

TRAVELING, WRITING AND ENGAGEMENT IN ROBYN DAVIDSON'S *TRACKS*

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Abstract

In 1980, Australian writer Robyn Davidson publishes her travel narrative *Tracks*, in which she describes her crossing of the central Australian deserts in the late 1970's, on foot and by herself, being accompanied only by her dog and by four camels. The narrative became an immediate success after its publication, receiving the *Thomas Cook Travel Book Award*, and being widely read both in Australia and worldwide. It has also become an emblematic example of contemporary travel narratives, mainly due to the fact that it is not only a book about survival or about a woman crossing a desert alone, rather elaborating on the implications between genre and gender; it is also a narrative that recuperates the political and ideological background of an important moment in Australian history. Thus, taking into consideration Davidson's ambivalence in relation to writing about her travel experiences, in this article, I argue that *Tracks*, more than celebrating the process of self-transformation in travel, lingers on the tension between its narrator's search for freedom and her awareness regarding the responsibilities involved in engaging with cultural difference and in representing geographical crossings.

Key words: Travel Writing; Australian Literature; Robyn Davidson; *Tracks*.

*Words are the memory twitching after the reality of the
dance...*

Robyn Davidson, *Tracks*

Narratives of travel and of geographical crossings have informed our imagination regarding different cultures mainly as the acts of travel and of writing about it are inextricably embedded in the ways we speak about ourselves and others in cross-cultural encounters.¹ In fact, Tim Youngs, in the opening pages of his *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, argues for the importance of this genre, since “[i]ts construction of our sense of ‘me’ and ‘you’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, operates on individual and national levels and in the realms of psychology, society and economics” (1). In this context, further discussions and reflections about narratives of geographical displacement continue to be significant

in contemporary literary and cultural studies, especially if we consider the constitutive ambivalence of the genre. As many scholars have already pointed out, the writing of travel involves both the complicity of this discourse to past and present imperialist practices as well as the ways in which travel narratives attempt to resist these same practices opening the possibility of cultural revisionism. For Wasserman and Almeida, for example, “[t]ravel writing brings to the fore fundamental and unresolvable contradictions: it records (but at times simply imagines) how geographic dislocation confirms and destabilizes the self, whether that is understood culturally or psychologically. It records conquest and the imposition of the cultural self on a cultural other, but it also records exploration and the opening of the self” (9). Thus, to approach travel writing critically involves thinking of the many ways in which its constructions lead us to revisit the

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involvement of the self in the crossing of geographical and cultural borders.

It is in this space of re-reading narratives of travel that I would like to insert a discussion about Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*, a narrative originally published in 1980, and which describes Davidson's crossing of the central Australian deserts in the late 1970s, on foot and by herself, being accompanied only by her dog, Diggity, and by four camels. At the time she crossed the desert, Davidson was 25 years old, and had spent two years in Alice Springs (being originally from the Queensland coast), preparing for her trip and learning how to train and take care of camels. Her complete journey, from Alice Springs to Hamelin Pool (right on the shores of the Indian Ocean), took approximately six months, during which she visited different Aboriginal camps and cattle stations, acquiring a profound knowledge of the Australian outback.² Although Davidson has said that, when she started preparing for the journey, she "had no intention of writing a book" (qtd. in Youngs "Interview" 26), she first commits to writing after accepting an offer from *National Geographic* to fund her trip in exchange for an article about her experience in the desert. Two years after the publication of this article, she writes *Tracks*, a narrative that became an immediate success, receiving the *Thomas Cook Travel Book Award*, and being widely read both in Australia and worldwide. Most recently, in 2013, the book also received a filmic adaptation directed by John Curran.

According to Holland and Huggan, "*Tracks* contains the classic ingredients for a woman's survival narrative: the courageous solitary traveler, defying the restrictions placed on her sex; the fearless confrontation of total strangers and 'hostile' surroundings; the gradual adaptation and communion with the environment" (121). However, as the critics also recognize, "[Davidson] counteracts these easy clichés" (121-122), especially due to the fact that the book also presents other emblematic aspects that have turned it into an iconic example of contemporary travel narratives. *Tracks* is not only a book about survival or about a woman crossing a desert alone, thus demystifying much of the masculine ethos present in travel narratives associated to pilgrimage and internal transformation;³ *Tracks* is

also a book that recuperates the political and ideological background of an important moment in Australian history, when Aboriginal rights were being recognized and many efforts were being advanced towards a more empowering administration of Aboriginal communities in the Australian outback.

With this background in mind, it is possible to perceive that Davidson's narrative elaborates both on internal and external explorations during her journey through the Australian desert. It is constructed both as an individual search for her "self" in the world as well as a narrative that goes beyond personal frontiers, since it inserts the individual in a more communal or nationalistic discourse by re-reading the desert as a space that is inhabited and historical. For Tim Youngs, Davidson accomplishes, in *Tracks*, "a renegotiation of her Australian identity, through encounters with Aborigines" (*Cambridge Introduction* 93). Indeed, one of her main preoccupations in the book is to re-access Aboriginal history and its legacies, and she does that not only by resisting imperial white Australian racist views of Aborigines, but also by recovering Aboriginal knowledge and their ties to the Australian land. This preoccupation leads Davidson to re-situate the vastness and the so-called "emptiness" of the Australian outback as being, in fact, historically marked.

