).

Attempting to include or androgynize female authors is at the heart of the problem with the canonical archetype. Female authors whose narrative voice fits the adventure archetype can be included without gender distinctions, as Mary Kingsley is, but others cannot be. The conflict faced by both Victorian and modern women travel writers is the simultaneous identification with native populations based upon a mutually subjugated position in relationship to the white males and the viewing of themselves as superior based on race and class. For Victorian travelers like Kingsley, whose writing is blind to the conflict, “the complex social situation [which] created both a sympathy with the native

populations and an assumption of superiority” (Lawrence 105) makes her canonically suitable by androgynizing her as a traveler and placing her within the archetypal structure. For modern travelers like Mary Morris, however, the conflict between sympathy and superiority is complicated by their awareness of their race and class; their writing attempts “to analyze their compromised status as white, Western women travelers” (Holland and Huggan 115). Thus Morris’s position within the canon is precarious because she has become aware of her multiple conflicting identities and does not write as nor can she be viewed as an androgynous adventurer.

Enevold points out that Douglass Brinkley’s belated inclusion of Beauvoir’s book into the road novel genre neutralizes her gender “because the prototypical traveler was always a man” (76). Like Kowalewski, Brinkley attempts to androgynize the genre by examining only the elements of the text which follow thematically. Enevold warns that gender should not be overlooked in travel writing or “cursorily treated by the cultural critic” (76). However, a cursory treatment is exactly what critics are doing, by sidestepping gender and addressing themselves to aesthetics or “dangerous” themes within the work instead.

Kowalewski, with only a brief paragraph pause to acknowledge some gender issues, a paragraph which hands the issue over to Mary Morris, spends most of his introduction dealing with what he calls a major “danger” to travel writing: an “attraction of turning a travel account into merely a personal diary, a kind of therapist’s couch. Too exclusive a journey into self represents a risk because the main adventure in such private voyages often consists of, as John Krich says, ‘uncovering the motives for having departed’: ‘the sites visited pale before the place left behind, and there is no destination but distance’” (9). Kowalewski does not provide a specific example of a travel narrative that commits this so-

called dangerous transgression, which would be quite helpful in distinguishing between how much “journey into self” is acceptable and how much is too much. Kowaleswki’s introduction instead suggests the failure to maintain a separation between the traveler and the destination is the point at which the journey into self has gone too far. Kowalewski says, “the most successful travel narratives blend outward, special aspects of travel...with the inward, temporal forms of memory and recollection” (9) which acknowledges that an inward examination is acceptable within the genre; however, he limits this inward examination to memory and recollection and goes on to state that “a crucial element of all travel writing remains the author’s ‘visitor’s’ status,” a status that becomes suspect if the author begins to assimilate the views and customs of the place. Kowalewski says such an assimilation of culture makes the author no longer a traveler at all but something different—an expatriate (9). But this is just a semantic way of discounting multiple perspectives, an arbitrary decision which can be called upon to eliminate a work from the genre when it’s inconvenient.

Additionally, Kowalewski claims (as does, we can assume, Krich, whom he quotes) this “literary hazard” of self-therapy is bad for the genre. Kowalewski has already expressed concern that travel writing not fall into the trap of “therapeutic” travel writing, while Blanton wishes to distance the genre from the “confessional” style. Both suggest that works which don’t meet the archetypal standard are problematic while at the same time they argue for the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Essentially, they’re saying on one hand, the genre is missing multiple voices, but on the other hand the genre must include only voices which say the same thing. Multiple voices by definition will say multiple, often contradictory things. Their critical blind spot is the so-called hazardous therapeutic writing.

The essay “Journeys Into Kansas,” by William Least Heat-Moon, which also appears in Kowalewski’s text, examines this contradiction between archetypal storytelling and therapeutic writing. Least Heat-Moon goes so far as to criticize the failings of his own work to meet the paradigm of good travel literature when he notes that his book Blue Highways “sets off heading more into the country of the interior rather than the interior of the country” (21). He even says similar works, including Matthiessen’s The Snow Leopard “follow a dangerous course that can lead travel writing into memoirs or fiction” (21). Least Heat-Moon echoes Kowalewski’s use of the word “dangerous” and cautions that the works should not become too internal, believing his own work to have committed this offense by offering an internalized voice that leads to what he calls “a dead end” (22). This dead end is the inward journey. The outward journey, Least Heat-Moon says, does what a travel book should: show “what we [Americans] can accomplish” (20). The journey that demonstrates the outward accomplishments is the correct one for travel writing, he believes. But Least Heat-Moon is voicing his own view of America in Blue Highways and has already acknowledged that the “literature of travel desperately needs women’s voices” (20). He’s expressed the need for other voices but derides his own unique voice for failing to tell the “correct” story.

In Alison Goeller’s essay “Temporary Homelands,” she traces a simplified evolution of travel writing by women from the outward to the inward journey. She says travel writing has “until quite recently, been largely the domain of male writers,” a fact she attributes partly to physical restrictions placed upon women and goes on to note that with more freedom of movement, the twentieth century now contains considerable female travel writing (60). Goeller begins her analysis with Osa Johnson’s I Married Adventure. Two things in Goeller’s analysis of this work are notable. First, the title’s repetition of the adventure trope suggests

certain expectations for its traditional content. This expectation is confirmed by Goeller's interest in the work: "the near absence of any comment on her interior life" (61). Second, it is Goeller's belief that Johnson and other early female travelers, "like the land itself, have been explored, conquered, exploited, and degraded" (62) and Johnson's book can only hint at her compromised position through descriptions of the exotic exterior rather than the interior dialogue. Johnson has a unique experience but attempts to force her story into fitting a paradigmatic voice.

Goeller traces the evolution of the voice into a more internal view as her discussion moves to Mary Morris. She calls Morris an "introspective writer...who looks at interior landscapes as well as the exterior ones" (62). Goeller's interest in Morris as a travel writer revolves around her approach to the journey in a way that other critics have termed dangerous. But Morris's departure from convention is not merely an accidental departure from the adventure paradigm or a poor aesthetic choice. She has intentionally journeyed into the interior. Of women's travel writing, Morris says: "the inner landscape is as important as the outer, the beholder as significant as the beheld. The landscape is shaped by the consciousness of the person who crosses it. There is a dialogue between what is happening within and without (Maiden Voyages xvii). She intends her writing to explore her consciousness, to become therapeutic. What Kowalewski and critics like him have failed to acknowledge is that the act of writing, even travel writing, is often therapeutic, even for men.

In Writing as a Way of Healing, Louise DeSalvo discusses and even encourages the therapeutic process of writing. She says by discussing problems or trauma in writing, the author is eventually able to make discoveries through creating order "from seeming randomness or chaos" (43). DeSalvo goes on to give specific examples of therapeutic

expression in the work of Henry Miller, an author Kowalewski has identified as an important writer of travel narrative.

According to DeSalvo, Miller's work is filled with self-therapy. His work explores complex love relationships and emotional turmoil and, as DeSalvo says, Miller's writing embarks upon "a period of intense soul searching" as "he discovered who he was" (44) which included his self-identification as an expatriate wandering through Europe. DeSalvo connects motives of self-therapy in writing to a well-known author of travel writing. But, as DeSalvo says, Miller, through his writing, has created "a personal myth that could sustain him," a myth that depicts Miller "as anarchic, iconoclastic, virile, tough..." (45). Although Miller's writing therapeutically allowed him to explore the pain of his wife's infidelity, he was able to construct his own masculine mythology and ultimately be a conqueror, which is perhaps why critics like Kowalewski have no problems including him in the canon despite his using the dangerous therapeutic writing.

An actual literary danger comes with the discounting of good travel writing based on therapeutic themes. Self-therapy within travel writing is only problematic for critics as far as the narrative voice doesn't validate other aesthetic paradigms of the genre. The issue of what is aesthetically valid correlates directly to the experience and voice of the author. Hogue confirms that "texts that do not conform in subject or perspective" are excluded "on the grounds that they are inferior aesthetically—thereby effecting certain silences in the discourse of literature" (3). So, while critics like Kowalewski and Blanton are disturbed by the lack of female voices in the genre, they are simultaneously perpetuating their silence by excluding works which don't meet certain standards of aesthetics, standards that tie directly to nonconformity of theme and subject matter, which reflect multiple perspectives. Unlike

Miller, who is ultimately canonically included despite the therapeutic nature of his work because he conforms to the paradigm of a masculine voice, these other perspectives use the therapeutic nature of the writing to reject the paradigm altogether and are, therefore, intentionally excluded from the canon.

It is this contradiction between overt calls for inclusion of multiplicity of narrative within the canon and subversive methods of exclusion from that canon based on aesthetic concerns that I find significant. “Otherness” has problematized travel writing by intersecting issues of race, class, and gender within the genre<sup>4</sup>. No longer are women (or men for that matter) writing about that other place as an adventurer and conqueror. Emotional, internalized, or therapeutic themes are clearly evident in modern work. Elizabeth Gilbert, for example, is hardly telling an epic adventure in the traditional sense when she’s buying silken undergarments in a lingerie shop in Rome. But Gilbert, as much as Kingsley or Matthiessen, is travelling and writing. She is, without a doubt, a travel writer, one who is subverting (or perhaps attempting to redefine) the conventions of the genre.

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<sup>4</sup> This is true of many genres in addition to travel writing. Consider, for example, how the term “speculative fiction” now exists to reconsider works which don’t quite fit within discourse on science fiction, a literary form traditionally dominated by authors of a certain race, class, and gender.

### **Critical Examination of Mary Morris and Elizabeth Gilbert**

So, it's not the narrative voice itself that's the problem for critics, it's what the voice is saying that makes critics keep those voices out of the canon. What is common to these pieces of travel narrative is their lack of storytelling within established paradigms. Although the specifics of the trips each woman took vary from place to place, there are some common themes and structural elements that appear ubiquitous to the travels and reflections of the authors that subvert or complicate archetypal roles that can be identified and examined.

Because an examination of every author that might have been critically overlooked is impossible, especially with regards to multiple identities involving race, class, and gender, I've chosen two authors who highlight this discrepancy in a way that focuses on how authors can be overlooked within a fairly narrow sphere of classification: Mary Morris and Elizabeth Gilbert. Because Morris and Gilbert meet the major criteria for an already severely narrowed vision of what fits in the travel writing genre—a Western, white, middle class perspective—the absence of their writing from critical consideration is particularly notable. The narratives for examination in this essay include Morris's Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone (1986) and The River Queen (2007), and Gilbert's Eat Pray Love (2006).

In addition to the fact that both women were noted authors by the time their most recent works came out, Mary Morris is especially apt for this analysis because of her notoriety as a critic as well as an author. Not only has Morris written four book-length travel memoirs of her own, she has also edited an anthology of travel writing by women and written scholarly criticism on the subject. Additionally, examining criticism by other critics of the genre leads a reader to discover that Morris is one of the most frequently referenced authors

in the modern genre. In short, Mary Morris is an expert on women's travel narrative, if such a qualification could be said to exist.

It is significant to note that several critics, Kowalewski and Blanton among them, cite the same single critical essay written by Morris as the guide for criticizing women's travel narrative. Part of the reason for this is a simple lack of source material. It seems Morris is one of the few experts on the subject matter of women's travel writing, and within that limitation, her single essay on the genre limits the discussion even more. Nearly every critical work I found after about 1990 that dealt with women's travel narrative in any way cited Morris's introduction to her Maiden Voyages anthology, itself a modification of Morris's essay "Women and Journeys" which appears in Kowalewski's volume and parts of which originally appeared in Morris's book Nothing to Declare. With so little critical material to work with, it's no wonder Morris is *the* one woman with whom critics argue. Rarely is she dealt with as a writer of the genre but rather as a critic of the genre. Morris is especially relevant to the discussion, then, because as both an author of travel writing whose work is infrequently criticized and as a respected critic and editor of the genre, she is both an outsider and insider to the literary tradition of travel writing.

Gilbert, on the other hand, is a recent contributor to the genre of travel narrative. Her work, Eat Pray Love, despite its lack of critical attention, has enjoyed a steady popularity since its publication in 2006, topping the *New York Times* best seller list and attracting the attention of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey who are in a position to tout the book's appeal to the "average American" female. In fact, Oprah herself so loved this book that she's had multiple shows featuring Gilbert. One was even titled "Why we can't stop talking about Eat Pray Love" (Oprah.com). Two years after its publication, tattered copies of Gilbert's

paperback are still being passed from hand to hand, discussed at local coffee shops, and inspiring what is referred to on Oprah.com as “Eat Pray Love Parties,” where women (mostly white, mostly middle class) get together and talk about how Gilbert’s book changed their lives. Such pop culture notoriety is contrary to the usual academically acceptable literary criticism; however, this popular appeal versus canonical recognition is one of the conventional subversions that I am interested in cataloguing.

Oprah’s website, for example, has a complete subdirectory for Gilbert’s book and features pages and pages of dialogue between women (and a few men) about the text. Such conversations are echoed on countless other websites dedicated to the book. In addition to frequent reader discussions about the book, reviews by magazines, newspapers, and literary websites repeat similar ideas. Of the over 350 reviews and discussion boards I examined (out of about 2,950,000 possibilities,) a trend emerged which confirmed my suspicions about the text. Gilbert has given a voice to a particular demographic of travelers, a demographic which does not meet the adventure archetype in any way, and that demographic has responded.

While readers and reviewers don’t always agree on whether or not they liked the book, a disagreement often characterized by the gender of the reviewer, there is a consensus on what the book is and isn’t about. Fan comments on the Oprah.com discussion board aptly describe reader perceptions about the book: “Anyone who was looking for a book about travel and culture would surely be disappointed. But that's not the what and why of this book. It is one woman's INNER journey from despair to joy” (leahnell). Another poster said, “it isn’t really about the traveling per se, but the voyage of life....you don’t actually have to travel to these places; it’s the transformation that is crucial” (loiskat). Such common statements reflect what Morris has asserted about the inner and outer journeys of women and

demonstrate how the text provides a gendered viewpoint on what is considered important in a travel narrative. Even reviewers who saw Gilbert as a “spoiled white girl” concede that the text is dealing with an inner spiritual journey reflected through an outer physical journey. The most negative of reviews did not find fault with the therapeutic aspect of the narrative so much as the personal character of the narrator, frequently calling her “whiney” or “a brat.” Not one of the hundreds of reviews faulted the text for its overly therapeutic or self-interested travel motifs. The concerns expressed by critics like Kowalewski don’t ever make an appearance in the most negative of reviews. Those that disliked the book agreed that the problems with the text had more to do with Gilbert’s personality and writing style than any fault of her emotional approach to the journey. As Jennifer Egan of the *New York Times* said, “I found myself more interested, finally, in the awkward, unresolved stuff she must have chosen to leave out” (Egan). Egan doesn’t fault the book for its therapeutic approach; Egan identifies with the difficulties voiced by Gilbert, just not her perfect solutions. Gilbert’s readers and reviewers, whether they liked her book or not, agreed that the physical journey was a metaphor for the emotional one.

In “Women and Journeys” Morris offers a possible explanation for this identification, common among modern women authors and readers, by tracing that voice back to its literary roots.

The late John Gardner once said that there are only two plots in all of literature: you go on a journey or the stranger comes to town. Since women have for so many years been denied the journey, we were left with only one plot in our lives—to await the coming of the stranger to town. Indeed, there is no picaresque tradition among women novelists. Women’s literature from

Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf is mostly a literature about waiting, and usually waiting for love. Denied the freedom to roam outside themselves, women turned inward, into their emotions. (25)

It's no accident that romance and overly emotional writing occurs, even now when women have the ability to travel. This "one plot" has driven literature by women for ages. The inner journey is intrinsically connected with the outer journey and the ability to travel. While the traditional archetypal image of "Penelope waiting" has shifted and women can now be "the stranger" instead, the themes of home life, romance, and turning inward to emotion have remained constant in the literature. Gilbert's text perfectly reproduces these themes in a modern American white, middle class voice.

Perhaps the most common of themes in the travel texts by both Morris and Gilbert are romantic and with greater physical freedom, romance is freer as well. In "Women and Journeys" Morris equates sex with the exotic. She says "the language of sexual initiation is oddly similar to the language of travel. We speak of sexual 'exploits' or adventures' ...and the great 'explorers' whether Marco Polo or Don Juan, have traditionally been men" (25). As women are more freely able explore the globe, their "adventures" are freer as well. Sex and love "at home" is prescribed, restrained. Morris even notes that the bindings for corsets were called *stays* (Women and Journeys 25). Not only have women been traditionally prevented from exploring the world, they have been prevented from the exploration of their own bodies. Just as women move away from home, they move away from the prescribed sexual behavior. When travelling, behaviors which aren't socially prescribed become acceptable, and behaviors that were acceptable have the light of a foreign sun shed upon them, making what was prescribed by social pressures suddenly unacceptable.

In addition to sexual relationships with men, these texts often include relationships with other women. Frequently, these friendships provide the narrator with sounding boards to explore what her other relationships should be. Sometimes they are more complex than simple friendships. In Nothing to Declare, Morris has a friend, Catherine, with whom she has a complex friendship. This relationship at times borders on romantic, even erotic, though it remains non-sexual. The women sleep naked together and argue heatedly. The image of the erotic is subtly emphasized at one point when Morris notes Catherine terminates an emotional moment between the two of them by returning to a book she is reading, Tropic of Cancer (93). Such moments in Morris's narrative depart from convention as the author's emotional journey is in the foreground and the trip itself is in the background.

More frequent than such sexual situations, however, are the platonic friendships that ground the narrator in the real world. In Nothing to Declare, Morris's primary friendship is with her neighbor in Mexico, Lupe. Morris and Lupe, along with Lupe's children, form a bond that is almost a familial one and Lupe often acts as Morris's conscience with regards to her self-perception. "Have I gotten fat?" Morris asks Lupe one day. Lupe's response is "No, but you are *gordita*." Gordita means chubby and Morris is angry that her friend has called her chubby. Seeing that she is angry Lupe teases her and says she is old and gordita (230). Morris views being chubby as negative but the Mexican women consider this attractive. Through Lupe, Morris experiences her female self from the perspective of another culture. In a similar fashion, Lupe helps Morris work through some of the struggles she's having with a romantic relationship through her culturally influenced perspective. Without the outer journey to Mexico, Morris could not have solved the difficulties she was experiencing internally.

Much like Morris, Gilbert, in Eat Pray Love, struggles throughout the text with what sex and romance are supposed to be. She maintains dialogue with her best friend in New York throughout her trip but it isn't until the end, when she has moved through Italy and India and spent some time in Indonesia, that she discovers the truth about herself. She needed the journey to be a therapeutic one.

