No Longer Overlooked

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When asked what is included in the genre of travel literature many people would include guidebooks and other works that may describe the culture and the everyday life of places that are often traveled and correlated with tourists. It is clear that the travel literature genre is either unknown or overlooked by a majority of people. The genre is even disregarded on a scholarly level, as traditional college courses premiering travel literature are often hard to find, and criticism and scholarly works are scarce. Many travel writers are barely known and their works are rarely discussed. Through research of the travel literature genre and more specifically the book *Tracks* by Robyn Davidson, it is apparent that travel literature lacks the respect and recognition it deserves. *Tracks* is a prime example that demonstrates how travel literature, much like good literature in general, is constructed of complex structures that join to create a complete text. As a whole, travel literature is a genre that should not be overlooked, as the texts are just as influential and fascinating as any other genre. The authors of travel literature not only reveal their perspectives on the culture and the surroundings of the traveled land, they also often present inner changes that frequently allow the reader to relate to the author. Moreover, works of the travel literature genre, including *Tracks*, deserve the proper recognition and should no longer be overlooked.

Even though it is extremely subjective when discussing why a work is considered good literature, it is important to address what good literature entails. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term literature is “applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.” This definition could also be implied for good literature, as it is generally thought that good literature includes written works that are either exquisitely crafted or appeal to the reader’s emotions.
Harriet Lee, the author of the article “A Good Reader Maketh a Good Book,” suggests that “good literature makes demands upon its readers; it demands understanding of life and more than a superficial knowledge and experience of the world” (487). As a whole, according to Lee, good literature should influence the reader to mentally engage with the text, while applying not only surface knowledge, but knowledge of the reader’s world. Good literature is also simply defined by the canon and most frequently includes “the most revered authors and works of the past” (Beaty xxxi); however, many critics expand the canon, as well as the label of good literature, to also include modern writers and insist that readers “should both respond critically to all texts and scrutinize the standards by which certain works have been designated great” (xxxii). Likewise, readers should not simply settle with the works considered in the canon as the elite literature, but instead, make a personal judgment according to supporting evidence and “valid approaches to literary interpretations” (xxxii). No matter how one defines good literature, it is clear the concept is highly subjective; however, overall, good literature consists of a multitude of elements including artistic form and emotional appeal.

Good literature in general includes texts that are not only magnificently crafted but also have a poignant appeal to the reader. Likewise, good travel literature specifically can be determined with these basics as well. In an interview, the author of the travel book *Tracks*, Robyn Davidson states:

I think that the devices you use to make a good book are the same, sort of universal. Obviously it may manifest in the most extraordinary, different ways but ultimately you have to make a form that works … It’s not like academic
writing where you’ve got a particular kind of structure. If you’re a writer you’re making something that you want people to read. (Youngs 27)

Much like other genres, travel literature in particular has several other elements that help classify the text as being fundamentally good. At first, however, it is important to understand exactly what constitutes a text as travel literature. In the book, *Methods for Teaching Travel Literature and Writing*, Eileen Groom states:

> Travel literature is not guidebooks, is not what we would buy to find out about the food, the transportation, and so on available in a location; instead using the persona of the narrator as the needle and real people, places, and events as the threads, with spits of fiction and steady hands of contemplation to ensure the threading, the author creates a piece. (1)

Essentially, travel literature does not include texts that are generally about specific locations and tourist attractions, but instead, the genre includes work that pertains to authors who travel and witness people of a different culture while expressing reflections and internal changes that take place during the time of travel. The author of *Abroad*, Paul Fussell, asserts that works of the travel literature genre also include three basic elements: “first, the setting out, the disjunction from the familiar; second, the trials of initiation and adventure; and third, the return and the hero’s reintegration into society” (208). Much like any other genre, travel literature has a particular structure which most authors seem to follow, but like other genres as well, travel literature expands beyond the three elements. Fussell further defines the genre by stating:

> A travel book, at its purest, is addressed to those who do not plan to follow the traveler at all, but who require the exotic or comic anomalies, wonders,
and scandals of the literary form romance which their own place or time cannot entirely supply. Travel books are a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative—unlike that in a novel or a romance—claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality. (203)

Good travel literature allows readers who are seeking an escape from reality to explore exotic and far-off places while still being exposed to ‘actuality’, since travel texts are based on the author’s personal account along with fact. By influencing the reader to explore the traveled land with the writer, the work also allows the reader to explore the thoughts and reflections within the writer’s mind while assessing his own. Fussell proclaims, “Thus ‘the ideal book of this kind’ invites the reader to undertake three tours simultaneously: ‘abroad, into the author’s brain, and into his own’” (204). If the text fails to encourage the reader to evaluate all three aspects successfully it does not mean the work is no longer considered to be travel literature; however, the lack of the three aspects makes it rather difficult to consider the work to be ‘good’ travel literature. Tracks, the travel text written by Robyn Davidson, not only effectively allows the reader to learn about the culture of the Aborigines in Australia, the book also efficiently presents Davidson’s inner thoughts and reflections while influencing the reader to evaluate his as well. When examining and analyzing these aspects of Tracks, it is clear the work is a complex and successful text. Without a doubt, Tracks is indeed an example of good travel literature which demands the proper recognition and respect from all.