Moreover, Davidson's narrative also raises important questions about the interrelation between genre and gender in geographical crossings. Besides a "re-discovery" of Australian spaces, her journey in the desert is an opportunity for gender self-refashioning, especially as Davidson has to confront the expectations surrounding her identity as a woman-traveling-alone. In a territory where "men are men and women are an afterthought" (Davidson *Tracks* 4-5),⁴ Davidson has to carve her way into what Sidonie Smith has called the "masculinist logic of the bush" (61), particularly as Davidson quickly realizes that the outback, or bush country, is marked by a heavily male-oriented culture. As Smith suggests, "[t]o survive as a 'woman of the bush,' Davidson develops a 'range war mentality' and forges the 'bad girl' identity of the rugged individualist evacuated of normative femininity" (61). In this context, *Tracks* can also be read as a narrative that challenges the constraints

of gender through a narrator that does not easily fit into the image of the domestic and sessile female.

It is in the light of these discussions that I approach Davidson's text. Yet, I would like to bring to the fore the fact that Davidson's narrative of desert crossing can also be read as challenging an unproblematic, or even celebratory, view of the road as a space for self-transformation, especially due to the fact that, in her text, the road is embedded in tension and contradiction. According to Youngs, "[m]ost journeys are quests of some kind" (*Cambridge Introduction* 87) since they allow the traveler to search for "meaning, purpose or belonging" (*Cambridge Introduction* 90); in this context, it could be said that the questing motif that drives Davidson through the Australian desert in a young age is a search for freedom to re-invent herself. This motif is even reinforced in Davidson's postscript for the 2012 edition of *Tracks*, in which she argues that her choices were a result of her time, "the late sixties, early seventies, when anything and everything seemed possible, and when the status quo of the developed world was under radical scrutiny by its youth" (Postscript 257). Besides a questioning of imposed roles and norms, according to Davidson, "nothing was as important as freedom. The freedom to make up your own mind, to make yourself. And such aspirations involved risk, unleashing opportunities for learning, discovering and becoming" (Postscript 257). However, what one notices in the book is that Davidson, as a narrator,⁵ gradually starts to demonstrate that crossing the desert to free herself of imposed social norms means taking responsibility not only for herself but also for others. If, as Youngs suggests, "[q]uesters use the lands through which they pass for their own purposes" (*Cambridge Introduction* 94), in Davidson's narrative, the narrator is extremely aware of the fact she is traversing historical spaces, which leads her to constantly question and revisit her own purposes during her journey. Thus, in this paper, I argue that Davidson's *Tracks*, more than merely celebrating the process of self-transformation in travel, lingers on the tension between its narrator's search for freedom and her awareness regarding the responsibility involved in engaging with cultural difference and in representing

geographical crossings. If, on the one hand, Davidson welcomes the changes she identifies in herself while traversing the desert, on the other hand, her narrative becomes a space to reflect about her position as a writer since it is directly implicated in the legacies of a colonial history.

"My Aloneness Was a Treasure:" Facing Solitude on the Road

At the end of the 1970s, when Davidson decides to move to Alice Springs to initiate her preparations for the aforementioned trip that would eventually lead her to cross the Australian outback with only a few camels, her dog, and her gear, not many people believed she could actually do it (maybe not even herself). In fact, one of the transformative forces guiding Davidson's narrative of her journey through the desert has to do with the overcoming of barriers, or of a seemingly impossibility of accomplishing her goal. Such impossibility is constructed in the first part of the narrative in mainly two ways: a) through the fact that Davidson is not originally from the outback, but from the Australian north-east region (from Queensland), being, then, what she calls "an urbanite in the bush" (7); b) and also due to the fact she is a woman willing to venture through "tough men's country." Indeed, the very first image that opens the narrative depicts a narrator arriving "in the Alice at five a.m. with a dog, six dollars, and a small suitcase full of inappropriate clothes" (3), being confronted with a sense of not-belonging, and by extension, having to build her way into what at first she calls "a lunatic idea" (4). Immediately after her arrival in Alice Springs, this sense of confrontation increases as Davidson gets to know more deeply the misogyny of Australian bush country, where a woman like herself, traveling alone, was synonymous to danger, irresponsibility, or, as one of the clients at the pub where she works tells her, "the next town rape case" (19). She is also confronted with the colonial prejudice against Aboriginal people, still viewed as "enemies," since they were labeled as "dirty, lazy, dangerous" (6). Such images appear at the beginning of the narrative as constitutive of Australian bush culture, a culture commonly marked

by its individualism and its masculinist ethos. To “break through” these geographical boundaries means, for Davidson, to challenge and reconfigure gender and cultural frontiers as well. Thus, the first part of *Tracks* is constructed both as a demarcation of territory and as a narrative of preparation for the trip to be taken, since it authenticates its narrator’s ability to survive alone, as a woman, in a normative masculinist environment.

However, it is also important to note that, by inserting herself as a traveler in “bush country,” Davidson is immediately inserted in a history of colonial travel and exploration of the Australian land, something that is reflected even through her choice of going to Alice Springs to “get [...] the requisite number of wild camels from the bush and train them to carry [her] gear, then walk into and about the central desert” (4). Although Davidson does not fully explore the implications of choosing camels as her main “means of transportation” in the desert, this choice brings with it another layer to her narrative since she recognizes that they were part of the history of colonial Australia: “[camels] had been imported in the 1850s along with the Afghani and North Indian owners, to open up the inaccessible areas, to transport food, and to help build the telegraph system and railways that would eventually cause their economic demise” (4). By recovering this piece of history, however slightly, Davidson highlights not only the presence of camels in the outback, but also of groups of explorers generally left out from narratives of colonial Australia.⁶ Moreover, when she decides to use camels to cross outback country, Davidson somehow, according to Sidonie Smith, “assumes a place in the history of that technology of motion” (27) and, by extension, “reimagines her relationship to [that] technology” (28). If, on the one hand, her choice allows Davidson to become closer to the land as she avoids the comfort of cars or trucks, on the other hand, it also leads her to take responsibility for the animals she trains and for the ways in which she re-visits the legacies of a colonial past. Moreover, her connections with the camels in the narrative seem to provide a structure for materially grounding her experience in the desert since, according to her, “[her] routine was built around their needs and never her own” (114). Symbolically, the

camels also represent adaptation, as originally foreign creatures which became well-adapted to the nature of the Australian outback. Thus, by learning how to train and take care of camels (activities usually performed by men), Davidson re-elaborates the gender barriers that would have traditionally separated her from the desert.