Throughout the text, Gilbert has struggled with painful memories of her relationships. It is a woman name Wayan, Gilbert's best friend in Bali, who finally convinces her that "everybody need [sic] sex" (264). Though Gilbert is skeptical, she begins to open herself up to the possibility that her previous experiences were not right. The feelings she expressed at the beginning of the text that something was wrong with her (Gilbert 12) become clear by the end, when she discovers that it was the relationship that was wrong, not her. She even wonders why she thought her life seemed so difficult (297).

In fact, when she arrives in Bali, she has sworn off men and sex altogether. She finally accepts that a man, Felipe, who is very different from the men who have previously been in her life, is the person she was looking for all along. She could never have accepted the relationship with him had they met in New York. She had to find him in Bali, and more than that, she needed another woman's help to do it. The emotional clarity Gilbert discovers at the end of the text comes at the end of her physical journey. She needed the time away from home to find this clarity and more than that, she needed to find God. None of these internal discoveries are specific to the external locations she visits, but the location made the discoveries possible. Her original motive, as Kowalewski fears, didn't become clear until after the trip was over.

At the beginning of her book, Nothing to Declare, Morris tells the reader her motive for traveling: “I had grown weary of life in New York...with a terrible feeling of isolation and a growing belief that America had become a foreign land, I headed south. I went in search of a place...where life would begin to make sense to me again” (4). Her trip to Mexico, she admits, was to explore her inner turmoil, to use the outer journey as a way to make sense of her inner self.

In the introduction to the anthology Maiden Voyages, Morris notes that identification is important in the literature. She says that the experiences of male travel writers “did not correspond to or validate” her own (xvii). In fact, it was her inability to identify with those voices that led Morris to write her first travel book. Morris reflects that in 1985, she read *The New York Times Book Review* list of the best new travel books. She noted not one of the twenty or so books was written by a woman (Women and Journeys 29-30). Morris goes on to make the point that most men explored a world that is essentially external and revealed only glimpses of who and what they are, whom they long for, whom they miss. The writers’ own inner workings in most cases...are obscured” (xvii). The external journey, the adventure, was something with which Morris could not identify. Morris says she felt as if “she lived in a foreign land...and...decided to actually live in a foreign land and...figure out what home meant” (Women and Journeys 28). By traveling for the singular purpose of untangling her personal problems, Morris commits the very act Kowalewski calls dangerous. Morris also likens having intentional motives for traveling to attending a party with the intention of falling in love, the likelihood of which therefore becomes incredibly remote (Women and Journeys 28). The spontaneity which comes from traveling without a clear intended purpose

or destination allows the traveler to discover what it is the trip intends for her, not what she intends for the trip.

Morris says the trip allows the traveler to “forget that this is not our real life—our life of domestic details, work pressures, attempts and failures at human relationships” (Women and Journeys 28) and later ponders why she and women like her made their journeys in the first place. Morris identifies “a complex restlessness in our culture that has to do with the breakdown of the family, a certain spiritual emptiness in our lives and a thirst for the unusual” (30) as driving forces for crossing physical boundaries as a way to explore the self. Self-therapy is a driving motive for travel.

One issue Morris is cataloguing in her list of how women travel differently is the idea of safety. In Nothing to Declare, Morris describes her first night in San Miguel, Mexico. She has just rented a small apartment there and has spent the evening exploring the surrounding town. She describes returning to her apartment:

For the first time, I walked that quarter mile at night alone. Every shadow, every sound, made me turn. I behaved like a hunted thing. It is not easy to move through the world alone, and it is never easy for a woman. You must keep your wits about you. You mustn't get yourself into dark places you can't get out of. Keep money you can get to, an exit behind you, and some language at your fingertips. You should know how to strike a proud pose, curse like a sailor, kick like a mule, and scream out your brother's name though he may be three thousand miles away. And you mustn't be a fool. (10)

The potential for violence and rape, and the less overt dangers of inaccessibility to places based on gender bias, have caused travel to be gender-marked, as Morris describes

here. Interestingly, Morris's narrative here turns briefly from a first-person to a second-person voice. It seems she wishes to impart her experience to her readers in an instructional voice—*here is what you should do, my female friends*, she seems to say. But she isn't just theorizing here or postulating that these things might happen. They are facts. In Nothing to Declare, Morris meets Cory in a bar, another American woman in Mexico. Morris has been told by her companions that Cory has been raped. The two women have a brief encounter in the restroom. Cory unbuttons her blouse and shows Morris her breasts. "Her nipples were completely swollen," Morris reports, "her breasts were black and blue all the way to the armpits" (37). But she wasn't raped, Cory asserts, she was dating the man who did it. Morris has a faded black eye from a terminated violent relationship which Cory has noticed. Morris says she didn't want to have anything in common with this "dour, blonde girl" (37) but Cory's reason for showing Morris her chest was her desire to demonstrate that they shared a common danger, a danger the men in their group do not share.

Issues of safety and denied access caused some women to disguise themselves as men, as Sarah Hobson does, cropping her hair and wearing a girdle around her breasts to traverse the then-named Persia, recorded in her memoir Through Persia in Disguise. Even dressed as a man, she says she "felt uneasy without the protection of daylight to reconnoiter and to assess the mood of the town: at night, people seemed hostile..." (Maiden Voyages 351). Interestingly, Hobson, called John, finds safety, acceptance and friendship, not with the men she encounters but with the wife of an Iranian acquaintance who, after discovering her secret, quickly relishes the companionship with the female stranger.

Other women have traveled with companions, male or female, relying on the axiom of safety in numbers. Still others give the impression of traveling with a male companion

where none exists. Mary Morris admits to wearing a wedding ring as she traveled through the Middle East in order to appear as though she belonged to a man (*Women and Journeys* 31).

Janet Wolff, in her text on feminism, literature, and cultures, *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, discusses additional gender issues in traveling: “Although both women and men may be ‘potential wanderers’, and even actual wanderers, their conditions of wandering are very different” (8). In addition to safety issues, another major issue Wolff notes is the peculiar position of being a woman traveling alone, creating what she calls a stigma of the “eccentric or non-respectable (because they are unattached and out of place)” (8). Negotiating this difficulty, by whatever means, is an issue of travel unique to women. Wolff notes that some women resolve this dilemma by taking a man and transforming themselves into “the wife of a traveller rather than the traveller” themselves. Elizabeth Gilbert simply says to tell a white lie. She says “if you are a single woman traveling through Bali and somebody asks you, ‘Are you married?’ the best possible answer is: ‘Not yet.’” Gilbert adds “Even if you are...an eighty-year-old strident feminist lesbian nun who has never been married and never intends to get married...” the best answer is still “not yet” (228-229).

While these strategies range from deadly serious to lightly humorous the point is the same—there are practical issues of navigating foreign places unique to women and each author is making some type of pragmatic concession to the logistics of being a woman traveling. Frequently, those concessions involve the rejection of the dominant adventurer archetype in favor of a more safe and practical role.

Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, in *Tourists with Typewriters*, acknowledge the concessions made by Morris in *Nothing To Declare*, though even their criticism can’t help

but use her introduction to Maiden Voyages as a feminist bridge to the work itself. They begin by saying Morris's anthology and critical stance "risk essentializing women's travel writing, seeing it as inevitably 'feminist' or preoccupied with 'the private sphere'" (113). Despite this risk, they concede that the many critical studies on women's travel narrative "emphasize the nineteenth century, tending to succumb in the process to the very nostalgia on which men's travel writing is often based" (114). I agree with them that Morris's stance on women's travel writing risks what they term an "institutionalization of women's literature" (113) by re-placing any travel narrative written by a woman in the women's literature genre; however, given that so few critics are willing to deal with the material at all, I find their attitude towards Morris's work naïve. It isn't simply women's literature as they say Morris claims, but it isn't being dealt with as pure travel writing either. By criticizing Morris's self-placement within women's literature and by failing to acknowledge that she has been marginalized by the travel writing canon, they risk silencing her completely. Still, they do examine her work critically as a travel text.

Interestingly, Holland and Huggan find fault with Morris's text precisely because of the way she alters the traditional male voice, despite their claims that other critics miss "the opportunity to inquire further into the *gendered* politics of location" (emphasis theirs 111). Holland and Huggan call Karen Lawrence's Odysseus and Penelope paradigms of adventurer and waiter "contrived," paradigms Morris herself has invoked<sup>5</sup>, but nevertheless find them a useful critical stance to examine gender conventions in travel writing. Holland and Huggan

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<sup>5</sup> To clarify, Morris invokes Penelope in the introduction to the Maiden Voyages anthology, though her use of Penelope as an archetype in this text predates Lawrence's use in Penelope Voyages. Additionally, Alison Goeller makes reference to Penelope and Odysseus archetypes in her essay without any reference to Lawrence. Holland and Huggan seem to suggest Lawrence has invented something here, but that does not seem to be the case. It appears Lawrence has simply used the pre-existing mytho-historic figures as a shaping metaphor for her examination of the literature. In fact, the word odyssey itself indicates how ingrained the archetype is within western culture.

recognize Morris's conflicting status as both adventurer and waiter when they note that her "narratives enact a dialogue between adventure and introspection;" however, they find Morris's writing at times to be "unduly narcissistic," calling some of Morris's passages "trancelike reveries redolent of New Age psychobabble" (114). Although Holland and Huggan include the full passage in their criticism, they offer no specific explanation for their feeling that it's "psychobabble." In fact, their criticism seems to rely on their reader's review of Morris's passage itself and a simple agreement that they are correct in their assessment. Holland and Huggan quote Morris's chapter five, which begins, "As I approach San Miguel, my ghosts converge" (125). She then explains who the ghosts are and how they are operating in her life. One ghost, she says, is her grandmother who gives her advice on men and comforts her, while the other is a stranger, but not altogether an unwelcome one. The third and fourth paragraphs of that chapter are where Holland and Huggan begin their citation:

At various times ghosts or gods run my life. The ghosts I find in my rooms at night, in the eyes of the brujas, in the bird nailed to the tree. While the past struggled to keep me back, the gods propel me forward. Into risks and sacrifice, choice and responsibility. The ghosts are in charge of memory; the gods' domain is destiny.

I listen to the ghosts and obey the gods. The ghosts whisper, the gods prod. I listen like a cat at an opening to a wall, and when it is safe, I pass through. When the gods recede, the ghosts take over and when I let go of the ghosts, some of whom mean me no harm, the gods send me out on my missions. I return to find the infiltration of ghosts. (Nothing to Declare 125-126)

Though Holland and Huggan do acknowledge that Morris's "external journeys are accompanied by an inner quest for self-understanding," Holland and Huggan use the term "New Age psychobabble" to describe this section of Morris's work and find fault with her writing's "confessional strain" (Holland and Huggan 114). In addition to the fact that the use of the term "New Age psychobabble" is unnecessarily derogatory towards certain spiritual practices, the main problem with viewing Morris's work as psychobabble relates directly to the two "traps" identified by Kowalewski earlier: that writers not become too enmeshed with the native culture nor spend too much of the narrative on self-therapy.

In addition to ghosts and gods, the passage cited by Holland and Huggan also contains imagery of a bird. Morris uses these images throughout the text as markers of her journey. The bird imagery, for example, returns throughout the narrative as a means to express her relationship to the new landscape. On Morris's first night in San Miguel, her new home in Mexico, she "went to the place where the birds were going" and notes she "...always followed the birds..." (9). A bird nailed to a tree symbolically represents the violent cessation of the journey, a halt to the flight.

In fact, a bird, a rooster, is responsible for Morris meeting Lupe, her best friend while in Mexico, as Lupe's wandering rooster prefers Morris's balcony to his own yard. "He hates to stay home," Lupe comments. "Like all men" (12). Their friendship is christened later that day by Lupe's children bringing Morris gifts of food—five hot, handmade corn tortillas. Morris's understanding of the culture grows as the friendship between Morris and Lupe grows. Her Spanish improves as she listens to Lupe tell about herself and her life. It is while Lupe is describing her childhood that the connection between ghosts and grandmothers is made and the word *brujas* is first used. The *brujas* or witches in the hills, Lupe tells Morris,

whispered the stories of Lupe's parents and grandparents to her—often contradictory and filled with symbolism. (16). Later, Morris sees a white haired woman in the hills who watches her from the mouth of the cave where she lives. Throughout the text, Morris encounters this witch woman, who seems to watch over her like a guardian. Morris notes the bruja grew “younger and more beautiful, her hair more silken” each time Morris saw her (138). This feminine presence, invoked in the passage cited by Holland and Huggan, becomes, throughout the text, a spirit guide for Morris, alternating between the real woman in the cave and the ghost of her grandmother.

Like the ghosts and the birds, a cat is alluded to in the passage, and a few pages later, a small cat with green eyes appears on Morris's doorstep and adopts her. Lupe's children name the cat Globo, who later has kittens in Morris's kitchen. It is at this point in the text that Morris says she feels that she is at home in San Miguel (Nothing to Declare 128). Towards the end of her stay, Morris develops a life-threatening intestinal infection. She is rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night where she receives the treatment which saves her life. When she returns home, Lupe tells her that the little cat died at the same time that she was in the hospital undergoing emergency surgery. The cat was symbolic of Morris's spiritual illness which manifested physically.

In her dreams, Morris is an animal, sometimes a white tiger, sometimes an owl or an eagle, with wings or fur and cubs hidden in a mountain lair. Morris says “in dreams I am an animal. In these dreams I am free” (229). Not only has Morris accepted the brujas as her guides through Mexico, she has adopted the animals' spirits as well. When Globo the cat dies at the exact time that Morris herself was near death, the parallel between her and the culture and landscape she has adopted is pointedly highlighted.

The invocation of ghosts and the allusions to the bird and the cat that Holland and Huggan find to be “psychobabble” are actually Morris’s attempts to find spiritual connection and comfort for the alienation she has been wrestling with throughout her journey. The problem for critics like Holland and Huggan and Kowalewski is that Morris is using the local symbolism and spirituality she has been exposed to in Mexico to explore the interior landscape, a journey which departs from the hard science of describing the exterior landscape of Mexico through a clear visitor’s status. The internal dialogue Morris has throughout the text which she records through symbolism just can’t be critically reconciled and is therefore considered “psychobabble.” Morris has broken both of the “rules” of travel writing by adopting local practices and using them for her own therapeutic purposes.

Nowhere is Morris’s relationship to the place more apparent than in her relationship to the road and the children of San Miguel. The shift from her viewing herself as an outsider at the beginning to her viewing herself as an insider at the end is clear in two similar passages where she describes herself walking along the same road to her apartment. Early in the text, she says of the route “I had never gone that way before” and as she walks, “children I’d never seen came alongside of me. These children were dirty, with snot on their faces and matted hair, and they pulled at my arms and legs” (38). But her perspective changes as her relationship to the landscape and the people changes. By the end, San Miguel is her home and she relates a parallel incident from a new perspective: “I know the road that lies before me. I know it well. I have traveled it before” (229). She is returning to San Miguel after a side trip to Central America but she feels it is a homecoming. As she walks toward the apartment, she says “the children converge, shouting, calling my name...my pockets, laden with candy trinkets, tiny flags, are soon emptied...I let them take me to the ground, into the

dust, and they climb all over me, laughing” (229). The children are no longer strangers and she calls them by name: Pollo, Lisa, Agustín. She is no longer afraid of the dirt or the landscape. It is her home. The journey has emotionally transformed her.

Along with accepting the foreign landscape as home, food often appears throughout both of Morris’s texts as another symbol of locating herself within her landscape. In Nothing to Declare, she and her friend Lupe pass a great deal of time shopping for food, preparing meals, and serving food to others. The kitchen is a convergence point—they discuss love and romance while making food. As mentioned earlier, their friendship is christened by the gift of corn tortillas.

Sometimes, however, these spheres are forced; even while breaking out of the traditional “waiting at home” role, other traditional roles can still be in place. In The River Queen, Morris does the cooking for the crew who consist of her and two men. She notes early on in the text she’s been relegated to the traditional female role of cook by virtue of the knowledge each of the three people possess. Jerry is the possessor of nautical knowledge, Tom, the mechanical, and Morris is the one who can fix more than a frozen pizza. Morris notes how these roles are differentiated by location as well as gender. Even on a tiny houseboat the men distinguish between masculine and feminine activities and locations. Morris relays the scene in which she discovers this:

Tom stares at me for a few moments. “What are you doing?” he asks.

“Um, I’m cleaning these beans for supper.”

“Well, you should do that in the galley, not on the fly.”

“Ah, well, I wanted to get some air and shade. “ I point to the

bimini, but I see that Tom is clearly annoyed.

“That’s not something you do on the flybridge.” And he gets up and heads below.

I’m stunned that I’ve upset him with my green beans. After all, he eats on the flybridge. Why can’t I prepare my beans? But it seems I’ve broken some code of the sea. Perhaps it’s bad luck to have a woman on board. Or having green beans on board. Obviously I have offended some sailor’s sense of propriety or evoked some age-old superstition. I’m recalling Jonah. Perhaps now is when they cast me into the drink. (119)

Though Morris’s tone is jovial and she and Tom later reconcile, her narration reveals a split between what is acceptable for females and what is acceptable for males. Men eating food on the flybridge is fine, women preparing food on the flybridge is not. Not only has Morris revealed how the roles of men and women differ in relationship to place, but she has discovered this in a very personal sense as a part of her journey down the Mississippi River.

For Morris, finding her place on the boat is both an exterior, physical one (she’s the cook) and an interior, metaphorical one. Throughout the text, she is struggling to understand the complex, lifelong relationship with her recently deceased father. Throughout the trip down the river, she imagines her father with her in the landscape, and through the journey is able to come to terms with his life and his death. “I need to find a way to put his bones at rest,” she says at the end (265) and she means both literally and figuratively. She finally decides to scatter his ashes in the river, ashes which have been sitting behind her piano since the memorial service a year earlier. Without the exterior journey, there could have been no interior resolution, but in contrast to the adventure paradigm, Morris’s journey had no exterior purpose.

Like Mary Morris, Elizabeth Gilbert takes an extended trip away from home in an attempt to find her place in the world; and perhaps more than Morris, Gilbert's text Eat Pray Love commits those grave transgressions critics have cautioned against. Even her title hints at the therapeutic motive in her journey and because of that, I would like to deconstruct Gilbert's title for a moment.