In this context, in deciding to “disentangle travel from its masculinist logic” (Smith 28), Davidson has also to overcome what Kristi Siegel has called the “rhetoric of peril” present in Eurocentric views of travel (58). For Siegel, from cautionary fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” to mainstream Hollywood movies, women are exposed to a view of the road as “dangerous” (a concept that carries with it the undertone of both safety and morality), and, consequently, should be “protected” or “kept safe” (Siegel 57, 65). This rhetoric ultimately constrains women’s movements and their ability to experience geographical crossings due to their supposedly “vulnerability” in face of peril.⁷ In the Australian context, this image of vulnerability could be associated to what Débora Scheidt called “the much proclaimed view of Australia as a man’s country” (68). As Scheidt argues, “[c]ommon sense and the low visibility of women in the very first decades of Australia’s history as a British colony, especially in the interior, have [...] played a part in establishing Australia’s reputation as a land where men were more bound to succeed than women” (68). Moreover, during the nineteenth century, when white colonists started to drive into the interior of Australia constituting the “itinerancy-based Australian rural culture” (Scheidt 69), men were usually seen as more appropriately fit for the road. According to Scheidt, “[w]hile men could travel in pairs or small groups, driving herds or in search of seasonal work, their wives were let in charge of the family and the farm, usually miles away from any outside assistance or human contact” (70). In this context, Davidson’s attitude of journeying through central Australia, by herself, directly speaks back to a male-oriented tradition of exploration in the Australian outback.

In addition, as Siegel’s discussion suggests and Davidson’s narrative shows, the image of a woman traveling alone somehow disturbs such rhetoric of

peril or vulnerability, challenging people to re-think about the connection between movement and gender, something that becomes an important issue in *Tracks*. As Davidson tells us, the meanings behind her decision to cross the desert by herself involved: “to be alone, to test, to push, to unclog my brain of all its extraneous debris, not to be protected, to be stripped of all the social crutches, not to be hampered by any outside interference whatsoever, well meant or not” (91). Yet, as she comes to realize, other meanings for her trip were being created by the people around her as well, as if the image of this woman traveling alone in the desert had to be processed, or narrativized, by a frame of reasoning that would somehow explain Davidson’s act. Aware of people’s reactions, Davidson writes:

Why was everyone so goddam affected by this trip, adversely or otherwise? Had I stayed back home, studying half-heartedly or working in gambling clubs or drinking at the Royal Exchange Pub and talking about politics, that would have been quite acceptable. I would not have been up for all these astounding projections. So far, people had said that I wanted to commit suicide, that I wanted to do penance for my mother’s death, that I wanted to prove a woman could cross a desert, that I wanted publicity. Some begged me to let them come with me; some were threatening, jealous or inspired; some thought it a joke. The trip was beginning to lose its simplicity. (90)

What Davidson perceives even before she departs for her trip is that her actual (material) experience in the desert, free of what she calls “all responsibility to people” (94), is not separated from the narratives, or the stories, being created about her journey. This realization inevitably brings her back to the same social and cultural constraints from which she wants to escape.

One of the ways in which Davidson attempts to avoid other people’s interferences in her trip is through solitude. Aloneness for the narrator is a means towards what Smith called Davidson’s process of becoming “other to herself” (62), in the sense that she “un-becomes the feminized woman trapped in her reliance upon rituals, spectacles, and degraded embodiment of normative femininity” (62). To face solitude in the

desert is constructed in the narrative as a way into freedom, or into escaping what one is expected to be, and there are many passages throughout the book that demonstrate Davidson’s cherishing of a newly-acquired independence. In fact, she closes the first section of her book, the one focusing on the preparations for her trip, with the following image: “It was done. I was on my own. For real. At last. Jenny, Toly, Alice Springs, Rick, *National Geographic*, family, friends, everything, dissolved as I turned for the last time, the early morning wind leaping and whistling around me. I wondered what powerful fate had channelled me into this moment of inspired lunacy. The last burning bridge back to my old self collapsed. I was on my own” (104-105). Davidson’s text becomes, then, a space for the recreation and reinvention of the woman narrator through solitude, as she feels she has to “free” herself from other people’s expectations. Such process is marked by the material transformation of the body as well, which involves learning how to build strength and to develop stamina, to cope with the potential dangers of being in the desert by herself, thus, according to Smith, adopting and adapting “the conventions of heroic travel” and “claim[ing] a place for women in the misogynist and inhospitable bush of Australia” (62).

It is interesting to note, though, that while the action of traveling alone in the outback represents to the narrator a way towards freedom and self-transformation, such freedom does not come from an idealization of the desert as a mere space of possibility. On the contrary, during Davidson’s crossing of the arid terrains of central Australia, her body and all of her senses and efforts are completely dependent on an understanding of the desert as a unique ecosystem, one that is rich with life, but also not easily molded and adapted to the Western traveler’s needs. In order to carve a space for herself in the desert, the narrator first has to re-access its spaces through what she understands as the reality of her trip, and not through a mythologizing of the desert as a mystical or enigmatic space. This is more evident during the first part of her trip, when she is still getting used to the routine of the desert and the pace of her journey. In one example, after getting lost and not being able to locate one of the mapped routes she intends to

go through, Davidson writes: "My little heart felt like a macaw in a canary cage. I could feel the enormity of the desert in my belly and on the back of my neck. [...] And I felt very small and very alone suddenly in this great emptiness" (116). Gradually, throughout her desert crossing, other images from day-to-day survival on the road seem to demystify the image of the desert as a mystical space. As the narrator tells us, "I realized the trip was not a game. There is nothing so real as having to think about survival. Believing in omens is all right as long as you know exactly what you are doing. I was becoming very careful and I was coming right back down to earth, where the desert was larger than I could comprehend" (123). It is possible to note then that in *Tracks* the space of the desert is marked by the tension between the feelings of "exaltation or dread, and usually a combination of both" (Davidson *Tracks* 122), showing the narrator's conflicting approach to it.

Another point of tension in Davidson's desert crossing has to do with the realization that her quest for freedom is embedded in traversing territories still sacred to Aboriginal peoples, since great parts of the central areas of Australia are Aboriginal land. Despite the fact that, at the beginning of her narrative, Davidson tells that one of the reasons that prompted her to take the trip was as a "way of getting to know [Aborigines] directly and simply" (37), one also notes how the narrator attempts to mitigate her presence in Aboriginal territory, not feeling completely at ease with such choice. When she narrates her encounters with Aboriginal people on the road, she frequently records how she negotiates her interaction with them, and also how she is perceived, received or observed. As she realizes while crossing the desert, she is neither simply "passing through" Aboriginal land nor is she invisible; her tracks leave marks on the territory she is crossing. In this context, it can be said that Davidson's work does address the possibility of reimagining the self, becoming what Smith and Watson have identified as "occasions for both the reimagining and the misrecognition of identity [...], and for resituating the mobile subject in relation to home and its ideological norms" (207). However, this reimagining is possible when her body is also re-defined in the encounter with the other, which allows

the narrator to avoid the romanticizing of the road. As Susan Bassnett has discussed (based on Sara Mill's work), the emphasis on looking at women's mobility on the road as a way into reinvention and possibility could bring a romantic overtone to the way we approach women's travel writing since disguising their own implications in representing their cultural others (234). What this cautioning about the idealization of movement and dislocation reminds us is that traveled spaces are also marked by tension and contradiction. In *Tracks*, it is possible to note that, at the same time its narrator welcomes self-transformation on the road, she attempts as well to negotiate her presence in contested terrains. The next section will be, then, an exploration of Davidson's narrative in relation to what is involved in traveling and representing such spaces.

Tracking the Story: Davidson as Quester and Writer

One of Davidson's first encounters with Aborigines in the desert happens when she arrives in a community called Ayeronga, in the territory of the Pitjantara, one of the Aboriginal ethnic groups from central Australia. After describing her arrival, she points out that "[t]he whole of the first section of [her] trip would be through [Pitjantara] tribal territory, or what was left of it, a large reserve controlled by white bureaucrats and dotted with mission and government settlements" (120). As a white person herself, who does not necessarily belong in that territory, Davidson describes her presence there as being welcome but something of a nuisance, since, according to her, she was greeted by the local people, who would speak with her in their language, but who would call her "the *kungka rama-rama* (crazy woman)" (120). She also mentions that she was well received by the community especially because she "could not have picked a better way to travel through their country. Pitjantara people had a special relationship with camels as they had been the one tribe to use them constantly for walkabout right up to the mid-1960s" (120). Yet, at the same time she recognizes the possibility of interacting with the people from the community, she also mentions that during her three days in Ayeronga, instead of staying at the camp

with Aboriginal people, she would live with a school teacher and his family, since she was “too shy to force [herself] on to people who might not want a whitefella hanging around, poking her nose into their business” (120). This somewhat mixed description of herself as both a welcomed traveler and possibly an intruder permeates a great part of her narrative, especially when it involves crossing Aboriginal land. One of the ways Davidson finds to mitigate her presence in the land is by interpolating in the narrative aspects of the colonial history involving Aboriginal populations, thus re-writing such history by taking into consideration the usurpation of Aboriginal land, their rights, and the colonial and administrative policies that helped to disintegrate and decimate Aboriginal communities.

In a sense, her narrative becomes both a response to what she learns in the desert as well as an act of resistance to the whitewashing of Australian history. In a time when, as Davidson tells us, “stone-age drunks on the dole were about the only coverage Aborigines got” (6), and when “everybody had been taught at school that they [...] [had] no culture, no government and no right to existence in a vastly superior white world” (6), by recuperating Aboriginal history, Davidson inserts her narrative in a broader social and political context that goes beyond what could be seen as her solipsistic drive of crossing the desert alone. It is through these interpolations that Davidson brings to the reader’s attention a new perspective about the actual situation regarding Aboriginal life and status at the end of the 1970s in Australia: from facts regarding new policies in terms of land rights, to issues regarding their government, the interaction with white administrators in camps, and even facts regarding their health and education.