The full title is Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia. With so much going on there, I'll take it one word at a time. Eat: Food and cooking as "woman's work," a woman's place is in the kitchen, after all. Pray: Giving a voice to thoughts and feelings to something outside of oneself who will hear and acknowledge those thoughts and feelings. Love: As already noted, romance and love are traditional female topics in literature. One: as in, by herself, not accompanied by a husband, lover, friend, etc. Woman: a female perspective, it's not one *person's* search—something specific to gender is significant. Search: a search is itself a journey and so much is going on with searching—is she looking for something? Has something been lost? And of course, suggesting a search at the beginning of a text sets the reader up with the expectation that by the end of the text, something will be found. What will be discovered, uncovered, recovered by the end? Perhaps Everything: Is Gilbert really looking for everything? This seems to be a modern exaggeration. Perhaps everything in the Western sense? Actually, Gilbert has already defined everything in the title: everything to Gilbert includes food, sex, and God. That does seem to cover a lot. Perhaps it is everything that is missing from her life when she leaves home. Across Italy, India, and Indonesia: Inherent in this phrase is a key piece of information: that everything Gilbert is searching for cannot be found at home. She must find her answers somewhere else; she must journey outwardly to journey inwardly. Like Morris,

Gilbert's exterior journey is also an interior one and like Morris, Gilbert eventually empathizes with the foreign place, further violating the "rules" prescribed by critics like Kowalewski.

Lorraine Code, in her book Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations, takes on the issue of empathy directly. Code's chapter entitled "I know Just How You Feel: Empathy and the Problem of Epistemic Authority," emphasizes the problematic issue of categorizing emotional or empathetic narratives, traditionally written by or associated with women, as "less valid" than male narratives traditionally emphasizing science or fact. She argues that societies which devalue empathy are poorer for doing so and notes empathy, one of many "stereotypically 'lesser' skills" traditionally reserved for women, is viewed as being on the outer edges of western culture (120). Viewing science as "better" negates the possibility that the empathetic and personal claim "I know how you feel" can make connections across cultural boundaries. Code says such empathetic phrases are "the antithesis of the observational knowledge that makes individuals into objects of study, and seeks to achieve impersonal control" (124). At this point in her text, Code is exploring a theory about the detached scientific approach to viewing culture and the empathetic attachment to people. Code clarifies her position here as being one that "highlight[s] a difference between [the two theories] where issues of gender figure prominently. While this final qualification hints at how Code's theory could be viewed as essentialist, especially when viewed in the binary: empathetic equals female and scientific equals male, the point I wish to make using Code's theory is this: empathetic narrative within travel writing violates established paradigms by failing to keep the traveler a separate entity from the place. In Kowalewski's terms, empathy is what turns a traveler into an expatriate, and in that context empathetic narrative is less

valid precisely because it attempts to connect with rather than remain distant from the subject of report.

A desire for empathetic response within a foreign culture is exactly what Elizabeth Gilbert is hoping to fulfill, though she never views herself as an expatriate—her intention is always to return home at the end of her journey. While in Italy, she describes a moment, after a bad breakup with a man in the United States with whom she'd maintained an ongoing romantic relationship. Sitting in a car in Rome with an Italian man, Giovanni, whom she had befriended on the trip, she uncontrollably bursts into tears. Giovanni, who wishes to be supportive, falls back on the English phrase Gilbert has recently taught him: "I understand Liz. I have been there" (87). So much is going on in this English idiom—having "been there" alludes to a place one can visit. It is an empathetic response to a feeling, and Gilbert has taught her Italian friend that "deep grief sometimes is almost like a specific location, a coordinate on a map of time" (71). By connecting emotion to travel, Gilbert is able to do a number of things. First, she is able to create an empathetic bond with another person despite all of the cultural differences in place. Giovanni is later able to use Gilbert's idiom to successfully comfort her. Second, Gilbert creates a framework within her actual text that makes the self and the place connected at an emotional level.

There is a point in Gilbert's text which complicates the notions of visitor and expatriate even more. Gilbert describes the story of her friend in Bali, a man named Yudhi whose childhood dream was to be in show business in the United States. She says Yudhi speaks like a California surfer, calling her dude, and endured childhood ridicule for being a Christian among predominately Muslim families. As a young man he came to New York, got a job, married a New Yorker, and was quickly living out the American Dream. On

September 11<sup>th</sup>, Yudhi watched, with his wife and fellow New Yorkers, in horror and grief as the Twin Towers collapsed. Subsequent legislation—the Patriot Act and the Homeland Security Act—led Yudhi to attempt to update his immigration status to demonstrate his solidarity for and desire to remain in the United States. With his American wife and Christian background, he did not foresee any problems. However, Yudhi was not prepared for what occurred. Yudhi was arrested, detained with other immigrants, and eventually deported back to Indonesia. Gilbert says Yudhi is “more of an American than he is anything else” and faced more prejudice in Indonesia than he ever did in New York. He moved to Bali and communicates with his wife via email (Gilbert 249-250). Clearly, Gilbert has empathized with Yudhi. She says the crowd of people that inhabited the detention center with Yudhi “were invisible...nobody knew they existed anymore” (249). This isn’t something she’s witnessed personally. Her reflection on her journey at this point is no longer as a visitor to Bali. She may have crossed the line to expatriate.

In addition to Kowalewski’s expatriate category, I suspect he might also place Gilbert’s Eat Pray Love into the “therapist’s couch” category of travel writing.<sup>6</sup> She clearly tells the reader from the beginning of the text that she has embarked on the year long trip for reasons that are not clear to her and because she has suffered some emotionally devastating experiences at home from which she has not healed. Further, in each leg of her journey she employs a kind of “father-confessor” to whom she talks through her personal crises. In Italy, it is the handsome Giovanni who “has been there”, in India, Richard from Texas tells her she has control issues (151) and in Indonesia the ancient Balinese medicine man Ketut guides her spiritually.

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<sup>6</sup> The suggestion that Kowalewski might view Gilbert in a certain light is theoretical. Kowalewski’s text was published in 1992; Gilbert’s was not published until 2006.

Gilbert's text seems to be exactly what Kowalewski calls an "exclusive...journey into self" whose "main adventure" is a "private voyage" to uncover motives for making the trip (9). Gilbert echoes Morris's stated motives in Nothing to Declare almost exactly. On the first page of her narrative, Gilbert tells the reader her reasons for making her trip:

I am a professional American woman in my mid-thirties, who has just come through a failed marriage and a devastating, interminable divorce, followed immediately by a passionate love affair that ended in sickening heartbreak. This loss upon loss has left me feeling sad and brittle and about seven thousand years old. (7)

She admits she hopes Italy will "clear out some old negative thoughts and sad memories" (70) and throughout the text asks herself what she doing there in the first place, even joking that her year-long trip began to take shape "when a ninth-generation Indonesian medicine man tells [her] that [she is] destined to move to Bali and live with him for four months" (28) Clearly, Gilbert hopes the journey will be therapeutic but has no clear idea what it will be about. She does know early on she needs God to succeed. In chapter two, Gilbert tells the reader her story begins when she finds herself on her knees praying (9-12). She recognizes the controversial issue this admission introduces in her narrative and diagrams how each consecutive event fed on the heels of the last until she finally recognized her spiritual quest required her to go to India.

Why is it easier to find God in a distant place? This isn't exactly a new concept. It's referred to as a "spiritual journey" after all. Unlike missionaries of earlier times, however, these modern pilgrims are not carrying God to the distant lands; they are seeking the spirit already present in that land. For Gilbert, her spiritual journey and her physical journey were

intentionally intertwined. Her stay at the monastery was prearranged. She wanted to connect to a higher power. She consciously equates her physical journey with her spiritual one, even to the metaphor of the medium of conveyance, when she says:

I believe that all the world's religions share, at their core, a desire to find a transporting metaphor. When you want to attain communion with God, what you're really trying to do is move away from the worldly into the eternal (from the village to the forest, you might say...) and you need some kind of magnificent idea to convey you there. It has to be a big one, this metaphor—really big and magic and powerful, because it needs to carry you across a mighty distance. It has to be the biggest boat imaginable. (205)

Perhaps the worldly is at home—the village, the eternal is abroad—the forest. Gilbert goes from place to place searching for the divine and spends the entire second section of her book in the Indian ashram, the temple of her guru. In Indonesia, she seeks out the medicine man who has inspired her spiritual journey in the first place. She wants to connect to something spiritual, to find her divine path.

Gilbert continually fields three important questions asked of her by the Balinese. Are you married? Where are you going? Where have you been? The first question I dealt with earlier as I discussed issues of safety. The last two questions are significant within the context of the memoir as Gilbert recounts it and to the Balinese culture in general, but also act as a sort of framing metaphor for her whole trip.

The metaphor for the journey is so strong that it becomes its own entity. The spiritual journey of self-discovery begins to unfold in parallel to the physical journey. Gilbert hopes to find happiness on her journey. Of this goal, she says one must “fight for it, strive for it, insist

upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings” (260). Traveling with the express intent of fulfilling desires again violates those critical rules.

Kowalewski’s dangerous theme of “uncovering the motives for having departed” becomes central to Gilbert’s narrative. While Kowalewski rightly asserts that “the reliance upon narrative voice in this genre remains crucial because more than its episodic ‘plot’ or momentary characterizations, what shapes a travel book’s imaginative texture is its narrative intelligence” (8), he fails to allow for that narrative voice to deviate from expected paradigms. Essentially, the narrative voice is crucial as long as it says what it’s supposed to say. In Gilbert’s case, the narrative voice is attempting to say all the wrong things, at least according to Odyssean standards.

### Critical Conclusion

The consensus among traditional critics of the travel genre is the idea that authors must undertake adventures which they recount in a particular style of storytelling that places emphasis on the exploration and conquest while de-emphasizing the inner, emotional journey. This consensus is confirmed by the types of narratives and authors available in collected anthologies of travel writing and in the available criticism of the genre in general. What this consensus amounts to is the creation of an inherently masculine archetypal figure of the traveler; travelers who deviate from this prescribed aesthetic, either through subjective perspectives, overt empathy, or therapeutic travel motifs, are critically ignored.

But women's travel writing is filled with such dangerous themes involving personal dilemmas, self-therapy, and vague motives and are equally as worthy of critical examination as the Odyssean epics they subvert. Nothing to Declare, for example, is a fascinating work of creative non-fiction, filled with lush descriptions, beautifully rendered landscapes, both internal and external, complex symbolism, and deep insight into relationships between Western privilege and other cultures, as well as deep insight into the self and what separates a person from her world. I wonder, is anyone teaching Mary Morris? And what about Gilbert? Is Gilbert being taught? (I guess I would say thank you to Oprah, since at least Gilbert's book is being read, even if it isn't being taught.) And if, as I believe, the answer to these questions is no, then I wish to challenge that precedent.

For Morris, Gilbert, and writers like them, failing to write epic tales of adventure has omitted them from being the subjects of serious criticism of travel literature despite the quality of the writing which makes their works worthy of such criticism. Gender and genres have been segregated and authors not meeting the standards of the genre are dismissed due to

aesthetic concerns that fail to acknowledge their intentional departures from literary conventions. The way they handle the subject violates the rules for what makes certain writing *travel* writing, according to prescribed canonical standards, or at least *good* travel writing. The artificial aesthetic standards themselves are the real limitation to the genre. Kowalewski's perplexity about why travel writing has been scantily included can be explained by his own failure to broaden his definition of what makes for legitimate travel writing in the first place.

What I wish to make clear is that I am not arguing that Morris's or Gilbert's be categorized in a specific way. Clearly, examining them within the context of women's literature would be just as appropriate and enlightening as examining them as travel writing. What I am saying is that limiting their work to women's studies only or to no critical discussion at all leaves travel writing as a genre limited to the same old story of Odysseus, and silences voices that are struggling to be heard. By categorizing contemporary women's travel writing based on only one of the two major descriptors (*women* instead of *travel*,) Penelope is still stuck at home.

## PART TWO: PERSONAL MEMOIR

### Warmer Waters

*In the parking lot of a flooded out meat market in a suburb of New Orleans, a few hundred yards from the Mississippi River, a collapsed awning behind our truck and a long line of hungry people in front of it, my crew dish up lunch at a feverish pace. It is a Sunday and this is my job—serving food off a truck. The heat and humidity of the Louisiana summer combined with steaming Cambros of andouille sausage make sweat pool inside our plastic gloves as we scoop food into Styrofoam clamshells. The smell from the rotting meat of the market hangs in the air like death but the people outside are filled with life. The line is a mass of people, mostly women, mostly African American, in flowered dresses and hats, or in tank-tops, with children in shorts and t-shirts riding up on bicycles, tired mothers carrying babies, older folks using walkers or canes, all gathering for lunch.*

*A small man wearing a brown suit and the kind of hat common in the 1950s, still worn today by men of a certain age to church or a funeral, waits quietly in line, hands folded in front of him, as younger men in white undershirts hiss laughter through gold teeth and take their plates of red beans and rice from our truck. His hair is dark, graying at the temples and his mouth is pulled into a thin, reserved smile.*

*Priscilla leans out the window when his turn comes and asks in her sweet voice, as she always does, “How many meals for you today, sir?”*

*“Just one,” he replies. We begin to dish up his meal and Priscilla chats him up. Her small talk puts him at ease. Not everyone accepts charity comfortably.*

*“Are you coming from church?” she asks. The man flashes a toothy white grin and nods. Priscilla can read people.*

*“I sing in the choir,” he says. “And once a month, I sing on a radio show.”*

*“Really?” Priscilla asks. “What do you sing?”*

*“Hymns,” he answers. “If you’re still here next weekend, listen in.” He tells her the name of the radio station and lists several of his favorite songs. As he is talking Priscilla holds out a plate for him. He looks a bit concerned for a moment as he fishes in his pockets.*

*“How much do I owe you?” he asks.*

*“Nothing at all,” Priscilla says. “This is a gift from the American people. We can’t accept any money.”*

*The man’s face shows relief. “Well, I have to pay you something,” he says.*

*He takes off his hat and begins to sing. His voice is shaky at first, nervous perhaps at the crowd in the abandoned parking lot, but as he sinks into the song, his light baritone grows stronger, voices hush and activity stops. Jason and I, inside the truck, crowd around Priscilla’s window, our dripping spoons held motionless as we listen. Derrick, our driver, stops his work cutting open cases of fruit with a box knife and the folks outside cease their conversations as the man’s voice rises above the sound of the truck’s humming air conditioner. He sings a sweet soulful hymn—a traditional southern melody that conjures images of marching saints and well-dressed processionalists of trombone players. For the few minutes that he sings, we stand frozen, bewitched by his music, and tears form in our eyes.*

*Deep river*

*My home is over Jordan*

*Deep river, Lord*

*I want to cross over into campground*

*Oh don't you want to go to that gospel feast*

*My home is over Jordan*

*To that promised land where all is peace*

*I want to cross over into campground*

*Gonna walk into heaven and take my seat*

*My home is over Jordan*

*Gonna cast my crown at Jesus' feet*

*I want to cross over into campground*

*When his song ends, the crowd applauds. Our wet gloves slap together enthusiastically as he puts his hat back on and takes the foam container from Priscilla's outstretched hand. She thanks him for the song and he thanks her for the meal.*

*"I wanted to pay for my supper," he says.*

*"You did more than that," Priscilla says. "I think we owe you some change." He tips his hat to her, steps over a broken piece of awning, and turns down a side street out of sight. The crowd outside our truck resumes their laughter and conversations as I scoop another plateful of rice and beans and hand it to Jason.*

*Priscilla leans out her window and smiles. "Hello, ma'am. How many for you today?"*

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Five months earlier, springtime had arrived at the pond behind my office building. The pond was a man-made artifice with fountains at either end, which pretended to be natural space. I never understood why the landscape architects went to so much trouble to make it look like a natural space with a rocky shoreline and transplanted cattails and then added spraying fountains.

Despite the fact that it was tucked away in the suburban sprawl of corporate America, it was stocked with large carp and small minnows and managed to attract a large number of waterfowl and songbirds. In warm weather, I would take my lunches at the pond. It was small and I would walk around it four times to make a mile. Despite its size and artificiality, the refuge it provided me from the dreary gray of my cubicle walls brought me half an hour of peace I desperately needed. As long as I walked counterclockwise and looked over my left shoulder at the water, I could almost forget office buildings surrounded the entire space.

Canada geese and several species of ducks wintered here and laid their eggs in spring. I even enjoyed seeing the occasional Great Blue Heron or two swooping across the water. Small water mammals I never saw very clearly popped their heads out of the water from time to time as well. When the eggs of the geese and ducks hatched in the spring, little yellow tufts followed their parents in straight lines across our well-manicured yard. On my walks, I would eye the groundskeeper sternly to be careful with his riding lawnmower. He was more careful than the cars that came screaming down the road on the other side of the building. I still feel sick at the memory of seeing a full sized goose hit by a car right in front of all the other geese that had crossed the road in front of him. They all turned around startled and stared at him lying dead by the side of the road. The driver didn't even slow down. I hated it when the animals would get hit.

As springtime warmed to summer, the balls of yellow fluff grew larger. My office was chilly in summer and I always wore far too many clothes to work to be appropriate for my walks around the pond. One day, as storm clouds began to gather in the distance, I noticed two small tufts floating alone at one end of the pond. I had been keeping track of my little feathery friends and I knew these to be the offspring of one of the pairs of Mallards. I circled the pond and discovered their mother and two siblings on the far side of the pond. A short walk for me, but for the two undersized ducklings, an eternity away.

Initially, I thought I could shoo them back towards their mother and walked along the edge of the pond talking to them. I only frightened them into swimming away from each other, however, so I gave up the idea. I walked back to the path and watched hopefully as they regrouped with each other. The two ducklings were small. Far smaller than the others on the pond at this time of year and I was afraid for them. Their mother and siblings at the other end of the pond seemed oblivious to their plight and I wondered if she had abandoned them because they were so small. The tiny siblings huddled together a few feet from shore and I returned to my desk.

A few hours later, I went outside to warm up. Despite the impending thunderstorm, it was still warmer outside than in my chilly office. Lightning streaked the horizon and thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. I walked to the edge of the pond where the ducklings had been and I spied one of them immediately in the water a few inches from the shore. I looked around and finally saw the other one climbing awkwardly with little duck feet on the rocks. I thought if I could scoop the two orphans up, I could carry them to the other side of the pond and reunite them with their mother. I caught the duckling on the rocky shore easily but the

one in the water swam out beyond my reach. I held the soft, trembling bird in my hand as the other swam into deeper water.

The little bird was so tiny and I realized, as I stroked his small head with my finger, that I could not save him. He and his brother had been abandoned by a mother who selected the strongest to survive and left the weakest to fend for themselves. I tried to think scientifically of Darwin but it was cold comfort as the heavy drops of rain began to fall from the sky. I gingerly placed the duckling back at the water's edge as close to the other one as possible and backed away. I watched them for a few minutes and prayed silently that they wouldn't suffer too much. As I rode out the rest of my workday, I thought of them outside and I knew they were going to die.