Since the beginning of her narrative, even long before she departs on her journey to the desert, Davidson inserts information about what she calls “the complex problems – physical, political and emotional – all Aboriginal people have to contend with” (44). When she describes the Aboriginal camps around Alice Springs, for example, she mentions that the almost thirty camps near the city were formed due to the constant interaction of Aborigines with city dwellers, but that there was no infrastructure being provided

to the camps: “[t]here were five water taps to serve all thirty camps, and many people were so destitute they lived out of garbage cans, off discarded food they found at the dump and by cadging hand-outs in the street” (45). She also openly talks about the government policy of assimilation being used at the time as a “means of getting Aboriginal people off their land” (47), and about how the Department of Aboriginal Affairs did not seriously address important issues regarding Aboriginal schooling or homelessness (48). Moreover, throughout the narrative, Davidson comments on the condition of Aboriginal camps she passes through along the way, interpolating pieces of historical information as a way to contextualize the territory through which she is traveling. In one of such passages, she writes:

After 160 years of undeclared war on Aboriginal people, during which time wholesale slaughter was carried out in the name of progress, and while the last massacre was taking place in the Northern Territory in 1930, the colonialist government set up this and other Aboriginal reserves on land neither the cattlemen nor anyone else wanted. [...] The blacks were rounded up like cattle by police and citizens on horseback wielding guns. Often, different tribes were forced to live on one small area [...] The government allowed missionaries to rule many of these reserves and to confine and control the people. (118)

Excerpts like these work as reminders that the road through which she is traveling is not empty; that spaces in Australian territory are contested and carry a long history of oppression against Aboriginal communities. Moreover, by raising such important questions, Davidson attempts to counteract the uneasiness⁸ that permeates her accounts of crossing the Australian outback, particularly as she recognizes her travels could be read as one more way of “trespassing” Aboriginal land.

Much of her unease comes from a questioning of the limits and possibilities of representation, as she is aware of the fact that after she finishes her trip, her experience of it will be available only through her memories, and through the narratives and the stories told about it, be them her own stories or other people’s accounts of her

trip. Even if she embraces the opportunity to re-write history in her narrative of the desert, she also presents a certain distrust in relation to what the stories about her journey might tell about herself or about the Aboriginal people she meets along the way. This mistrust is intensified in the book especially due to the fact that, before departing to the desert, and as a means to fund her expedition, Davidson agrees to write a story about her trip to be published in the *National Geographic* magazine. She agrees as well that Rick Smolan, the magazine photographer, would document parts of her trip, taking pictures of her, of the camels, and even of her encounters with other people. By getting involved with a magazine such as *National Geographic*, which she recognizes as being “a conservative magazine” (141), and by having her dislocation being tracked by Smolan, Davidson feels she loses part of her freedom. As she writes: “I [...] knew at some level that it meant the end of the trip as I had conceived it: knew that it was the wrong thing to do – a sell-out. A stupid but unavoidable mistake. It meant that an international magazine would be interfering – no, not overtly, but would have a vested interest in, would therefore be a subtle, controlling factor in what had begun as a personal and private gesture” (91). Due to this “interference,” Davidson realizes that her trip will become a story (or, as she later realizes, many stories), something which unavoidably changes the dynamics of her project. As she writes later on in the narrative: “I did not perceive at that time that I was allowing myself to get more involved with writing about the trip than the trip itself. It did not dawn on me that already I was beginning to see it as a story for other people [...]” (136). The implications behind approaching her trip as a narrative with, as she says, “a beginning and an ending” (136), lead her to reflect about her role as a writer, especially as it involves writing about the Aboriginal other. In this context, her narrative also becomes a means to problematize representation in itself, since she constantly points out the fact that she is writing *Tracks* after the trip was finished, being already removed from its context and, by extension, re-imagining or fabricating it as well.⁹

This awareness of the distance between her experience of the trip and its representations

accompany Davidson not only through the process of writing *Tracks*, but also as a preoccupation that shapes her career as a writer. In an interview to Tim Youngs, more than twenty years after the publication of *Tracks*, Davidson discusses the process of writing about her travels, approaching writing as a construct, particularly when it involves describing something which is supposed to be based on a “true” experience. She says:

I'm very interested in memory and concerned about it and of course even more so in something like travel literature where the immediate assumption is that you're giving someone a piece of reality. It's nonsense really: you're creating an artefact and you have an extraordinary responsibility about how you talk, not just about yourself and what happened, but towards the people you purport to be talking about. We can't be innocent about that any more, the way we talk about other cultures. (qtd. in Youngs “Interview” 25)

What one notices in Davidson's comment above is the fact that, even if a narrative is approached as a construction or as an “artefact”, as she calls it, it is not free from its responsibilities in relation to the ethics of representation, especially when it concerns a person's encounter with other people or cultures. Although *Tracks* was written long before Davidson's previous statement, the issue of responsibility, for herself and for others, already permeates her narrative. Despite the fact that Davidson as a quester goes to the desert in search for freedom, as a narrator, she is actually acutely aware of her role as a writer. One way of negotiating her engagement in *Tracks* is through her re-inscription of the desert as an inhabited and historical space.

For Sidonie Smith, Davidson's “story of transformative journeying is the narrative of black-white contact, as [she] seeks some kind of at-oneness with the indigenous people of Australia and some kind of atonement for the brutal history of conquest, colonialism, and persistent racism” (62). In this context, Davidson's text becomes a space for the re-articulation of her “white guilt” (Davidson *Tracks* 44), as her unease in crossing Aboriginal land in fact leads her to search for new meanings involving the legacies of colonial