The next morning arrived gray and dismal. I checked my email and opened my files, distracted by thoughts of the ducklings. As soon as I could get away from my desk, I headed outside to the pond. I found, first one, and then another small yellow body. One rested still on the gravel of the shore, near where I had sat him the previous day. The other floated on his side in the water, caught in a small outcropping, rocked gently by the waves of the pond. I wondered about the cause of death. Starvation, perhaps? I went back to work. The following day their bodies were gone, taken by crows, raccoons, or perhaps the groundskeeper. At least they were together, I thought.

—

Two years before, when I started to work for the real estate company as the marketing coordinator, I had a private office with my name on a placard on the door and a large window overlooking the pond. Time progressed and I was moved to a smaller office with a window facing the street. They said it was due to a lack of office space for the new lawyer but I

couldn't help but take it personally. After a few more months, all pretenses were dropped and I was put out in the central area with the office assistants. No windows at all. My fingers on my keyboard were always numb. It was too cold in the summer and too cold in the winter. At least in the summer I could walk around the pond.

I called my friend Stacy a lot in Arizona. For some reason, her voice on the other end of the phone always sorted out the true from the false. "If you don't like it there, go get another job," she would say. Then she would sigh, knowing I'd show up the next day for another miserable shift. A true friend really is someone that listens to your same bullshit over and over again without judgment.

When I initially landed the position I was so hypnotized by the prestige of it and the money; it was the American dream-come-true. I could buy a new car, think about an addition for my kitchen, and do some traveling abroad. Instead, I got a microwave and a relationship, both used.

I told Stacy I had a date. In four years, she'd never given me bad relationship advice. She knew Matt and I thought she'd be excited for me when I told her he had asked me out.

"You didn't agree to go out with him did you?" she asked instead.

"Yes," I said cautiously. "Why?"

"Shit, Dawn. He's just, well, he's probably just horny. I can't imagine a year in Iraq has done much for his libido. You haven't slept with him, have you?"

"No, of course not." I actually hadn't even thought about it yet. "He's sweet," I insisted. "He's not like that."

“He’s *just* like that,” she said cynically. I heard the sound of exhaled smoke. “But maybe he’s changed. I don’t know. Just be careful, I don’t want you getting hurt. It’s been a long time since you’ve dated a guy and he has a hard time not drinking.”

“Okay, I’ll try.” I changed the subject. We had another conversation about my miserable job.

Vague alarm itched the back of my skull. How exactly does one “be careful” in a new relationship? I really could not have imagined how else to proceed. “Just be careful” seemed like words of wisdom frequently offered and usually ignored. Of course, Stacy was right.

Perhaps if I had stared up at the sky quietly for a while, I might have seen dark clouds brewing, or tuned in a weather report and taken appropriate shelter. I might have seen the catastrophe coming. But really, who does that? No one thinks their house will be the one to get hit by the storm. No one turns to their partner and says, “Honey, get the cat, I think this is the big one.”

—

*My job has given me a pre-ulcerous condition and I’m forced to quit drinking coffee. This is especially tragic for me considering how much I love coffee and how cold I am all the time. I need to find a job in a warmer climate.*

—

In late August the weather got hotter and brewed numerous storms in the Gulf of Mexico. I vaguely tracked their courses on the news and the memory of the ducklings faded. On Monday, August 29th, Hurricane Katrina made landfall. New Orleans levees failed and thousands of people were displaced or stranded. Increasingly glued to my TV at home and my computer at work, I watched, transfixed, as the situation went from bad to worse to

inconceivable. I did very little actual work during that week, but spent many hours of my day reading news clips and browsing photos on the Internet. By Friday, I had used up what little passivity had remained in me to do nothing in the face of destruction and I decided to take action.

A small article in Friday's newspaper gave the phone number for Disaster Services and requested calls from anyone wanting to help. I called the number and was told there would be an information and training meeting from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. the following Monday. I was at first hesitant and then recalled it would be Labor Day, one of my five paid holidays per year. I gave the woman my name and agreed to attend the meeting.

—

I spent Labor Day weekend in anxious withdrawal from friends and family, watching the TV for hours on end, sometimes with Matt, sometimes not. I couldn't make sense of the images I was seeing on TV and my mind wandered to thoughts of what I might do if I were down south. I also spent a lot of time worrying about my job and dreading my boss.

When Monday came around I went to the local Disaster Services headquarters for the training. A sign-in sheet was passed around the room and one column heading read "date available for deployment." Initially, I had given myself two or three weeks to tie up loose ends at work, find caregivers for my pets, and attend a weekend retreat I had scheduled. As I scanned down the list, everyone else had written that day's date. Apparently, they had packed and were ready to go. I was a little stunned by this and a little ashamed at my hesitancy, so I decided to indicate my availability as two days later, Wednesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>. If I had known what was going to happen, I might have chickened out right then. I'm glad I didn't know.

The second part of the day was spent as a sort of sharing session. People who had been on disaster relief missions before shared their experience and Disaster Services leaders collected and reviewed our paperwork, including health evaluations, experience and background information, and a myriad of waivers. Once forms and health history were cleared, individuals were chosen for deployment.

Not everyone was chosen for deployment right away and I didn't expect to be one of the first—I had no experience. I had indicated on one of the forms that I worked in a group halfway house for a number of years. Since sheltering is one of Disaster Services' primary functions, despite my inexperience, I was selected for deployment with the first group. I was stunned. I had not thought it would all go like that. I was just going to the training to get information and find out what might be involved in helping. Instead I was holding an 800 number to call and book tickets for the next available flight to Louisiana.

I was thrilled and terrified. I desperately wanted to go and help. I desperately needed to get away from my job, my boyfriend. My mind raced. How would I get the time off from work? I knew my boss, the VP of marketing, was going to be, well, pissed would be putting it mildly. She was pissed when I didn't work 50 hours a week. What she was going to be when I asked for three weeks off, I didn't know what to call that. Rancorous, maybe.

As expected, she was not pleased. At one point she said something like, we all feel bad for those people down there but we can't just abandon our jobs and go help them. We have to keep our priorities straight. I said nothing. When she asked me why I had never told her I was a volunteer with Disaster Services, I lied. I didn't know what else to do. I was already crying. Finally, in exasperation she approved my leave and told me that while I was

gone I was to consider whether or not I really wanted to continue as the marketing coordinator at that company. That was Monday. My flight left Wednesday morning.

My mother willingly agreed to care for my three cats and watch over my house. My parents said they were proud of me. Friends told me they were glad I was going and wished they could go too. My neighbor, John, said I would be doing God's work. I thought about what my boss had said and I decided my boss was the one who had her priorities backwards. I was sure the real estate world would go on just fine without me. I was so sick of modifying house photos for direct mail advertisements and drawing plat maps. I was so sick of being cold in the summer.

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*Shortly before I leave, Matt and I have an argument. Calling it an argument implies we disagreed. The truth is that we both agree he is pathetic. He is insisting God hates him. Foolishly, I try to convince him God doesn't hate him, he is just depressed, just being dramatic. After a while, his self-pity is so exasperating that I ask him why God hates only him and no one else in the world. His quick comeback is that God also hates the people in Africa because they are suffering too. I throw my hands up, roll my eyes, and go into the kitchen to do the dishes. The real reason God hates Matt is because he never does the dishes. I won't miss him.*

—

On Wednesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, my parents dropped me off at the Des Moines airport to catch a flight to Texas. I said goodbye to Matt without much sadness; I did not expect to talk to him until I returned home three weeks later. There was no way to know where I would be assigned and Disaster Services had warned workers that some cell towers were damaged

and phone service would be limited. With no power or telephone lines, communication might not have been possible.

When I boarded the plane in Des Moines, I had only vague instructions and my worldly possessions, crammed into a backpack and a duffle bag. When my plane landed in Houston—George Bush Airport (the irony was not lost on me)—I seated myself in the terminal café and called the 800 number “for further instructions.” It was busy. What I soon learned was that the key word in any disaster relief effort is *disaster*. I wandered around the airport for a while and tried again. Busy. I called about 100 times before I got through—to a recording: “If arriving in Houston after 5 pm, proceed to the Hilton Inn. In the morning, rent a car from Avis, and report to the Disaster Services headquarters, located at 235 Flora Street in Baton Rouge.” It was 6:30 pm. I was spending the night in Texas.

I met Joe and Charlie while waiting for the shuttle to the hotel. Joe was from California and on his way home. Charlie was crazy—a gung-ho weirdo with wild hair and a lot of nervous energy. He had marked every item he brought “Disaster Services” with a big red magic marker. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had gotten a Disaster Services logo tattooed on his ass just in case he got caught with his pants down. The prospect of driving to Baton Rouge with Charlie gave me the creeps, not to mention the fact that he smoked like a chimney. We got to the hotel, checked in, and went to dinner in the hotel restaurant. I still did not have my Disaster Services Visa card. Joe said he’d cover me.

Joe ordered a pasta platter with Caesar salad. Charlie got the halibut with braised vegetables. I got the steak, baked potato, and side of guilt. We ate until our bellies complained like it was 3 o’clock on Thanksgiving afternoon. The image of the boy I had seen on TV earlier that week crying and telling the reporter he’d only had a granola bar to eat for

three days came back to me. Joe pulled a wadded-up handful of sweaty twenty dollar bills from his pocket and paid the waiter for our meals. He split the rest of the cash with Charlie and me.

“Disaster Services cash,” he said. “Might as well take it, I’m going home in the morning.” He said he was tired and went up to his room to sleep even though it was only 8:00 p.m. Charlie wandered over to the bar and lit a very long cigarette. My first night as a disaster worker was not going like I expected. I decided I’d rather be alone than hang out with Charlie so I returned to my room.

As I sat cross-legged on the queen-sized bed in the Houston hotel and stared at the backpack resting alone on the opposite bed, the sensation washed over me that something just wasn’t right. The pack was filled with the requisite clothing of a disaster: one pair of military-issue rip-stop pants, three pairs of cargo shorts, five t-shirts, one pair of sneakers, one pair of hiking shoes, one pair of flip-flops. If you didn’t bring it with you, they told us, you wouldn’t have it. I also had a duffle with two towels, one sleeping bag (lightweight), hand sanitizer, toothpaste, bug spray (apply once daily), sunscreen (apply twice daily), baby wipes (shower-in-a-box), flashlight, and batteries. Sadly, no Swiss Army Knife—airplane, you know.

The duffle and backpack remained securely closed. The hotel had provided complementary shampoo and soap. There was even a shower hat, and although I pocketed this in my luggage, I never planned to use it. I don’t even know why I took it. A piece of thin plastic in the shape of your head makes such an odd hotel perk. Do people actually use those things? If it weren’t for the hotel lobby bulletin board displaying hurricane updates and missing persons information, I could have almost forgotten where I was and why.

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The travel gods were smiling on me. Charlie discovered he had been assigned to the Houston Astrodome and would not be accompanying me to Baton Rouge. I gratefully boarded the shuttle alone to get to the Avis rental lot by 8 am. There were only two cars left out of thousands. The clerk gave me the keys to a white Taurus, a city map of Houston, and directions from the Avis lot to Interstate 10. She said to take I-10 east all the way to the suburbs of Baton Rouge. That's all she knew. I resigned myself to figure out the rest of the directions when I got closer.

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*East Texas is rough and homogenous. Straight roads and miles of unwavering heat grudgingly give way to occasional glimpses of the Gulf of Mexico through the metal spires of oil refineries. Crossing Texas seems like a long dream that you finally awaken from to the Spanish moss and cypress trees of Louisiana. It never ceases to amaze me how un-arbitrary state lines are. East Texas and West Louisiana merge seamlessly, but you can just kind of tell when you've crossed from one to the other. There's something different, maybe in the air. It's like that when you cross the southwestern desert too—you wouldn't expect to see much change of scenery from New Mexico into Arizona, but you do and you just know—you start looking for the Saguaros.*

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As soon as I crossed the border between Texas and Louisiana, I pulled over at the Louisiana Welcome Center and got a map. They didn't have any city maps of Baton Rouge and I hoped the tiny inset of the city on the state map would be sufficient. I still had a ways to

go so I was not worried. I was sure it would all work out. Someone in the great state of Louisiana would know where 235 Flora Street, Baton Rouge was. I just kept heading east.

The drive across the western part of Louisiana was more pleasant. The road crossed vast stretches of bayou where cement pillars plunged into the depths of swamp water, alive with pelicans, herons, ducks, diving turtles, unseen crawdads and catfish, skulking alligators, and plenty of bright sunshine. It was hard to imagine this idyllic scene battered by the winds of Hurricane Katrina a few days before, and at this point in my journey I had no knowledge of the approaching Hurricane Rita, which would eventually carve a path across all that I drove through then.

Rural Iowa is filled with deer. You can't drive ten miles without seeing them, whether grazing contentedly in a recently harvested cornfield or a casualty of a hit and run on the roadside. I have known many people to hit them but I hope I never do—I'm always watching for them. I am especially watchful at dawn and dusk. When I drive past groves of trees along the Iowa interstate in a driving rain or snowstorm, I wonder where the deer are. Do they huddle together under a fallen log or take meager shelter from the cold and snow in a leafless bush? As I passed the Louisiana cypress swamps, I wondered how a 15-pound great blue heron buffered itself from 150 mile-per-hour hurricane winds. I guess it is the nature of nature to survive.

As I approached the suburbs of Baton Rouge, more obvious evidence of the disaster emerged. For many miles, I had been seeing broken treetops, but nothing worse than what I was used to seeing after a bad Midwestern thunderstorm. At some point, I realized the traffic had changed. I shared the road with few small vehicles. The ones like my own bore window or door signs of Disaster Services, FEMA, or other government agencies. Larger vehicles,

most towing trailers weighed down with generators, bright red cans of gasoline, and gallons of drinking water, reminded me what would be missing when I reached my destination. Semi tractor-trailers had covered their corporate logos with signage reading *disaster relief*. The majority of the vehicles, however, were military. The right lane was entirely filled with uniform clad soldiers driving olive or tan Humvees, fuel and water tankers, equipment trucks, four-axle flat beds, and the like. Numerous helicopters flew overhead. I'd seen military convoys before, but never like this. What struck me most as I passed them, mile after mile, was that these vehicles were the dregs.

Nearly all were cobbled together from the scraps of other vehicles. Olive drab trucks with desert tan quarter panels, Humvees with the scars of recent welding patches painted primer gray, others with dents in the roofs, some with doors just plain missing—this was the equipment we sent to New Orleans. Of course, the reason was obvious. The good stuff was all in Iraq. That alone was enough to bring tears to my eyes. Then I turned on the radio.

I tuned in a local call-in broadcast and felt my heart in my throat as I listened to the show. Desperate callers telephoned in begging for help. Every plea was similar, and went something like: “My name is Jane Smith. I’m looking for my brother Joe. He was last seen evacuating from 18<sup>th</sup> Street in Metairie on Friday, Sept 1<sup>st</sup>. Joe, if you hear this please call. I’m at the Disaster Services shelter on Oak Street in LaPlace. The number here is 864-555-1234.” I listened for a while as people asked for information about lost loved ones. During the commercial breaks, local companies, banks and factories, wished families well and encouraged their displaced workers to call and let them know they were safe.

The impact of the disaster became more than visions of downed trees and signs blown over. When I reached a rest area just outside of Baton Rouge, I shut off the radio and stared

at the deserted parking lot littered with garbage and row upon row of portable toilets. I had arrived at the city limits, I needed to use the facilities, and I had no idea where to go from there.

Inside the restroom, a woman in the trademark red and white Disaster Services vest (complete with ID badge) washed her hands. I approached her, explained my situation, and asked if she knew where 235 Flora Street was.

“I just came from there,” she informed me. “Take I-10 another few miles to 210 north. From there it’s another few miles to the Saint Martin Avenue exit. Take that and follow that road west for about ten blocks. There will be an abandoned Wal-Mart at the corner of Saint Martin and Flora Street. That’s where HQ is.”

I thanked her for her help and got back in the Taurus. Despite the overwhelming traffic once I got into the city—Baton Rouge’s population of 300,000 had swelled to about 800,000—the kind woman’s directions led me to the front door of HQ. I arrived around 2:00 p.m. and had plenty of time to in-process and get my assignment, but still no Disaster Services Visa card. The final leg of my journey approached—finding my post in New Orleans without benefit of road signs, streetlights, or inhabitants. At least at that point I had some navigators with me. Just like Flora Street, I was sure we would find Kitchen 13—one of my navigators even had a Visa card.

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We four new recruits had been assigned as a feeding crew out of Kitchen 13, set up in Kenner, a suburb of New Orleans. As predicted, we found our way with little trouble. Unlike Baton Rouge, there wasn’t any traffic in the New Orleans area—it was evacuated, after all.

Our arrival was heralded by a wet-haired, freshly scrubbed Marny, barefoot and dictating a long list of do's and don'ts. Mostly the do's involved in sign this, write your number on that. The number one rule: don't leave the police station after dark. Marny was in her mid-forties, solidly built, with long brown hair and an ornery twinkle in her eye that I would come to appreciate. When the heat and stress got unbearable, it would be Marny who would rescue us with squirt guns and childish playtime. Then, however, she simply pointed us to our cells and let us settle in. The real work would begin the next morning. I selected a bottom bunk and met Jason, my cellmate. He was to become one of my crewmates on the rig and my best friend for the entire three weeks I was there.

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*We are headquartered at the Kenner city jail, sleeping in the cells. Next door, the military has conscripted a large athletic complex and football field and numerous camouflaged tents dot the landscape. Inside the police station, the city jail section of the building is our home sweet home. We dine elbow-to-elbow with the soldiers and their guns.*

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Disaster Services has three main areas of service to the public: feeding, including both mobile and stationary food and water distribution; sheltering, which, in addition to the actual providing of roofs over heads, includes assistance in acquiring weather-appropriate clothing, bedding, and hygiene items; and health services, which includes access to all areas of both physical and mental health. It's Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* in action, though I'm not sure I agree with Maslow past the first level and I always want to call him Pavlov. The name Maslow always makes my mouth water. Nevertheless, these three services are designed to meet the emergency short-term needs of those affected by disasters. Such "disaster-

caused” needs rarely last more than a few days or a few weeks. Hurricane Katrina changed all the rules.

The feeding portion of the relief effort was pretty straightforward. Get food and water to people as quickly and as efficiently as possible. However, “quick” and “efficient” were sometimes mutually exclusive. Our policy was that it was better to waste a little than miss a chance to be helpful to someone. That policy spawned charges of misallocation and a host of post-Katrina investigations.

Initially, I was assigned to the kitchen crew of the stationary kitchen but I grew weary of dishing up canned green beans and ravioli to the off-duty police officers and requested a transfer to the mobile feeding crews. Squeaky wheel got the grease, it seemed, and my transfer was approved. It helped that our supervisor, a grizzled, bald-headed New Yorker who got hooked up with Disaster Services after 9/11, had instantly taken me under his wing. Along with his wife, a woman who looked and sounded just like the actress Fran Drescher, tall and thin, whiney and east-coast but big hearted and hard-working, he ran the Kitchen 13 operation. New York Bob oversaw the yard and the mobile crews, while Pat took care of the kitchen and the food loads. Bob and Pat made sure we observed a moment of silence on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> before we began our runs that day. Bob had taken a shine to me, for whatever reason, and made sure I got assigned to a DiRT crew as soon as a position opened up. Turnover in a disaster zone is high and a position became available about 6 hours after I made my request.

The mobile feeding was done in vehicles called Disaster Relief Trucks, or D-R-T for short. The DiRTs, as we called them, looked basically like ambulances with lights and sirens, brightly painted with the Disaster Services logo on the sides. The cabs of these trucks were

cramped two-seaters, filled with dials, control panels, and CB radios. The feeding action, however, took place in the rear. The back was large enough for a regular sized person to stand up in. However, if you happen to be a six-foot eight-inch retired Army major, you wouldn't be working on a DiRT crew. Sorry Fred, you'll have to work in the warehouse yard instead.

One side of the truck had a shelf designed to hold three large Cambros at waist height, a mini food assembly line. The Cambros were insulated containers that could carry hot or cold foods at optimum temperature for hours. The other side of the truck had two jump seats for the crew to ride in, and several sets of large cargo straps that could hold additional Cambros in place, as well as stacks of bottled water. Above, side-by-side cupboards contained all the serving utensils, boxes of rubber gloves, cleaning supplies, paper towels, garbage bags, and hardware necessary to make mobile feeding possible. At the front of the work area, a swiveling seat was bolted in front of a sliding service window and behind this seat was an area to hold boxes of plates, condiments, and pre-packaged snack foods, as well as the occasional case of fresh fruit.

Disaster Services contracted with the National Baptist Organization to prepare the hot food we distributed. Disaster Services bought the bulk food and then the NBO set up the mobile kitchens and prepared it. Essentially, we were on the front lines and they were our supply unit. We were cautioned not to give orders to the NBO or interfere in their operation in any way. Only our CO was to coordinate with them. We worked together, we ate together, and we shared quarters together, but there was hardly any social interaction between the Disaster Services crews and the NBO crews. Part of the reason for this was that most of the

NBO members were retired. Add to that the fact that they got up at 4:00 a.m. to start cooking for our first run and it was plain to see why we didn't mingle.

There were two notable exceptions to this. Seth and Scott had come with their church group to help on the kitchen crews. These two men were nearly 30 years old and had been best friends for many years. They related tales of traveling in Thailand together, drinking beer with German tourists, and talked of their plans to either enter the seminary or go back to college.

Seth was the serious one, an intellectual with sandy blonde hair and a crooked smile. Scott was a bit more of a free spirit, not quite as handsome or brooding as Seth, given to strumming his guitar on his bunk while we played games and relaxed. They joked about the other NBOs and their elders' propensity to sing them awake at 4:00 a.m. Within a week, Seth and Scott defected to Disaster Services DiRT crews.

The trip in the DiRT out from the kitchen warehouse was crowded. Usually, though against strict Disaster Services policy, the crew rode standing up in the small aisle between the Cambros and the bottled water so the jump seats could be folded up to make room for additional cases of snacks and water. The work was fast-paced, hot, and went until the food was gone. If you've ever worked food service, imagine that job occurring inside a moving truck in the jungle and you get a fair idea of the variables. The trip back to the warehouse at the end of the run was dirty, empty, with flattened boxes on the floor to cushion aching feet. With all the food and water out of the way, a worker could finally sit down and drink a hot Gatorade to replace lost fluids.

*Water is the basic element in every disaster and every disaster worker knows about water. It doesn't matter if the disaster is a wildfire, a tornado, a flood, a hurricane, a tsunami, a terrorist attack, or some other god-awful tragedy; water plays the key role. Either you have too much of it or not enough. Rivers bursting their banks, torrential rains, city-swallowing hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis—way too much water; fires raging unchecked through scrub lands or cities, terrorist bombs igniting blazes and stirring up choking clouds of dust—way too little. When the shouting is over, when the flames are out, the tides have receded, the winds have calmed; you still need water. In fact, now you need it more than ever. Drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, even flushing—you have got to have water.*

*Humanity has a few basic needs for life. Water is at the top of the list. And if you really think about it, it's a short list. Water, food, protection from the elements, those are the big three. No human can survive without those things. Many of us go our whole lives without really giving that a second thought; we take those things for granted. But when the water, the food, and the protection from the elements burn up, blow up, or wash away, securing those essentials of life becomes paramount to everything else. So, a disaster worker is an expert on all those things, but especially a disaster worker is an expert on water.*

*Water comes in many forms: rain, lakes, oceans, rivers, seas, tap water, spring water, drainage water, sewer water, potable water, bottled water. In a disaster, you get water in tanker trucks, water in gallon jugs, water in liters, water with fancy Avian labels, water with no labels, water in Budweiser beer cans that puncture and spray everywhere when you bump into them with a forklift, water wrapped in plastic sheeting that holds up to gale force winds, and water in cartons that disintegrate at the slightest touch. You have water with a fruity taste, water with caffeine; water stacked on pallets inside box-trucks heading up narrow,*

*curving roads that make you fear the shoulder will give out and send you and your load of water into the swirling river below. You have water that you put in the sun to warm which you pour over your head for a makeshift shower, water you had to wade through, standing water concealing downed power lines which block your path, dirty water soaking your shoes that never quite dry, well water you have to bleach every day and test with a special kit, toxic water you can't even touch, and, finally, you have perfect, thirst-quenching water carried willingly in the hands of someone you never met before.*

*That last one is the water you need the most. That is the water that chases away the hopelessness you feel in the aftermath of a disaster when all the other waters have washed away everything you held dear. A perfect stranger with a funny accent, a tired smile, and clothes even dirtier than your own carries the sweetest water. That is the water that lets you know maybe you can keep going. It lets you know you can pick up the shovel and keep digging. Keep digging until your water again runs clean and pure.*

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An official DiRT crew consisted of four people. In other disasters, three did the job but this disaster was just too big and there was too much to do so four people per DiRT became standard operating procedure. There were between ten and twelve DiRTs operating out of our kitchen at any given time, depending on the state of repair of the vehicles; flat tires were common in a debris-strewn disaster zone, as was overheating in the 95 degree heat. Air conditioning was a luxury, not a necessity, though in the back of the vehicles when the Cambros were opened and the steam of cooked food was rolling out, temperatures would easily reach 110 degrees even with the air conditioner blowing on high. At such times, sweat pooled inside of our plastic gloves like tiny water balloons at our finger tips, making dishing

up spoonfuls of sugary fruit cocktail a slippery mess. I averaged about eight pairs of gloves per run and my hands were usually pink and pruned by the time I got back each evening.

Multiple kitchens were scattered throughout the disaster area. Our kitchen delivery sphere stretched from the southern shore of Lake Ponchartrain to the northern banks of the Mississippi River from the far western boundary of Jefferson Parish to its eastern edge in Metairie where it met Orleans Parish just shy of downtown New Orleans, a stone's throw from the Superdome. The economic classes varied greatly throughout this sphere but Katrina had not distinguished between them. The damage was widespread and random. A pleasure boat rested casually on a street corner in north Jeff. Parish while an uprooted palm tree leaned precariously against the roof of a Church's Fried Chicken in Metairie. Each day, we drove past a four-plex where one apartment was missing its walls. I was amazed that the walls of the bedroom could be gone but the pillow stayed on top of the bed.

In addition to this delivery sphere, K13 had a special delivery site; a veteran DiRT crew made twice daily runs to the 17<sup>th</sup> Street levee. The Army Corps of Engineers worked tirelessly to repair this portion of the levee, the collapse of which was now infamously associated with the submersion of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. Our DiRT crew took food and water to the ACE teams and their military guards within the restricted zone and for the rest of us, this access to the heart of the disaster embodied the veteran DiRT crew with something of a celebrity status.

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My DiRT crew was assigned to runs in some of the poorest sections of the sphere. Though we had no special claim to fame, the four of us, me, Jason, Priscilla, and Derrick, worked as a well-oiled machine. Once, I was temporarily assigned to another crew when a

personnel shortage occurred. I could stand their Mickey Mouse operation for only one run and I was relieved to finally get back with my crew.

Priscilla and Derrick both came from Washington, D.C. They were full-time paid Disaster Services staff. They were both African American and close to my age, Priscilla a little older, Derrick a little younger. That, however, was where their similarities ended. Priscilla, I am convinced, was an angel in disaster-appropriate clothing. She had warm brown eyes, and a kind smile that put everyone who saw it at ease. Her voice was always upbeat and matter-of-fact, even when things were bad, which, in a disaster zone, they frequently were. In our four person DiRT crew, she was our “window person,” the one who sat at the service window giving out the food to the hungry folks we served. We referred to them as clients or customers—we did not call them victims. It was a subtle distinction but it allowed them their dignity while reminding us we were there to serve above all else. Serving the clients was something Priscilla did with grace. It was why she was at the window. She was a natural people person, unlike Jason and I who were just a little too shy. He and I were the worker bees, while Derrick was our driver, good with maps and blind alleys. Derrick liked to flirt with me and asked me to show him my karate moves, though he talked so fast I sometimes didn’t understand what he was saying. Priscilla assured me he was harmless, though, and I trusted her completely so I volleyed his friendly jibes. Despite the fact that according to Disaster Services policy the DiRT driver is the crew chief, Priscilla became the unspoken leader of our team. Derrick always said he was in charge but he still did whatever Priscilla said.

Of all the people on my newly assigned DiRT crew, Jason was the one I bonded with most closely. I guess we just clicked together the way some people do—me doing all the

talking, him doing all the listening. Along with Ron, K13's logistics officer, the three of us spent nearly all of our off-duty hours together, talking, eating, traveling, sweating, crying, sleeping.

Jason was stocky, hairy, scarred, dirty of fingernail, stinky of foot. I gave him the benefit of the doubt on the last two: being without running water can inhibit your normal hygienic rituals somewhat. He would say "sure" in an Eastern Pennsylvania sort of way that sounded more like "shore". He was from Lancaster, PA—properly pronounced as Lank-ister with emphasis on the first syllable. His accent was hard to detect at first, however, since he was a man of few words. Not exactly the Rocky Balboa image I had of guys from that part of the country.

Jason's most notable feature was the bright pink twelve-inch scar running from the top of his head down behind his ear to the base of his skull. He'd shaved off his hair for the trip down south and through the half-inch of dark stubble that had grown back since he'd been away, the scar was hard to not stare at.

While in New Orleans, he usually wore a boonie hat but it only concealed some of the wound. Obviously a scar like that comes with a story, perhaps a painful one. We all figured Jason's unassuming good-natured attitude was due to some gratitude born out of a serious brush with death. At first no one asked about it. Finally, I did. I had visions of him caught in a convenience store gun battle, fiery car accident, or surgical lobotomy but it was simply that he started getting dizzy and having headaches as a kid and they put in a shunt to drain fluid off his brain. He was so matter-of-fact about telling me this; I realized the scar was much more visible on the outside of him than it was on the inside.

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Our cell block was designed for four. Two bunks on opposite walls, one top and one bottom. Each cell was in a block of four. There were four blocks per floor and three floors. If you did the math, the capacity of the Kenner city jail was 192 people. There were about 400 of us. Chief Congemi let all the prisoners go after the floodwaters tore through the levees. It was a city jail after all—sentences of 60 days or less for things like drunk and disorderly or unpaid parking tickets. The chief's words to them were something like "Get your families and get out of here. We need the beds. I don't ever want to see any of you here again." Talk about a suspended sentence.

Disaster Services had the second and third floors, along with the Baptists in one cellblock of floor two. FEMA, operating a relief center (if you could call it that) out of the police station, shared the first floor with the police officers and their families displaced by the storm. To get from the main entrance to the cellblocks occupied by the police families, you had to pass through the booking area. In that area, the recently arrested were finger-printed, photographed, and secured in holding cells while being processed, not that there was much business with the city mostly evacuated. The holding cells were along one wall of the hallway leading from the entrance to the cellblock. Colloquially, this was sometimes referred to as the "fish-tank."

If you happened to be one of the unfortunate, and/or stupid people arrested in the midst of a disaster relief effort headquartered in the city jail, you would have spent several nights awaiting a hearing or transport to another city sleeping on the bare cement bench in the eight by ten-foot room, designed to detain prisoners for a matter of hours. During this extended stay in the fish-tank, you would have felt as if you were indeed in an aquarium as wives and children of law enforcement officers and government agents passed by gawking at

you wondering what idiotic notion came over you to commit a crime in a city swarming with M-16s and frayed nerves.

Once, the officer on guard duty had a conversation with a fellow in the holding cell. The fellow was shouting that he should be set free because he was just trying to feed his family. The guard shouted back that he couldn't feed his family with a bicycle. The irony was that had he truly wanted food for his family, he would only have had to come to the police station of his own free will. The Baptist kitchen and Disaster Services mobile feeding operation were preparing 4000 meals a day there. We would have given him as much food as he could have carried away, on foot of course.

On the second floor, in the second cell of the first cellblock, six of us had set up camp. Me, Jason, Janet, Frank, and the retired couple from Mason City, Iowa quietly brushed our teeth with bottled water over the non-functioning stainless steel sink and hung damp socks from the cell bars. Janet and I had claimed the bottom bunks, Jason the top above Janet, and Frank slept on the floor between us. The Iowa couple also slept on the floor, near the cell bars with a highly prized inflatable air mattress. (Wal-Mart sold out of those in a matter of hours.) Frank left the day before Jason had a Humpty-Dumpty incident. Had he still been there, Janet and I would have awakened to the sound of Jason's elbow cracking into Frank's skull. A softer landing for Jason perhaps, but I don't think Frank would have liked it. The night after his fall, we teased Jason about the red lump on his forehead and he traded his top bunk for Frank's old spot on the floor.

The only thing missing from our little paradise was running water. When the average daily temperature was 96 degrees with 80 percent humidity and you've worked like a dog for twelve to fourteen hours serving food and hefting boxes, the one thing you desperately

needed come nightfall was a shower. The process for showering was a bit complicated but I realized there was nothing else to do so the time involved was irrelevant. Also, it became evident that the showering ordeal was really a social activity in disguise, and the whole procedure got me past public shyness very quickly.

I always wondered about those women at the swimming pool or the gym who trotted around the locker room with their boobies flapping in the breeze. I'm sure there is the male equivalent—some exhibitionist with his parts jiggling gratuitously. Didn't they have any shame? For god's sake, wrap a towel around yourself. No one wants to see your privates. I discovered, however, that after about five days, de-sensitivity set in.

Two shower options were available. The first option involved setting a gallon or two of water in the sun during the day and pouring it over your head in the shower area of the cellblock at bath time. The shower area had no privacy. Prisoners do not get shower curtains and we jury-rigged a sheet over a clothesline. The trick of course, was to make a lot of noise while doing your business so no one else walked in on you. Did I mention the cellblocks were co-ed? Mr. and Mrs. Mason City shared shower time. It seemed to work for them—two people could make more than twice the noise. Anyway, option one was less desirable. It's very difficult to wash your hair with a gallon jug of water in one hand, a bottle of shampoo in the other while whistling a tune and trying not to step in the slimy spot where the last showerer left a glob of what you hope is conditioner. Option two was better.

The police department school bus waited at the front of the police station each night at 7:00 p.m. and again around 9:30 p.m. for whoever wanted a real shower, be they Disaster Services, Baptist, FEMA, or police officer. The bus, driven by one of the friendliest officers on the force, made the 40-minute trip to the La Place city high school—Go Tigers—boys'

locker room on the right, girls' locker room on the left. Bad towel-snapping memories undoubtedly surfaced for some. The shower stalls, much like the prison, had no curtains but at least the boys and girls were separate. Also lacking at the high school was hot water. If you made the first run, you were guaranteed tepid at best. Even on a 90 degree evening a cold shower was still a cold shower. Believe me, shampoo-rinse-repeat featured none of the latter. Between the cockroaches scurrying for cover when the lights came on and wiping the grit off the bottom of my feet with institutional brown paper towels, I dressed as fast as possible and got back on the bus. That September, I don't think I ever completely experienced a state known as dry. At least I got the baked-bean juice off my forearms and the camaraderie on the bus made it well worth the trip.

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In the common area of our cellblock, where, under normal circumstances the prisoners would eat meals at metal picnic tables bolted to the floor or play cards or arm wrestle, about ten different individual "campsites" were set up. New arrivals claimed their spot with either a Disaster Services issue cot, an air mattress, or just a sleeping bag on the floor. At some point, Ron, one of the common area floor sleepers, had secured some ten-by-twelve foot rectangles of two-inch thick foam. I don't know where he got them or what their original purpose was, but they made the floor and the metal cell bunks a lot more restful.

Lights-out was at 10:00 p.m. Lights out in a city jail means the guard on duty hits a master switch from the guardroom. Ka-chunk and it's dark, the end. Curfew was strictly enforced. With the Baptists, who had the entire cellblock next to ours, getting up at 4:00 a.m. to begin preparing the 2000 lunches we would be loading on our trucks for first run, lights-

out was no joke. Each morning, 40 elderly Baptists would sing hymns as they made their beds and dressed. Ron bought us earplugs in bulk.

If you wanted to stay up past curfew, you went outside. Outside, clusters of porta-potties, canopies, and picnic tables dotted the squad car parking lot and the training field next to the police station. The Motel 6 across the street has been closed due to the flooding, though a few Hispanic men were staying in the wet, mildewed rooms while they worked on a cleanup crew for the city. They were being paid a lot of money for their labor but they had nothing to eat. Sometimes, late at night, they would come to our picnic tables and in broken English ask for cans of fruit juice and military rations. We sent them away with as much as they could carry. Except for the Hispanic men and a lone employee, the hotel was abandoned.

The parking lot of the hotel was adjacent to the police station field and had been converted into a large outdoor warehouse for K13 by Disaster Services. Numerous refrigerator and freezer semi trailers, industrial sized ovens, tents, a pressure washer hooked to a water tanker, as well as stacks upon stacks of pallets of water and dry goods filled this parking lot. On the far side of the field, two construction site sized dumpsters filled to overflowing everyday with the flattened boxes and garbage of a warehouse/kitchen cooking and serving 4000 meals a day.