relations in Australia. Interestingly enough, Davidson does not “speak for” the Aboriginal communities, but she listens to their stories and tries to re-access their ancestral connection to the land they inhabit. As she tells us in her narrative, “no amount of anthropological detail can begin to convey Aboriginal *feeling* for their land. It is everything – their law, their ethics, their reason for existence. [...] They are not separate from the land. When they lose it, they lose themselves. This is why the land rights movement has become so essential” (167). It is also important to mention that, for critics such as Tim Youngs, even if Davidson is mindful of Aboriginal history, her narrative is still “open to the charge of exploitation” (*Cambridge Introduction* 93), as “even texts that appear radical in their politics are at risk of using the Other exploitative to the advantage of the self” (*Cambridge Introduction* 93-94). Although Davidson’s narrative does embrace the risk of being seen as using Aboriginal history to its narrator’s own benefit, Davidson does not attempt to camouflage such risk, but openly confronts it by constant self-awareness in relation to what is involved in the acts of travel and of writing about it. This sense of responsibility is negotiated in the book mainly through two narrative strategies: a) her constant doubting and questioning of photographer Rick Smolan’s actions as a recorder; b) her descriptions of her encounter with Mr. Eddie, the Aboriginal elder with whom she travels for part of her journey.

The first time Davidson mentions Rick Smolan in *Tracks*, she writes about how her first encounters with him did not cause much of an impression on her. Yet, among some of the things she says she remembers from these times, she includes the following description:

He was a nice boy [...] one of those amoral immature photo-journalists who hop from trouble spot to trouble spot on the globe without ever having time to see where they are or be affected by it. [...] and I remember vaguely some tepid arguments concerning the morality of and justifications for taking clichéd photographs of Aborigines in the creek-bed for *Time* magazine when you knew precisely nothing about them, and didn’t much want to. (81)

It is interesting to perceive that, throughout the narrative, Smolan is depicted or represented in a much similar way to the descriptions above. In other words, he is the traveler who, contrary to Davidson as a narrator, is concerned with capturing isolated and not necessarily true portraits of the people or the places he encounters instead of actually engaging with them. While Davidson depicts herself as being constantly aware of her interferences and biases when interacting with Aboriginal people or when crossing historical spaces, Smolan is located at the other end of the spectrum; for the narrator, he is not able to see the reality or the materiality of what he encounters in the desert. He is, according to Davidson, “caught in the romance of the thing – the magic [...]” (94), and only interested in the “extraordinariness” of her story, since focusing on “record[ing] this great event, my traipsing from point A to point B” (94). In this context, there is tension every time Smolan appears in the narrative. It could even be said that he is seen by the narrator as standing for a misguided kind of representation, one devoid of involvement with the context of what is being observed and, by extension, described by the narrator as “a form of parasitism, voyeurism” (133). In a sense, Smolan’s presence during the trip reminds Davidson of her own responsibilities towards herself and others not only while crossing the desert but also, and maybe even more importantly, when she has eventually to represent this crossing in writing. Despite her efforts at reconciliation with him (which even involve a sexual encounter between the two), Davidson constantly attempts to differentiate herself from Smolan or from his project.

One of the most revealing moments in the narrative that describes Davidson’s conflictual position in relation to Smolan is during their stay in Docker, another Aboriginal camp where Davidson stays for six weeks, since one of her camels was recovering from an injury in one of its legs. Smolan also stays there for two weeks and, while they are both in Docker, the narrator tells of a crescent discomfort between them, especially due to the fact that, by being associated to Rick, Davidson feels she is seen and treated as an intruder in the community. She calls this time as a

moment of facing “mental collapse” (141), which has a lot to do with her constant questioning and doubting of the reasons and implications of being in Aboriginal land, mainly because it involved carrying along a person who would be once more recording, or documenting, Aboriginal life from a Western perspective. As Davidson writes: “Whatever justification for photographing the Aborigines I had come up with before, now were totally shot. It was immediately apparent that they hated it. They knew it was a rip-off. I wanted Rick to stop. He argued that he had a job to do” (141). It is at this moment of conflict that Davidson also realizes that her future narrative (to be published in *National Geographic*) would be consumed with the same kind of interest or mindset that Smolan’s photographs would be seen. In it, Aboriginal people “would remain quaint primitives to be gawked at by readers who couldn’t really give a damn what was happening to them” (141). Thus, Davidson’s self-awareness of her position as a writer in *Tracks* can be seen as a response against such objectifying of Aboriginal people for Western consumption. As has also been suggested by Holland and Huggan, “Davidson’s narrative resists, by and large, such opportunities for cultural voyeurism” (123). Also, through the descriptions of her reactions towards Smolan’s pictures, she distances herself from his actions, attempting to create a more solid or broader depiction of Aboriginal communities and of their history in her book.

Moreover, another way to resist or challenge the images being created by Smolan is through Davidson’s reinterpretation of his photographs. As she insistently reasons in the narrative, “[n]ever let it be said that the camera does not lie. It lies like a pig in mud. It captures the projections of whoever happens to be using it, never the truth” (133). One example of this comes from the time Smolan meets Davidson and Eddie on the road. Aware of the fact Aborigines do not like being photographed, Davidson lets Eddie demonstrate to Smolan he does not want his pictures taken. As she narrates the event, Davidson writes:

[Eddie] lifted his hand, and said in English, ‘No photograph,’ then in Pitjantjara, ‘It makes me feel sick.’ I laughed. Rick captured that one moment and then desisted. When we had that photo developed much later

on, there was a woman smiling at an old Aboriginal man, whose hand was raised in a cheery salute. So much for the discerning eye of the camera. That one slide speaks volumes. Or rather lies volumes. (186)

By providing another version for Smolan’s pictures, Davidson gestures towards the idea that truths are also constructs, demystifying the possible “objective” look of the camera. Although Davidson does recognize that Smolan’s presence during her trip was her own choice, since she was the one who accepted having her trip documented as part of her deal with *National Geographic*, she mitigates her feeling of intrusion through positioning herself as a different kind of traveler in comparison to Smolan. It becomes apparent, then, that *Tracks* is a result of Davidson’s sense of engagement, or commitment, as a writer towards the Aboriginal communities.