The yard at night was like summer camp. The evening air was soft and warm, the heat of the day forgotten, and happy and relatively clean workers sat and talked or played cards by lamplight. Every nook and cranny of the yard held a cooler full of iced Gatorade, soda, and bottled water along with a random scattering of open cases of snacks; anything from off-brand potato chips, name-brand cookies, candy bars, and beef jerky to chewing gum and

pudding cups. If it was individually wrapped and full of preservatives it could be found in the yard. I never once felt guilty eating all that crap. The camp songs were just the icing on the Twinkie. I slept like a baby every single night and didn't gain an ounce.

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*New Orleans is well known throughout the world as a gourmand's paradise. A rich cultural history has given birth to some of the greatest culinary creations in existence. French, Italian, Spanish, Cajun, Creole, and Caribbean recipes have blended together, forming the unique flavor that is New Orleans cuisine.*

*For breakfast, eggs with andouille, a heaping side of grits, and coffee with chicory is a must. For lunch, a catfish po-boy or a heap of fried shrimp will do the trick. Dinner choices are endless. From a spicy jambalaya, the kick of which requires an extra pitcher of ice-cold sweet tea to cool the burn, to a duck etouffée or a crab and okra gumbo made with a roux so smooth the tiniest lump of flour has been patiently dissolved. A fricasseed rabbit with oysters and hominy, the crayfish bisque, blackened redfish with red beans and rice, coq au vin so tender you could eat it with a spoon, or just a good old-fashioned rack of barbecued pork ribs will satisfy even the most selective of palates. Save room for dessert. A thick slice of pecan pie, crêpe Suzette, or a crème brûlée crowns the perfect meal. It's no wonder New Orleans is the fattest city in the nation.*

*However, when the French Quarter is closed until further notice, when the owners of Sisco's on St. Charles Boulevard are living in a trailer in Baton Rouge, when even the McDonalds off the I-10 is under eight feet of water, the biggest wad of cash in the world can't buy that paneéd pork and dirty rice the police officer on duty was craving for lunch.*

*Instead, the MREs and canned peanuts sweat-drenched Disaster Services workers are passing out in front of a blown-out furniture store will have to do.*

*If another police officer from Orleans Parish, a Creole by birth and a cop by choice, happens to have weathered the storm, he might dig some old pots out of storage, left over from the officer's mess in the old city hall. He might drag them outside and use some bleach and wire brushes to clean off the rust stains. He might confiscate an industrial sized grill from the local Home Depot (also closed until further notice) and boil up some of the bottled water shipped in from out of state. He might be able to recall from memory his daddy's recipe for chicken gumbo. If his police chief can keep a supply of diesel fuel in the refrigerated trucks that are serving as his freezer, the officer can triple the recipe and feed the whole force. The charm of his daddy's outdoor café will become the necessity of the city jail parking lot but the satisfying flavor of his daddy's stew won't suffer for it.*

*The food will taste even more satisfying to that tired officer coming in off his 12-hour shift. A week ago the police station and city jail were his places of business. Now it's his living room, his bathroom, his bedroom. It's where his wife has spent the day wondering what's left to salvage in their house across town. The stew tastes as good as any he can remember having, and calms his hunger a lot better than the granola bar and cheese crackers he had for lunch. It will tide him over until the next day, when the double shift he'll have to work will force him to eat a military-issued field ration for dinner, that, although the package claims to be "jambalaya", really resembles the mushy casserole the jail inmates usually eat. At least the field rations come with a miniature bottle of Tabasco sauce. If he gets a day off this week, the officer might drive his wife the 40 miles to La Place for dinner, where the storm wasn't so bad.*

*The officer doesn't know about supply problems. The three chain restaurants in La Place haven't gotten a regular delivery since the storm hit and are down to serving frozen hash browns and chicken strips to the extra thousands of patrons now flocking to their tables. For some reason, the town's one gourmet restaurant is still serving their signature turtle soup and alligator tail. Certain governmental regulations about wild meat procurement may have been overlooked. The health and safety inspectors are busy in Metairie checking food temperatures in the insulated Disaster Services Cambros.*

*For now, the officer is just glad that his fellow patrolman knows how to feed a hundred people with Cajun Trinity and sleight-of-hand and that the disaster workers sharing his cellblock are feeding the tattered community he is patrolling. That everyone is alive is enough. Whether they're getting plain hot dogs on white bread, ham and pinto beans from a #10 can, pre-packaged snack cakes with a shelf life of fifty years, or just an orange from a few cases of fruit Disaster Services managed to get trucked in, everyone will eat today. He smiles to himself. His wife wanted him to lose a few pounds by Thanksgiving anyway. Maybe by then, he'll be thin enough for seconds on the turkey and dressing.*

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I spent September 9<sup>th</sup>, my 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, in New Orleans serving food to displaced citizens. I actually felt very grateful to be able to do something like that on such a landmark anniversary. The only gifts I received that day, in addition to my own sense of well-being, were a call from my mom and a couple of disposable cameras Ron gave me to honor the occasion, which was probably the best gift I could have gotten that day. The fact that Matt did not call me and wish me well was only due to the fact that he forgot my birthday altogether.

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When I met Ron, I was reminded of Radar O'Reilly on the TV show M\*A\*S\*H. Ron was the Radar of Kitchen 13, acquiring our needed supplies in tricky deals and back door antics. Technically, Ron was our "logistics" officer, but he was so slick-willy with his wheelings and dealings, I couldn't imagine he got his acquisition abilities through Disaster Services logistics training. It had to have been a natural gift. One of his job duties was to keep our refrigerated semi trailers fueled, no small feat considering how scarce diesel fuel was in New Orleans just about then.

Our DiRTs needed to be kept fueled as well but the supervisor had worked out an arrangement with the Kenner police chief and we'd been gassing up at the police station's private pump. It was very handy having a gas pump right next door to the yard but this pump couldn't supply the needs of the trailers too.

Ron cleverly solved this problem in typical Radar fashion. He swapped ice cream and Gatorade with the military commander next door for the occasional use of their tanker truck. Once a week a soldier from next door drove the tanker truck onto our yard, fueled up our trailers, and returned to his base with a cooler full of ice cream bars. Everyone was happy and precious Disaster Services funds were not spent on pricey fuel.

Ron looked a bit like Radar too. He was short and stocky with dusty brown hair and a bushy mustache that gave him a teddy bear face. He was about 50 and wore reading glasses that he kept on a chain around his neck when he wasn't using them. When I picture him in my head, he's carrying a clip-board and has a pencil behind his ear. He wore tan cargo shorts and a tan cargo shirt and if he didn't take his medication at the proper time his skin would

break out in large red welts, the last physical manifestation of a terrible electrical accident he suffered a number of years ago.

Ron was very forthcoming about the details of the accident itself—he was a power worker who was electrocuted while on a job site when the city did not correctly disconnect the power at the source. He had a slow recovery and spent many months in a wheelchair as his system readjusted to correctly processing nerve impulses disrupted by the shock. This recovery was speeded somewhat by the large financial settlement he received from the State of California, with which he bought a large cabin in Big Sur and dedicated his early retirement to volunteering with operations like Disaster Services.

I got the sense that Ron was the kind of guy who felt the need to buy his friends. He was somewhat insecure and always had a one-up story to top any story told to him. He also paid for everything for Jason and me. Since he was well off and since Jason and I still had not received our Visa cards from Disaster Services, we allowed this arrangement without discussion.

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As time passed at the police station, I got to know some of the other crews better. There were a good 60 workers at K13 at any given time. In addition to the DiRT crews and warehouse workers, we had a couple of disaster assessment people, a few nurses and mental health workers, and additional support staff, like Ron, handling logistical problems and resource management. Priscilla, who was in the cell next to mine, shared her space with Tracy, a disaster assessment worker, who was a fiery, redheaded forensics student with a strong stomach and a license to carry a concealed weapon. Though we didn't see much of her

during the day, she was our cellblock companion at night and played a mean game of gin rummy.

Gretchen was there, too. She was pretty tight with Seth and Scott and the three of them radiated a glow of spiritual energy that just made me feel loved. Gretchen was the one I talked to the most about Matt. Of all our cellmates, she was the female closest to my age. Tiffany Diamond was the enigma. In addition to having a name any Hollywood press agent would drool over, Tiffany was the bubbliest contradiction in flip flops I ever met. She was young, only 21, everyone's kid sister and the class clown. When she went home, she was joining a convent, or so I'd been told. At our morning staff meetings before first run, she liked to tell jokes. One morning, God love her, she blessed us with a Shel Silverstein classic:

*There's too many kids in this tub*

*There's too many kids in this tub.*

*Too many elbows to scrub*

*I just washed a behind that I'm sure is not mine*

*There's too many kids in this tub*

We all applauded and loaded up for the day's first run. I think Tiffany knew that some days needed to start with a little extra humor just to get through them.

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Sometimes, people's desire to do good in a disaster is overshadowed somewhat by their lack of common sense. Case in point: massive donations of winter clothing—coats, mittens, and stocking caps—to Indonesian tsunami survivors living in steamy equatorial

regions. Such donations clog relief arteries and take up valuable storage space and manpower. When in doubt, give money—that always helps.

Somewhere along the line, an unknown entity donated a quantity of 25-pound bags of cat and dog food to Disaster Services, which, like the mittens and hats, could not be distributed. We could not take this food on our rigs with us due to Disaster Services policy on animal feeding. If an individual came to the warehouse and requested pet food, we could give it to them but we could not hand it out publicly nor advertise the fact that we had it. Since no one knew we had them the bags sat unused in our warehouse yard. We were to leave the animals to the ASPCA. The official explanation for this policy: distributing animal food devalues human suffering by suggesting animal suffering carries equal importance. It was a logical, if exceedingly unsatisfactory argument.

Sadly, many animals on our routes were starving and begged us for food. At one of our regular stops, a large band of stray dogs had formed into a loose pack and circled our truck when we would distribute food to the residents. The dogs were friendly, if a bit skittish, and many were former pets of rescued and evacuated Jefferson Parish residents.

In Metairie's hard-hit inner city, a very poor section of the Parish, where police escorts were necessary even after martial law was lifted, the only people that remained were young men who sat on the stoops of their flood-damaged homes drinking from 40-ounce bottles of Colt 45 and laughing in the oppressive heat. The rescue codes spray-painted on the sides of the homes, four numbers in a diamond shape, indicated who was found and when: rescued and evacuated, dead, any animals taken. Some buildings had owner cell phone numbers spray painted on them; others were boarded up with sheets of plywood. Most were empty and had trees resting on rooftops, windows smashed, or entire walls gone. The young

men flashed golden smiles as our rig pulled up and our windows opened for service. There were a few pre-adolescent boys who circled around these groups of young men, mimicking their behavior and rough language.

The pack of stray dogs in this neighborhood included an old bitch pit-bull, obviously nursing a brood hidden somewhere in the weeds of the vacant lot next to the community center where we set up our feeding site. With one eye missing from what was probably an old fight wound, she was more insistent than the other animals. When all the people had gotten their food and returned home, we would toss her hotdogs and slices of white bread from the rig's window. The other dogs fed on the remainders of the lunches the young men would throw onto the gathering garbage piles on the curbs. After several weeks, the boys on the stoops grew tired of red beans and hotdog meat, but the dogs were not so picky.

Near our kitchen headquarters, a trailer court contained a few remaining residents. One man, confined in his trailer because of age and a wheel chair, hung a blanket over the doorway—it was the only protection from the elements he had. Such conditions are hard to fathom in the United States. Sadly, he was not the only one, and even more sadly, he was a military veteran. We had another vet, missing both legs from Viet Nam, whom we served in a housing project in another part of town. He was the only Caucasian resident in the complex and as I witnessed the conditions around me, I struggled to come to terms with what truly exists in my country. I had never seen poorer conditions than the ones I saw there. I struggled to wrap my mind around the situation.

Marny and Ron, as a special two-team crew, loaded food, water, hygiene products, and first aid supplies into a Disaster Services-decaled passenger car and delivered them to the trailer park resident's "door". The man was frightened and did not immediately answer their

calls. Eventually he responded, accepted the donation, and agreed to allow a second visit from a health care volunteer who could assess his medical needs. As they left the man's home, the two workers noticed dozens of stray cats living in the nearly abandoned trailer park. Perhaps the veteran was tossing scraps to them from what meager provisions he had.

The two returned to the kitchen warehouse, silently stripped all Disaster Services decals from their car, removed their vests and ID badges, loaded as much of the donated cat food as they could into the trunk of the car, and left again. When they returned their trunk was empty and the expressions on their faces were a little less pinched. Marny suggested to me the stray dogs in Metairie could benefit from a similar "donation".

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*We drive past Lake Ponchartrain everyday and I watch the herons and pelicans fishing, unaware of the toxic water spewing into the lake from the pumps downtown. I feel powerless to effect any change in my world.*

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After about a week of twice-daily DiRT runs, sweaty, food-caked clothing and forgotten items became acutely apparent. Wal-Mart in La Place, Louisiana was the only option. One evening, Ron, Jason, and I made the 40-minute trip to La Place, past the levee-topping Lake Ponchartrain, past tornado-splintered woodlands, past the trucks at the depot loading garbage onto boxcars for shipment to other states, past the impassable railroad tracks, and out of the restricted zone. "La Place is the place," Ron quipped as we crossed the military roadblock signaling re-entry into civilization.

Though officially outside the disaster zone, La Place was hammered by Katrina. Murky water still sat in fields breeding mosquitoes and most of the signs were blown out.

Every hotel was full in this small town off the interstate, previously just a place to pass through between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, a place for truckers to waste money at the truck stop casino and bed down for the night. There were a large number of chain stores right off the highway. They would have been doing record business if they had had any merchandise left on their shelves. The Waffle House was standing room only and was down to one waitress taking orders.

We ate our pancakes and hashed browns quickly to make room for the next group waiting by the door. They would also have pancakes and hashed browns—it was the only meal available. Outside, Ron tried an ATM machine in the parking lot. It was out of cash though we weren't surprised. Anyway, he was just curious, he'd gotten a large wad of twenties from the ATM in the casino—of course that one was working. We headed down the road to the shopping center.

I looked at the strange scene unfolding in the Wal-Mart and thought that this is what a department store in Nicaragua must be like. Surreal barely describes the experience. I walked nervously down the aisles searching half-empty, cluttered shelves for one last 3-pack of underwear while a soldier in full battle dress strolled by with a loaded M-16 dangling from one shoulder. I struggled to remember where I was. The store had been decimated, not by the storm but by the storm's aftermath, by evacuees searching for everything that had been lost to the storm and by every disaster worker, soldier, FEMA representative, and insurance agent in need of toothpaste, contact lens solution, or a clean t-shirt.

Since supply trucks were not getting through, and customers were lined up twelve thick per checkout lane—most with shopping carts topped to the brim—the store was quickly selling out of everything. I looked at the only two familiar faces, Ron and Jason, in the crowd

of—there’s no other way to say it—angry people, and I realized, as I watched Ron trying to decide on the most effective mops to buy for cleaning our trucks and Jason picking through what was left in the candy aisle, that these two men were total strangers to me a week before. I had to remind myself who I was, where I was, and why. I found one last package of underwear close to my size and stumbled upon some badly needed gray yoga-style pants. I quickly snatched them up before someone else beat me to them and headed for a line with only five carts in it. Ron joined me with his cart of mops and buckets.

The woman in front of us was glaring at our badges. We had Disaster Services ID tags dangling from our necks and mine suddenly felt like a noose. We had to wear them—we couldn’t cross the military checkpoint back into the New Orleans metro area without them. We found out much later that Disaster Services workers in Baton Rouge had been instructed to shop incognito because of so many encounters of this kind. Ron was the supervisor of sorts, if there can be such a thing as a supervisor when everyone is a volunteer. Mostly, Ron had all the money and the rental car so Jason and I were happy to let him be the boss. The woman in front of us began to yell at us about the perpetual busy signal on the Disaster Services emergency aid line.

“Where’s my money?” she wanted to know. “I can’t get through on your damn phone number.”

I felt the heat of fear rising to my cheeks and I was glad Ron and I were together. We were never supposed to travel alone but I had not thought about that applying to Wal-Mart until that moment. In a soft voice, Ron tried to comfort her. “I understand your frustration,” he told her. “Keep trying the 800 number, try in the middle of the night.”

“I called your damn number at 3:00 a.m.” the woman growled. “I was on hold for three hours and then got disconnected. I ain’t calling no more. Give me my damn money.”

Before Ron could say anything else, the woman in line in front of this woman interrupted her. “Shut your damn mouth,” the second woman told the first. “Leave these poor folks alone. If you want your damn money, you’ll wait on the damn phone just like the damn rest of us did.”

The first woman was stunned silent. The second woman handed the cashier a Disaster Services Visa Card and paid for the two cartloads of items waiting in plastic bags at the end of the aisle—nearly \$800.00 worth of merchandise. Ron and I took note of the woman’s credit card and breathed a small sigh of relief that nothing more was said. We waited quietly while the angry woman in front of us finished her business. Thankfully, she had only a few items.

This was not the first time Ron and I had been approached while shopping. At Home Depot a few days prior, a young couple came up to us. They stared at us moment, and then the man said: “You’all are just shopping here too, aren’t you?” We nodded. We were just purchasing supplies. Sad and disheartened, the couple walked off. I know they had hoped we were there to set up a Disaster Services relief center in the hardware store. Like the angry woman at Wal-Mart, they were unable to get through on the telephone. A single 800 number for hundreds of thousands of displaced people just wasn’t enough. Disaster Services had been trying to issue the Visa debit cards over the phone but the woman in the Wal-Mart line had the first one we’d seen. I was glad I could start telling people they existed. It was amazing how much hope could be bought with a little bit of good information, discovered in unlikely places.

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On September 15<sup>th</sup>, Ron and I did our laundry at a coin-operated hole-in-the-wall next to Wal-Mart. There was something oddly comforting about the warm hum of the driers and the smell of fabric softener and we were content to sit on the bench outside the Laundromat drinking lukewarm Dr. Pepper from a vending machine, swatting at engorged mosquitoes while the cycles ran. Inside, a TV mounted to the wall broadcast a speech by President Bush, aired live from somewhere in downtown New Orleans. Ron and I listened to the speech for a while as we loaded our washing machines with clothes, not bothering to separate colors from whites. The president was backlit by a federal building awash in an eerie blue light that Ron and I knew was being generated by some ungodly power source, not actually powering anything else in the whole of the city. We tolerated his double-speak for only a few minutes before retiring to the darkness of the sultry Louisiana air and the chirping of frogs outside. We could hear other laundry patrons scoffing at the president's talk through the propped-open door. His speech meant nothing there. Ron handed me a fist-full of quarters to buy another soda and pump coins into the machines for ten more minutes of dry-time.

Outside of the Laundromat, someone had parked their fan boat. It sat dry, on a trailer, and I lamented I couldn't take a ride through the bayou on such a vehicle, the high seats allowing a grand view of the swamp as the large fan powered engine glided the boat over the shallow waters, past cypress trees and wary, hidden alligators. But that was not what the trip was about and Ron snapped a photo of me in front of the boat instead.

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September 18<sup>th</sup> was just another day on the job. Our DiRT crept slowly through the fallen branches and downed power lines littering the streets of the north side neighborhood as

we looked among the deserted homes for signs of life. The curbsides of this middle-class neighborhood were piled high with furniture and personal belongings dragged from the flooded homes. Mattresses, clothing, televisions, mud-caked debris, and every single refrigerator from every single home had been piled on the soggy grass in great mountains of garbage that would continue to grow for many months after that. Every block or two, an individual or family was working to pull their life's accumulations from inside their house to the yard. So close to Lake Ponchartrain, this neighborhood had sat for days under five feet of water before the canals drained the overflow. With the constant heat and humidity, the air was stifling. I could only imagine what it must have been like inside the homes with no power for air-conditioning, mold and mildew creeping under waterlogged carpets. Even outdoors, the smell of decay was strong. Some people wore surgical masks. Everyone was dripping with sweat.

Our rig pulled up to a woman and several children waving vigorously at us. When they came to our service window, they were speaking excitedly in Spanish and we mistakenly anticipated their excitement as desire for the food we were carrying. After a few moments of confusion, Angela, our 16-year-old bilingual interpreter, got out of the squad car accompanying us. She was volunteering with Disaster Services until her flooded school was re-opened. She listened to the family for a moment and quickly moved back to the officer standing by his open car door. Since the city was still under martial law, he was both our protective escort and safe passage through the official roadblocks. At each stop, he got out of his car and essentially stood guard. That day he was also the man with the radio.

The local family, Angela, and the officer gathered by the roadside, the children pointing, and the officer on his radio. My team and I climbed out of our truck and followed

the pointing fingers to the source of the concern. A denim-clad power worker was hanging by his leather safety belt from a telephone pole 20 feet above the ground. His partner was frantically lifting his head by the hair and attempting to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while he too dangled in mid-air by his own safety belt. Despite the heat, my skin grew cold. I could only imagine the panic and terror the power worker was experiencing as he attempted to stay calm and save the life of his partner who had been electrocuted by the power line he had just repaired.

Our officer radioed for emergency vehicles and obtained a ladder from a nearby garage in an attempt to reach the men on the pole. He instructed us to stay clear so Jason, Priscilla, Derrick, Angela, and I watched mutely from the curb as he struggled with the ladder.

A very short time later, the deserted street was filled with sirens, fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances. We were asked to move our truck off the road as the first responders worked to rescue the man. They finally cut him free of the harness tethering him to the pole and lowered him down by a rope, his body slack and bent over backwards, arms hanging limply at his sides. Though we all carried cameras, none of us could bring ourselves to photograph the scene. I wondered at the ability of photojournalists to catalogue disasters.

These two power workers were volunteers from either Texas or Missouri. We had been feeding their crews all that afternoon as they had been working in this area restoring power. Based on the gear the two men were wearing I guessed they were one of the Missouri teams. As the gurney carrying the man was loaded into the ambulance, I got a good look at him. He was a big man, with shaggy blonde hair and a beard, perhaps in his thirties, and all

of his exposed skin was blue. The paramedics were doing CPR and fitting him with an oxygen mask but I could tell from where I stood that he was already dead.

As quickly as the quiet neighborhood had been enveloped with swarming rescue workers and vehicles, that quickly the sirens faded into nothing as they retreated to whatever hospital could handle the event. The six of us were left staring at one another for a few minutes, unsure of what to say or do.

“There are plenty of people still needing our services,” Priscilla finally said. She pulled on a new pair of plastic gloves and settled into her chair by the window. Jason and I followed her lead, tugging on our own gloves and preparing some plates for the Hispanic woman and her children. Derrick hopped in the driver’s seat and we moved down the block looking for further signs of life.

A few minutes later we came upon a man lugging tree branches to the curb. He was sweaty and waved at us with gloved hands when we pulled up. He approached our window, smiling, and Priscilla asked him how he was doing.

“Getting better all the time,” he said. “The power just came back on.” Jason and I exchanged sickly looks.

“We know,” I whispered.

“My Saints aren’t doing so good today,” he told us as we offered him a bottle of Gatorade with his hotdog and applesauce. “But it’s nice to have the TV back on.”

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*In a disaster, burnout hits everyone at some point. Long hours, sometimes 14 to 16 per day, bad food, inadequate facilities, no privacy, and the constant ache of suffering is difficult even for the most seasoned worker. Disaster Services therefore recommends each*

*worker take one day off for every seven days worked. This, of course, is the ideal. If there is too much work, or if a second hurricane happens to be moving in your direction your day off may consist of lying around on your shelter cot for a few hours reading a hand-me-down Tom Clancy novel, eating Oreos. However, if the sun is shining and there are plenty of workers to cover the day's shifts, you might wish to explore what New Orleans has to offer. Given the hurricane, that's not much, but you might go downtown anyway. The Superdome is quite a sight. With the roof blown off and workers in white clean suits and air tanks going in and out, you'll feel like you've stepped into a post-apocalyptic horror. You might need to hold your breath for a block or two as you pass. The stench is unbelievable. The air wafting down Canal Street and Bourbon smells a bit like burning rubber, garbage, rotten meat, and chemicals, which is probably what it actually is. Maybe you should visit the suburbs instead.*

—

Ron, Jason, and I managed to get our first day off together. We all really needed it. Even though Ron was not with us the day we found the power worker, his personal experience with electrocution made him react strongly to our report of the incident. New York Bob approved our request to have the same day off. We'd planned to head back towards La Place to visit an authentic bayou swamp tour we'd seen advertised. I was hoping for a fan boat ride. Before that, however, we decided to check out downtown.

We loaded the trunk with bottled water, snack foods and some miscellaneous relief supplies and headed into the city. Disaster workers don't go anywhere empty handed. It's odd how habits develop in short periods of time when extreme situations require them to and stick around long after the situation is resolved. I am now in the habit of drinking Gatorade by the gallon and carrying hand sanitizer everywhere, whether I need it or not. You don't

even want to know what's in my backpack when I go for a ride in the country on my motorcycle.

The “abandoned” city was full of people. One whole parking lot had become an international tent city for the press corps. Dozens of satellite dishes were set up in a parking lot and a lot of sweaty cameramen sat under the shade of their small umbrellas trying to catch a catnap before hoisting their camera up to film the next installment.

Combat-ready soldiers in full battle dress paced past buildings partially reduced to rubble on every street corner, guns at the ready. They didn't look as hot as the camera men, probably because of their training. There were cherry-pickers and bulldozers on every street, their operators working to restore power, communication, remove lingering dangers. FEMA workers and insurance agents wandered through the streets in long pants and ties, miserably hot, assessing countless millions of dollars in damages. In our lone passenger car, the three of us felt dwarfed and out of place. We realized we were probably breaking a number of Disaster Services rules and maybe even a martial law or two but no one stopped us to ask questions. There were too many other things to worry about than a carload of disaster workers out for a joyride. After a disturbing pass by the Superdome, we decided to get out of the restricted area and headed back north to the swamp tour.

The Cajun Pride Swamp Tour took about an hour to get to from downtown and was closed due to the hurricane. Actually, the gift shop was open though, and the soda fountain too, as long as we only wanted Coke and pre-packaged potato chips. No burgers and fries that day. Their boats were damaged and downed trees blocked their waterways. Although the white-haired old gentleman with the thick Justin Wilson “I garRONtee” accent and hip

waders couldn't take us out on the bayou, he did have a large supply of raw chicken and was glad of our visit (and I suspect, our Yankee cash.)

Using a large butcher knife to hack the whole chickens into rough quarters, he knelt beside the swamp edge, dangled the meat over the water, and whooped nonsense words like "hooee haw." Slowly and ominously, multiple sets of alligator eyeballs appeared on the surface of the murky water and moved towards the old man's position. Though he held the meat in his bare hand for the alligators to snatch away with their powerful and surprisingly quick jaws, he suggested the rest of us use sticks to hold the meat.

Me, my two disaster buddies, and a handful of cops from Missouri also on a day off from disaster relief work took turns feeding wild alligators. Field note: in addition to raw meat, alligators will also eat military rationed Salisbury steak. I have several photographs (thanks to my birthday gift) of us feeding the gators. I bought a t-shirt in the gift shop advertising the Swamp Tour's motto, "Tastes Like Chicken," and got some souvenir hot sauces for my parents.

—

Unfortunately, my second vacation day was cancelled. Eight days of serving food to people with nothing left had passed since Ron, Jason, and I went to the swamp and the stress had once again gotten to me. The impending new hurricane, now dubbed Rita, caused Disaster Services management to revoke any extracurricular activities until after the threat of the storm had passed. I was sitting on my bunk crying. Tiffany and Tracey had been holding my hands for the last half hour.

“Priscilla’s leaving today and my day off is cancelled.” I kept blubbing that same thing over and over. “I can’t take it,” I said.

“I know,” Tracey said. “I’ll miss her too.” She handed me my red bandana from the pile of clothes on the floor and I blew my nose on it. Finally, Tiffany stood up.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “We can’t just keep working with no days off.” She drug me by the hand down to the yard and told our supervisor in no uncertain terms that we were to have some time off, whatever it took.

I don’t know if it was Tiffany’s persuasive speech or the supervisor’s discomfort at my bawling, but he finally compromised. We didn’t get a “real” day off, but Tiffany and I were given the keys to a vehicle to chauffeur Priscilla to Baton Rouge. Apparently, that’s all I needed to restore some of my sanity. I stopped crying and we all went back to work.

Priscilla had an early flight out and needed to get some rest. Her overnight staff shelter was clear out of town, not even the suburbs of Baton Rouge but a separate town altogether. Everyone was quiet as we tried to find the interstate out of town. Traffic was still bumper to bumper. It was a little nerve-racking and we were all worried about the impending hurricane. Priscilla was concerned that her flight would be cancelled and Tiffany was wondering how she would even get a flight booked. She was scheduled to leave a few days later herself.

“We’re going to take care of each other,” I said, “and God’s going to take care of us all.” I said it as much to remind myself as to tell them.

“Amen,” Priscilla said. I felt at peace then, for the first time in a long time.

It was September 22<sup>nd</sup>. Tiffany and I got Priscilla safely to her shelter and decided to take the long way back to K13. We discovered a park a few miles outside of the disaster zone

along a four lane state highway. It was a strange place and we wandered around speculating on whether it was a public area, a private boat club, a petting zoo, or something else entirely. A river ran along the south side of the park with the waters coming right up to the edge of the grass and bleeding into the Cypress swamp. There was a large boat garage on the far side of the park, which we ventured into long enough to discover restrooms and a man contentedly servicing an outboard motor. He took no notice of us and we did our business in the restroom and returned to the water's edge. Between the gravel road and the river were some swings, a slide, and some picnic tables. Except for the man in the boat house, the park was deserted. The sky had already grown dark to the south and the wind had been blowing steadily all that morning. The next night, Hurricane Rita made landfall and the riverside park was submerged by floodwaters.

At that point, though, the rain was only threatening and we were more interested in the weird birds and mammals in the strange park than in the storm. Some creatures were caged and others wandered free among the Cypress knees in the shallow water, pecking at the grass, oblivious to alligators. The free-ranging birds included ducks, geese, turkeys, chickens, grouse, and quail. Inside the small fenced pen there were more chickens and ducks, as well as domestic songbirds and exotic parakeets and macaws. There were also some rabbits, guinea pigs, and other small mammals sharing this pen. Nearby was a separate pen with three deer, one male with a large rack, and two females.

Tiffany and I gave up trying to determine the difference between the animals in the shallows of the swamp and the penned ones. Some of them were the same species and their division between caged and free seemed arbitrary. We admired them for a while and quietly looked out across the river, which mingled so seamlessly with the bayou backwater that there

was no distinction between their boundaries except on the dock where a small lip was raised a few inches above the level of the river.

In the stillness of the warm, sticky air, with the clouds of the hurricane gathering above, Tiffany began to sing. It was an old campfire song I remembered from my childhood days at church camp. Her soft, sweet voice rising over the bayou waters and Cypress trees swaying in the breeze blowing in from the gulf raised goose bumps on my arms.

*As the deer panteth for the water,*

*So my soul longeth after thee.*

*You alone are my heart's desire*

*And I long to worship thee.*

*You alone are my strength, my shield.*

*You alone make my spirit yield.*

*You alone are my heart's desire*

*And I long to worship thee.*

Tiffany would be going back to Michigan a few short days after that. I would miss her curly blond hair and her bad jokes but I was glad to have the opportunity to be in that place, at that time, with her singing soulfully into the wind.

It began to rain shortly after her song ended and we knew the quiet moment of refuge was done. We returned to our work in New Orleans before the wind and rain became too much to drive through. A few days after that, I drove the same stretch of state highway and

saw the parkland under floodwater. I hoped the boat mechanic had gotten the animals out of the cages to safety. If he hadn't, they all would have surely drowned. I will never know the fate of those animals.

—

It was hot, record breaking, mercilessly hot. Even the locals were calling it a notably sticky summer. Hurricane weather will do that. But on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, I was cold. Hurricane Rita was swirling around off the coast somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico and at our morning staff meeting, our superiors notified us of a possible evacuation. The plan was for us to convoy the DiRTs to Baton Rouge. Most of us didn't want to evacuate and the plan to pack five people and all of their gear into a DiRT sounded ridiculous. The feeling a lot of us had was that evacuating meant abandoning the people we came to help just at the point when they needed us to stay.

I had only one long-sleeved item with me, a thin, hooded, decidedly not waterproof sweatshirt, and I borrowed a heavy military raincoat from one of the guys. I wore this on our DiRT run that morning as the cold rain started coming in torrents. It was the first day since I had been in Louisiana that I didn't see the sun. Rita was coming ashore.

We loaded up the trucks with boxed military rations. The NBO had decided not to risk their people and the Baptists had pulled out. The kitchen was closed. Most of our NBO contingent was from Arkansas and most of them had returned home. The season's hurricane activity had caused flooding along the Mississippi River and other areas of Arkansas and some of those volunteers went home to their own disasters. Seth and Scott decided to stay and they helped load our DiRTs with the MREs, bottled water, and cases of Oreos, the only food we could distribute without a kitchen.

Although most of us were committed to staying through the storm, the military camped next door bugged out. Their football field had been covered with olive drab tents and cammo netting the previous day; that day you wouldn't even have known they had ever been there. Military efficiency. At first that was quite frightening—Rita was going to be so bad that the military decided to leave? We found out, however, that they had moved their operation further south and west to be closer to where the hurricane was anticipated to make landfall. While knowing they moved on to a more dangerous area gave some comfort, the absence of that noisy green entity was noticeable. Without the NBO or the military, we had to make the day's run alone.

With the temperature drop of nearly 30 degrees and the rain coming down in sideways sheets, the residents on our routes were afraid. If the patchwork levees failed again, the city would re-flood and God only knew what would happen then. People who had no place to go during Katrina still had no place to go. Rita wasn't supposed to be as menacing as her big sister but once you're knocked down, you don't want to get kicked too. That's how it felt—like we were getting kicked while we were down.

My team drove slowly through the streets, even more abandoned than they had been. We were finding some folks still around but there was an attempted evacuation of the city. The military had been canvassing neighborhoods with trucks and loud speakers announcing another hurricane and offering transportation. Some took them up on it, others chose to stay. The ones who chose to stay needed food.

After Priscilla went home, My DiRT crew got a new member—Skip. Along with Jason and Derrick, we followed our old route through the poorer sections of Jefferson Parish. Priscilla's stability and kindness were sorely missed that day, and Jason and I both

commented on it. Like me, Skip was also from Iowa. We wondered why so many Iowans volunteered for disaster relief in Louisiana. At K13 alone fifteen of the sixty or so volunteers were Iowans. With folks coming from all over the country, it seemed interesting to us that such a large percentage of volunteers were from our area. Skip attributed it to the floods of 1993. That disaster was still fresh in our collective consciousness and coupling that memory with the Midwestern work ethic, he said, it wasn't hard to explain.

Skip was a huge man, over six feet tall and at least 250 pounds. He had to duck to get inside the back of the truck and volunteered for the unenviable task of standing outside the tailgate in the pouring rain whenever we stopped. He seemed to have a natural internal furnace keeping him warm though and didn't mind the temperatures. I was freezing cold the entire morning, even with my borrowed jacket.

Since Priscilla's window seat was vacant, the crew elected me as the replacement. Between the rain soaking my head and arms as I leaned out the window and the truck's air-conditioning Derrick felt was necessary, my hands were numbed and my lips were blue. My numbed fingers reminded me of my job back in Iowa. It was the first time I'd even thought about it in weeks.

I'm not much of a people-person generally, and that day was one of those fake-it-till-you-make-it days. My discomfort, both physical and mental, had to wait until we got back to K13. Our job was to get the MREs to as many people as possible before HQ radioed that the weather had gotten too bad and recalled the DiRTs. I did my best to imitate Priscilla's window etiquette as we made our final run before the hurricane.

We were in a poorer neighborhood, mostly single-story two bedroom homes and some smaller apartment buildings. It was a neighborhood we'd delivered to before,

apparently a lower priority for the city, since they still did not have power restored. Without any power, there was no way for them to store perishable food. With the entire city shut down, these neighborhoods had been relying on our twice-daily deliveries. I felt guilty that we only had military rations for them that day.

We pulled up to a small house and several people dashed out to our truck holding newspapers or coats over their heads. A middle-aged woman, tall and dressed all in green came up to our window. She was smiling and I smiled back.

“Good morning,” I greeted her in my best Priscilla voice. “Some weather we’re having?” This made her laugh. I explained our food limitations to her and she readily accepted the case of MREs we offered.

“I’m gonna put ‘em on my grandbaby’s kiddie pool,” she said. “I won’t have to carry anything that way.” She smiled again. “And, I’m dressing green for the gators!” I laughed at this and handed her a box of Oreos.

“They’ll never see you coming,” I said. The canal was already topping and we were only a few blocks away from it. She was joking but the water was rising.