If Smolan’s presence during the journey leads Davidson to question her rights to be crossing the Australian outback, her experience of traveling with Mr. Eddie, the elder Aboriginal man whom she meets along her way, somehow reconciles her to the land. Through such experience, not only does Davidson discover new meanings to her journey, but she also gradually learns how to approach the land without imposing her gaze and her needs upon Aboriginal territory. Although her encounter with Eddie becomes an extremely significant moment in her narrative, it actually happens by chance, when Davidson is camping for the night after a long stretch of walking through sand hills and dunes towards a community called Pipalyatjara. A group of Aborigines stop by at her campsite for the night, and before she departs in the following morning, one of them, Mr. Eddie, decides to accompany her for the next two days, until she reaches the village. Not only is this experience described in the narrative as being happy and fulfilling, but it actually leads Davidson to invite Mr. Eddie to accompany her in the following part of her journey, when they share the road for many more days and cross together sacred Aboriginal ground.

According to Davidson’s descriptions of Eddie, “[h]e was sheer pleasure to be with, exuding all those qualities typical of old Aboriginal people – strength, warmth, self-possession, wit, and a kind of rootedness,

a substantiality that immediately commanded respect” (159). It is through such respectful lenses that she approaches him in the narrative, allowing him to present her with a new perspective of life in the desert: “He was teaching me something about flow, about choosing the right moment for everything, about enjoying the present. I let him take over” (173). By accepting Eddie’s guidance, Davidson’s sense of herself as an intruder diminishes; she feels more grounded on the land and more connected to her environment. Great part of this transformation happens when Eddie takes Davidson away from the known tracks in the outback and leads her to what she calls “his country,” or the land of his ancestors. She writes:

For a week we wandered through that land, and Eddie seemed to grow in stature with every step. [...] He told me myths and stories over and over at night when we camped. He knew every particle of that country as well as he knew his own body. He was at home in it totally, at one with it and the feeling began rubbing off on to me. [...] He made me notice things I had not noticed before – noises, tracks. And I began to see how it all fitted together. (174)

Such involvement with Eddie represents to Davidson a new kind of acceptance as if, through this experience, her journey and most likely even her eventual writing about the journey become finally justified. Moreover, it is possible to say that it is during and after this transformative experience with Eddie that she is able to free herself from social constraints, going through what she calls a “[d]esocialization process – the sloughing off, like a snake-skin, of the useless preoccupations and standards of the society I had left” (181). Through this process, the self is transformed: “[...] I liked, still like, the person who emerged from that process far better than the one who existed before it – or since it. In my own eyes, I was becoming sane, normal, healthy [...]” (181-182). It is exactly due to this transformative awareness of the self on the road, a self that becomes more connected to her environment, that Davidson seems to feel reconciled to the land, remediating her sense of intruding Aboriginal historical spaces.

However, as Sidonie Smith argues, such transformation comes from Davidson’s participation “in certain historical practices through which white westerners have constituted ‘Aboriginality’ as radical difference, a radical difference whose curative powers can deliver an enervated westerner to a ‘truer’, more satisfying experience of the self” (66). For Smith, Davidson perpetuates a romanticized discourse about Aboriginal people, in which they are

[r]epresented as more directly related to the land, animals and plants, and the spirit world, [...] imagined as conducting a more “authentic” way of life [...] Yet this romantic discourse, like the discourse of degraded Aboriginality, fixes indigenous Australians in a premodern state of essentialized, ahistorical difference. And it reproduces a notion of Aboriginality that serves the personal, social, and political purposes of white Australians. (66)

Smith is precise in her recognition of Davidson’s depictions of Aborigines as continuing a tradition of romantically representing them as more connected to the natural environment than Westerners. Nevertheless, it also seems important to note that, if, on the one hand, Eddie and his community are indeed portrayed in *Tracks* as much “health[ier], integrated, and whole” (159), on the other, he is far from a pristine representative of an immaculate and idealized Aboriginal community. As Davidson describes him, when they first meet, he and other Aboriginal men are returning to their camps from a land rights meeting (155), in a “clapped-out ancient Holden” (155), and Eddie is wearing “one huge Adidas and one tiny woman’s shoe” (155). He is also eager to receive a rifle at the end of his sojourn with the narrator through the desert (185), and he is not shy in asking for money after performing the “angry bushman” for tourists (179). In other words, Davidson’s narrative shows that both Eddie and his community have been marked by the colonial experience, adapting their ways in order to survive. If Davidson does indeed “go primitive” as Smith suggests (65), she actually accomplishes this not only by crossing the desert “as an indigenous person” (Smith 65), but also by crossing cultural boundaries and learning how to transit and

negotiate different perspectives in a still misogynist and prejudicial Australia.

When talking about *Tracks* in her interview to Tim Youngs, Davidson mentions she continues to see it as an honest piece of writing. For her, the book is “very open, it’s not filtered by anything, so I think it probably has a place. Even though it’s not at all ethnography, it does say something quite honest about what was going on in Central Australia at that time and the relationship between Aborigines living there and whitefellas who were coming through to administer the land rights legislation” (23). If, at the beginning of her journey, Davidson had been, as Holland and Huggan suggest, “drawn to the desert as a site of both adventure and contemplation” (121), such drive is soon counteracted by her political choices of representing the desert as a historical space, thus challenging a mere celebratory view of the road as a space of possibility. As her discussion in the interview demonstrates, Davidson’s experience of crossing the desert, in fact, leads her to discover her role and her responsibilities as a writer.