“That’s my plan.” She nodded and thanked me for the cookies. “When are y’all coming back? Tonight?” I honestly had no idea. I didn’t even know if they were still going to try to evacuate us on the DiRTs. I knew most of the crews would vote against that idea, if we were given a vote.

“No, not tonight. Since we don’t have a kitchen, we only have the rations today so we’re only making one run.” I told Skip to give the family another case of the rations. “We will be back with more food as soon as we can,” I promised. She seemed to be somewhat relieved at this news, though I felt sick at the idea of leaving these people to whatever might

come. But she had the kiddie pool and was dressing green for the gators. The childish hopefulness of her plan gave me hope too.

Our crew spent another hour or so in the neighborhood but we didn't find more than one or two more homes still inhabited and in need of food. Around two o'clock, HQ radioed that the weather was worse and we needed to return. When we got back, Marny told Jason and me that Ron was missing.

The runs had ended much earlier than usual that day. Jason and I didn't know what to do so we played gin rummy for awhile on the floor of our cell while Seth, Scott, Gretchen, and Tiffany tried playing Frisbee in the rain. Sitting around doing nothing was so much worse than delivering MREs in a hurricane.

At dinnertime, we all headed across the street to Tom's Diner. It had just opened up again and even though the signage had been replaced by a large piece of poster paper, their coffee was hot and I enjoyed my first cup of the steaming liquid in over a year. The name of the restaurant reminded me of an old Suzanne Vega song and I hummed it as we sat waiting for our burgers and French fries, watching the rain beat against the glass and seep under the doorframe.

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*Hurricane Rita makes landfall at 2:30 a.m. on September 24<sup>th</sup>. Though some areas of New Orleans re-flood, the damage is minor compared to the impact in western Louisiana and eastern Texas. Many of our Disaster Services staff are reassigned.*

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Shortly after the second hurricane swept through, Tracy found a barn full of dead horses. They were abandoned by owners who evacuated before the storm, presumably in

denial that the hurricane could have possibly been as bad as it was. The horses, approximately 25 of them, had drowned tied inside of their stalls when floodwaters rose. She found these animals, waterlogged and decomposing, piled atop one another at the end of the barn. Tracy, despite her tough as nails character, took her documentation photographs, returned to her rental car, and broke down crying. This incident was the closest call yet for her while performing the difficult job of damage assessment and documentation. Her family's ranch in Gulfport, Mississippi weathered the storm and it was this day that the knowledge hits her of how close her family was to losing everything or her own beloved horse drowning in his stall. In defiance of all the death she saw that day, she fed a wild boar French fries out of her hand and rescued a starving kitten from a pile of debris. She named the tiny calico Katrina and took her back to New Hampshire when she returned to school.

The following December, Tracy sent me the photographs of the dead horses. They were difficult to look at—almost indecipherable in their chaos and I clicked through them quickly in the email she sent, grateful for the many pictures of her blue-eyed colt, alive and well, at the end of the sequence. In her Christmas letter that year, she told me Katrina, whom we nicknamed Hurri-kitty, gave birth to a litter of five kittens over the summer.

I was reminded of my own mother cat, who had died suddenly, a few short months after I moved her to a new town. She was only six and her autopsy was inconclusive. Perhaps she missed her home. Like Katrina kitty, my Lily had also given birth to a litter of five, hers in the previous summer. I wept for this beloved pet. It was like a bandage ripped from a wound I didn't know I had. Even now, tears well up when I think of her collapsing on the linoleum, of my fumbling to perform rescue breathing while driving her to the pet ER in my

bathrobe, and the vet telling me the inevitable. I already knew she was dead. I think we have an instinct about death. The unpredictability of the cycle of life is almost cliché.

—

Sometimes the best solution to a problem is to stop giving a shit. After about three consecutive nights of cell phone conversations with my soon-to-be-ex boyfriend beginning with “my supervisor’s a f---ing moron...” and finally ending with me trying to tell him something about New Orleans and him saying “...whatever, I gotta go,” I decided I’d rather spend my evenings talking to my cellmates than to him. As I sat there with other workers trying to sing along to the hymns I remembered from summer camp as a kid, I realized some guys actually do smile. It dawned on me that I used to smile too.

A less moral person might have used the trip and the discord as an excuse to be unfaithful. I have a dear friend who always says it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission. I wish I had an ounce of her foolhardy risk-taking. I had plenty of opportunities to broaden my horizons, so to speak. Jason seemed interested. Despite the fact that his “real job” was as a cook at Cracker Barrel and that he hardly ever strung more than three words together, I knew he had hidden depth. It’s easy to overlook obvious character flaws when you know you’ll probably never see someone again. Anyway, he did smile all the time, worked hard, and his response to every question was a positive one. It had been a long time since I had smiled with someone.

Jason and I were rewarded for our hard work with a night at the Motel 6 next door. The hotel, although severely damaged by the flooding, had cleaned up the first floor and our Kitchen supervisor had worked out a deal for one of the rooms. The room smelled like mildew and we were told we’d need to “share the sheets” since there was no laundry service

but at least the shower had hot water and the TV worked. Jason and I spent the whole evening watching the hurricanes on the news. It was a weird night and I was actually glad to get back to my bunk in the jail—I felt guilty and disconnected staying in the hotel, closed off from the rest of my fellow workers.

Jason and I finally learned Ron had a freak out during the second hurricane and packed his bags and left without a word to anyone. He telephoned me a few days later, once he was safely back in California, and told me he got scared with the hurricane blowing in and didn't know what else to do. I told him Jason and I were worried and he apologized but sounded unrepentant. I never talked to him again, though nearly three years later his number is still in my cell phone.

—

Maybe Matt sensed impending doom. I've been told my silence is very noisy. Stacy suggested I let him worry about the relationship for a while. After a few days of desperate, unanswered voicemails from him, I finally returned his calls. I kept it brief. The last week of the trip, I didn't call him at all. I spent what little remaining free time I had with my fellow workers—Jason, Tiffany, Tracy, Gretchen.

In some ways, the relief effort felt as though it was winding down, though Disaster Services would stay entrenched in the New Orleans area for five more months. Maybe it was just the end of our crew's time; the end of Kitchen 13 was around the corner. They bugged out a few days after I left.

Our crew had a lovely time playing "Fact or Crap", a silly game we bought at Wal-Mart to pass the time. Scott played his guitar and we sang camp songs in the jail. What shocked me the most is how happy we all were despite the magnitude of the tragedy

surrounding us. That we could smile and be of service and just do the work was a miracle and I was filled with gratitude for the job I had that paid me in lukewarm hotdogs and bottled water. I realized I had more in common with these people than I ever did with Matt and I enjoyed the work in Louisiana more than any highly paid graphic design work I'd ever done. My longstanding axiom about traveling to get to know someone had again proven true—I'd gotten to know myself.

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On September 28<sup>th</sup>, after a three-week tour of service, I left Kitchen 13 and the DiRTs to the next wave of workers. The relief effort was now in the hands of the next generation. The fact that Disaster Services stayed on the ground until February of 2006 was unprecedented, a record length of time to provide assistance for “immediate” disaster-caused needs. At some point officials began to question whether the relief they were providing was meeting disaster-caused needs or simply poverty-caused needs. Frankly, I think poverty is a disaster so I never worried too much about it, one way or the other. But my tour was over and it was time to let someone else split those hairs.

I spent my last day in Baton Rouge with Gretchen and several other workers scheduled to fly out the same day as me. We walked around the Baton Rouge mall in the afternoon and Gretchen and I talked about relationships. She told me I could do better than Matt. We spent the night in a staff shelter at a Baptist church. The shelter had a TV-VCR and computer access and I checked my email for the first time in three weeks. The two of us watched “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” with a guy suffering from diabetic sores on his foot and went to bed at 8:00 p.m. It's about all we had the mental capacity for. Someone had fiddled with the thermostat and the air-conditioning blew throughout the night. I woke at

6:00 a.m. freezing, as the room temperature was about 55 degrees. It reminded me of my office and I dreaded going back to work.

The airport was filled with disaster workers ready to get back home. We all gathered together in the airport café and exchanged stories of the last few weeks. It felt like a strange intermediate place—with the people I'd grown attached to and shared a common experience with, but in a foreign environment of sky cabs and hygienic facilities. Gretchen and I hugged very tightly for a long time before she boarded her plane for San Francisco. She called me a few weeks later and said: "Guess where I am. In a bar on Bourbon Street celebrating Halloween in a cowgirl costume." She had signed up for another tour.

When I got back to Iowa on September 29<sup>th</sup>, it was 54 degrees and I was glad I had bought an LSU sweatshirt at the Baton Rouge mall. My parents picked me up at the airport and anxiously inquired how it all went. I just said it was a good experience. I didn't know what else to say.

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At the end of October, I had been back from the gulf coast for less than a month and decided to quit my job at the real estate company to go back to school. Though I also decided to break up with Matt, it took longer to be free of him than the job. Stacy advised against using the phrase "get the hell out of my house" but I have to admit, there was a certain amount of satisfaction at seeing all of Matt's possessions sitting on the front lawn awaiting the U-Haul. I knew it was the right choice when I realized the only thing I would miss about our relationship was his DVD collection.

I realized that the only thing I would miss about my job was my pond. But the pond, too, eventually faded into memory as the months passed. The water birds, my non-human co-

workers and confidants, continued to live, build nests, reproduce, and die, oblivious to my absence. I bid them farewell but I didn't grieve for them. I knew they would not miss me and I was glad of the fact. They were not human after all, nor even my pets. They were just wild animals.

I resolved to be more mindful of my environment and the people I chose to have in my life. Despite the range of places represented by the volunteers in New Orleans—I met people from every state except Hawaii, and folks from Canada and Switzerland—there was some sort of core belief system common to all of us. Marny thought we were all a little on the thrill seeking side of life. Perhaps that was true. I think it went deeper though, to some spiritual level of consciousness. We each brought what we had to offer to the disaster and the disaster brought out the best in each of us. Whatever it was that made us each individually sign up, being of service to our fellow humans made living and working together in close quarters bearable, even enjoyable, in a way I had not imagine when I first signed up with Disaster Services. I had imagined myself alone. But I was not alone there, ever. None of us were.

### Concluding My Journey

Despite everything that's come before this, I still feel that what I've said about women's travel narrative is somehow essentialist or impersonal, that Morris and Gilbert are strangers or abstractions. For me travel is not an abstraction—I am a traveler and writing about it is personal. Although I would not presume to categorize myself as successful a writer as either Morris or Gilbert, I do believe my work demonstrates that the genre of travel writing has room for more than just adventure. By adding my own memoir to this discussion of women's travel narrative I hope to show concretely how the paradigm of adventure would have made the story of the trip ineffective—for my writing to successfully achieve my goals it had to be therapeutic.

There are three elements to the work I did: what I experienced on the journey itself, what I discovered in the subsequent recording of the journey, and finally what I learned as a result of examining both the trip and the writing in this essay. These three separate events each enhanced the understanding of the experience that preceded it. In other words, I did not know when I left for New Orleans in September of 2005 that in January of 2007 I would begin recording a memoir of that experience<sup>7</sup>, and when I began in January of 2007 to reflect on the journey, I did not know that a year later I would be reflecting on the memoir. I needed the emotional distance of returning home before I could record the experience. Additionally, I needed time to digest what I had written before I could see what it was I had actually said. I see themes and subjects in Gilbert's and Morris's work mirrored in my own, though I wish to note that most of my work had already been written before I had read anything by either

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, my attempts to keep a diary of the events as they unfolded failed to be anything more than disjointed notes from the first week, as I discovered that at the time I was emotionally incapable of reflecting in writing on what was happening while I was actually there.

Morris or Gilbert. It is no coincidence that what I experienced as a traveler and what I chose to record as a writer were so similar to what these other authors had also experienced and chosen to record. Morris notes that much of the travel done by contemporary women springs from “complex restlessness in our culture” and “spiritual emptiness” (*Women and Journeys* 30) and this was certainly true for me. Some of the similarities include safety issues, and focused attention on food, relationships, and spirituality.

### *Issues of Safety*

In my narrative I talk about all sorts of people I met. I traveled in a strange way—finding companions for a night, abandoning them for others, making deep friendships with people very quickly for short amounts of time. In some ways I was protected, in others very vulnerable. Early on in my journey I hook up with two fellows at the Houston, Texas airport. I spend an evening with them and am relieved it is limited to that amount of time. Once in the New Orleans metro, I adopt two male friends, one younger, one older, and they become the companions with whom I spend the entire journey. As I discuss in one section, we travel through dangerous areas to reach what we need. I note such an event in the following passage:

After about a week of twice-daily DiRT runs, sweaty, food-caked clothing and forgotten items become acutely apparent. Wal-Mart in La Place, Louisiana is the only option. Ron, Jason, and I make the 40-minute trip to La Place, past the levee-topping Lake Ponchartrain, past tornado-splintered woodlands, past the trucks at the depot loading garbage onto boxcars for shipment to other states, past the impassable

railroad tracks, and out of the restricted zone. “La Place is the place,” Ron quips as we cross the military roadblock signaling re-entry into civilization. (52)

Not only do Ron and Jason act as friends and escorts in dangerous situations, they help me to evaluate the relationships I was in at home and in one particular instance, I compare the two relational situations side by side. It is their example that guides me to the decision that I am in a bad relationship and changes need to be made. Not only do they keep me safe from physical harm, they help me to see the emotional harm that has been accruing.

### *Preoccupation with Food*

In my work, I spend a great deal of time talking about food. Part of this discussion is directly related to the subject of the text—I am working in a disaster zone distributing food to those who need it. Lengthy discourse on food in this context is natural and the suggestion that this is thematic to travel writing is perhaps a stretch. However, what I have intentionally done in my work is to create a familiar frame of reference with which the reader can identify.

I dedicate one section to a “what if” scene about New Orleans cuisine. This passage is outside of my real memory of the events and instead relies on a reader’s ability to get inside the head of the police officer fantasizing about a meal and the realities of what he will actually be eating on that particular day. When I say he will have to make do with “the granola bar and cheese crackers” for lunch, my hope was to create a point of reference for the reader, who might not be familiar with traditional New Orleans fare mentioned a few lines earlier. Through food, I hoped to give the reader a way to identify with the narrative.

In my work, enabling the reader to identify with my story was crucial. I wanted to have readers get inside of my text, to really be able to feel with the people who had been

impacted by pre-existing poverty and displaced by the hurricanes, as well as relate to my personal and internal journey as well. I wanted to employ that skill of empathy Lorraine Code discusses.

### *Relationships Going Badly*

I spend some time in my narrative talking about the romantic relationship I was involved in at the time of the trip and the job-related difficulties I was having with my boss. My internal conflict centers on the problems in these relationships and how the journey was both a reaction to and a solution for those problems.

Like Gilbert, I required the constant input from friends and traveling companions to make any sense of the twisted relationships I was in. In Eat Pray Love, Richard from Texas tells Gilbert she's got control issues. My companion Gretchen tells me I "can do better" and throughout the trip, my friend Stacy encourages me to end my romantic relationship. In fact, she advises against its beginning in the first place though I don't heed her warning and need to travel to have it make sense.

What I didn't know when I left for New Orleans is what I would uncover about my romantic entanglement once I got there. Additionally, I note that the solution (which was the end of the relationship) did not come until many months after the journey's end, and the writing of the narrative itself did not come until a year and a half after the journey's end.

As I composed my narrative later, I realized how large the impact of the trip had been on my ability to make sense of the problems I was having when I left. One of the goals I had for the piece was not only to catalogue the experiences of being in New Orleans and document the aftermath of the hurricanes but also to show how the experience acted

therapeutically, enabling me to effect needed change in my personal and professional life. Perhaps a simple cataloguing of events without the inner narrative might have met some paradigm of adventure, but the impact of the journey on me personally was so much more than “what happened down there” that I needed the written record to be more than that as well. For these reasons, the end of the story is not the end of the trip but the solution to the problems I had taken with me to Louisiana in the first place.

### *Spiritual Journeying*

In my narrative I talk a lot about how spiritually disconnected I felt before the trip. It begins with my walks around the pond by my office building watching the birds and animals. I say “the refuge it provides me from the dreary gray of my cubicle walls brings me half an hour of peace I desperately need” and it is through the contrast between the natural and the constructed, that I attempt to mark a path on the spiritual journey which evolves throughout the narrative.

For me, this spiritual connection culminates towards the end when I describe a similar experience watching birds and animals in a water setting. The difference in the later half is that spiritual growth has occurred—no longer am I compelled to “rescue” the animals, nor do I feel as though I am escaping from the job I am supposed to be performing—it is simply a quiet moment that I can appreciate for its own sake.

When writing about the spiritual in the narrative, I intended to show how this was reflected in mundane elements common from place to place. The animals were one way I did this. Another way I tried to do this was to illustrate how the people I had surrounded myself with either prevented or allowed my spirituality to emerge. Early in the story I connect the

idea of the relationships I was in with spiritual restlessness. Later, I make a connection with my traveling companions when I feel comfortable enough with them to suggest “God will take care of us all,” a comment which is met with an agreeing “Amen” from my companion.

Not only was I connecting the journey itself with a growing spiritual presence, but I wanted to demonstrate how the journey was actually responsible for the growth. At the beginning, I foreshadow this when I mention a friend, John, who tells me I am going to do “God’s work.” At the time of his original comment I only heard him say that I was going to go be of service to people in need. Only later, as I thought about the trip and attempted to write it all down did I discover that “God’s work” was being done on me as well as in what I was myself doing.

Later, when I read Gilbert’s book, I saw how she had had a similar experience while in India. Her service to the ashram, she finally learns, is not the service she had intended to perform; however, her skills as a “talker” placed her in a position of having to accept the part of herself she was so adamantly trying to stifle. In essence, the work she went to do and the work she actually did were not the same, though the outcome was still a change she had hoped would occur.

When I look in retrospect at the journey I made, I see clearly how the stated motives I had for going were entirely different from the motives I uncovered once I returned. The journey was, in fact, one of “uncovering the motives for having departed” (Kowalewski 9) and though Kowalewski finds this to be “dangerous” in travel writing, for me it was absolutely essential for both the journey and the writing.

My journey begins, much like Morris’s and Gilbert’s do, with a bad relationship, a job that is smothering me, and a diminished spiritual life. It ends, one could argue, when I

return home; however, for me, the end of the exterior journey was not the end of the interior journey. The written work extended the understanding of self beyond the confines of the trip. I was thus, not adventuring in the traditional sense, but was, despite my vocalized motive at the time of wanting to help, traveling to find out why I was traveling and writing to find out where I had been. Home, as Morris said, had become a foreign place to me and I needed to leave to find out why. The narrative recorded here is one of my journey to New Orleans in September of 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, and is in part, my discovery of the answer to that why.

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