Concluding Remarks

Towards the end of her narrative, Davidson includes a letter she writes from the desert to a friend called Steve. The reasons for including it in *Tracks* are described by the narrator as a way to show “what was happening much more clearly than [she] could now remember” (199). This letter, written in the last stretch of her journey, after having experienced a great deal of hardship and endurance in the desert, and after being marked and transformed by the travel experience, shows a traveler who is, at the same time, proud of her accomplishments, but also cautious in relation to what she is experiencing and learning in the desert. After telling her friend about both good and bad aspects of her journey, such as enjoying “[s]itting by [her] lovely fire 150 miles from anyone or anything, [with] billy[...] singing tea shanties...” (199), or about having to deal with a group of wild bull camels that had been circling her campsite (202), she also writes: “Funny thing about this trip you know. One day it has me flying through clouds in ecstasy (although, having been to the clouds,

I can honestly say they’re a nice place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there, the cost of living’s too high) and the next day...” (203). It is interesting to note that the reticence at the end of her sentence marks her choice of leaving the idea to be completed by her reader (be this reader Steve or all the other possible readers of her narrative). In a way, what one perceives is that, despite the knowledge about herself and others which Davidson as a narrator acquired during her time in the desert, there is also a side of the trip that demanded a great deal of energy and strength, not only physically, but also emotionally.

It is exactly this kind of contradiction and ambivalence that Davidson seems interested in exploring in her narrative. More than a polished account of a “heroic deed,” it is a narrative open to the anxieties experienced by its narrator while crossing the desert. In her postscript for the 2012 edition of *Tracks*, Davidson adds: “I have had several chances during those three decades [since the book’s publication] to grind off its raw edges, but have always decided against it. Whatever its inelegance of style, it was written with verve, confidence and a passion for truth – for getting behind my own act: let it stand” (Postscript 256). In fact, this suggestion of “getting behind one’s own act” becomes emblematic in her narrative, as Davidson is constantly challenging her writing, questioning the reasons and the implications of her journey through the desert. If her original intention was to be free to make, or re-make herself, she soon finds out that such freedom does not come without a cost. Her individual freedom is embedded in other people’s histories and part of the price she has to pay is to confront her own bias in once more exploring the inhabited spaces of the desert. For critics such as Sidonie Smith, Davidson’s narrative becomes a “critique to the myth of freedom on the road” mainly because she is “turned into a tourist attraction, [...] know[ing] only too well how the journey can be remade by others for their own purpose” (71). Although Davidson is very much aware of the commercial attention her journey has received, it could also be said that such critique actually comes from her recognition that she cannot escape broader political and social aspects that inform the choices she makes. By deciding to write *Tracks*,

Davidson is not only “throw[ing] [...] a bone to the dogs”, as she suggests in her interview to Tim Youngs (26), but she is actually negotiating her responsibilities and her engagement as a travel writer.

Notes

1. This article has derived from the research I am currently developing as a visiting scholar at Trent University. I thank CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior) for the scholarship received, which enabled me to develop this research.
2. According to *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, “the outback” refers to “the areas of Australia that are far away from towns and cities, especially the desert areas of central Australia”. (See Reference section for complete bibliographical information).
3. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, when discussing travel writing in terms of quests, Tim Youngs argues that “[m]any explorers deliberately invoke the figure of Odysseus or other classical questers. Such comparisons underline the masculine ethos of the quest [...]” (88).
4. All other quotations from Davidson’s *Tracks* will appear here referring only to page numbers, and will be from the 2012 edition of the book. For complete bibliographical reference, see the Reference section.
5. Although I use Davidson’s last name throughout my discussion, I am fully aware that there is a difference between Davidson, the writer of *Tracks*, and Davidson as the narrator of her autobiographical journey in the desert. This is why, throughout my analysis of her narrative, I tend to refer to Davidson as a narrator, in an attempt to highlight her self-awareness in relation to herself as a constructed character in the book. When talking about her writing in an interview to Tim Youngs, Davidson says: “Both of the characters, it seems to me, the narrator in *Tracks* and the narrator in *Desert Places*, are created people, they’re created characters, and I recognise both of them, but they’re not quite me. They’re bits of me or they’re projections of me, but they’re not *me*” (qtd. in Youngs “Interview” 27). For further discussion on the interrelations between writers and autobiographical subjects see also Smith and Watson’s *Reading Autobiography*, especially Chapters 1 and 2.
6. For further discussion on the presence of Afghans and the importation of camels in Australia, see the article “The Afghans and their camels in Australia” by Maria Visconti (*Antipodes*, June 2000, pp. 17-21). It is also interesting to note that in Davidson’s narrative, Sallay Mahomet, an Afghan descendant, figures as an important teacher regarding camel knowledge and training.

7. It is also important to note that in Siegel’s argumentation, the rhetoric of peril is usually associated to a privileged group of white middle- and upper-class women (Siegel 61).
8. In *Tourists with Typewriters*, Holland and Huggan also point out Davidson’s feeling of unease. However, in their reading of *Tracks*, they focus more on her uneasiness in relation to the genre of travel writing in itself (see, for example, their discussion on page 123). Here, I attempt to add a critical look to the fact that Davidson constantly depicts her unease in relation to her material crossing of Aboriginal sacred land as well.
9. In her interview to Tim Youngs, Davidson says: “As for the process of writing *Tracks*, I was in London, it was two or three years after the event, I sat down in this hideous flat on my own and churned out a first draft in three months [...]” (qtd. in Youngs “Interview” 25).

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