After identifying the definition and aspects of what formulates a text to be a piece of good travel literature, it is appropriate to specifically look at Tracks, by Robyn
Davidson, and examine the elements that make this text successful. Robyn Davidson presents and develops five major topics throughout the book, including, tourism, the Aboriginal culture, the power of choice, gender issues and the idea of change. All of these are essential to the book and work together to allow the reader to learn about the Aboriginal culture and the difficulties throughout Davidson’s journey, while also examining both the author and one’s own reflections and views. The process of analyzing Davidson’s thoughts and motives, along with one’s own, ultimately influences the reader to obtain a connection with the author. This connection allows the text to attain the emotional appeal of the reader and influences the reader to successfully observe three separate journeys concurrently.

As several of the definitions of travel literature clearly state, the genre does not include guidebooks and other texts often related to tourists; it is important to also separate the author of a travel text from a tourist. According to Fussell, when defining the differences between tourists and travelers another term, exploration, must be considered. Fussell states, “Before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration” (38). Even though the three different titles refer to a person making some sort of journey, the influence and reasons behind the journeys are different. The explorer searches for the unknown, the traveler further experiences “that which has already been discovered” by the explorer of the past, while the tourist simply enjoys that which has been “discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity” (39). As a result, Fussell distinguishes “the genuine traveler as being the middle between the two extremes” (39). Fussell explains:
If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of ‘knowing where one is’ belonging to tourism. (39)

Since the traveler is within the two extremes of exploration and tourism, the traveler displays similar characteristics of each while seeking the thrill of the unexpected and erratic impulses related to exploring, yet still assimilating to tourism through the comfort of plans and knowledge.

Robyn Davidson establishes a clear division between herself and the tourists as she travels across Australia and as a result, she marks herself as a traveler. Even though Fussell proclaims “that travel is now impossible and that tourism is all we have left” (Fussell 41), Davidson stands to prove him wrong as she constantly points out the rudeness and absurdity of the tourists, and even shares Fussell’s detestation of tourists. Davidson reveals her views of the tourists when she explains:

I must make a distinction here between travelers and tourists. I did meet some lovely people on the road, but they were rarer than hen’s teeth. At first I treated one and all with pleasant politeness. There were ten questions invariably asked me, and I unfailingly gave my pat reply. I posed for the inevitable snap snap of Nikons and the whirr of Super-eights. It got so that I was stopped every half hour and by three in the afternoon, the dangerous hour for me…a time when I cannot even be nice to myself, let alone these fools who would pile out, block my path, frighten the camels, hold me up, ask stupid boring questions, capture me on
celluloid so that they could stick me on their refrigerator doors when they got home, or worse still, sell me to newspapers when the heat was on, then drive off in a cloud of choking blinding dust, not even offering me a drink of water. (135-136)

Davidson clearly despises tourists, as she calls them “fools,” and their vulgar habits of taking endless pictures and asking “stupid boring questions.” She sets herself apart from the tourists by looking down upon them and their stereotypical actions. Moreover, since Davidson describes herself as being directly affected by tourism rather than taking part in tourist behaviors, Davidson further distinguishes herself as a traveler, rather than a tourist.

Even though Fussell believes tourism is the only way one can partake in a journey, since there are no places left to explore and discover, and because all places have now been traveled, other scholars believe there are still other means in which people can travel without being tourists. A scholar states:

Perhaps the Sahara has been crossed, and perhaps it has even been crossed in a jeep, but it has not been crossed solo, on foot, in less than x number of days. Travel writers can no longer have that treasured moment of being first anywhere, but they can certainly be the first to get there in an unusual, dangerous or impossible way. (Lisle 72)

Although the Australian desert is a place that has already been explored and traveled through many times in the past, Robyn Davidson can still be considered a traveler rather than a tourist, since she certainly accomplishes crossing Australia in an unusual way while traveling by camel and on foot. Furthermore, Davidson also has the advantage of
being one of the first women to successfully cross the Australian desert. In *The Norton Book of Travel* Fussell further expresses the notions of tourism and travel. He states:

Tourism simulates travel, sometimes quite closely … But it is different in crucial ways. It is not self-directed but externally directed. You go not where you want to go but where the industry has decreed you shall go. Tourism soothes you by comfort and familiarity and shields you from the shocks of novelty and oddity. It confirms your prior view of the world instead of shaking it up. Tourism requires that you see conventional things, and that you see them in a conventional way. (Fussell 651)

According to Fussell’s definition of tourism, he is mistaken to assume that traveling can no longer be accomplished, as Davidson clearly demonstrates the qualities of a traveler. Not only does Davidson travel across Australia on camel, allowing her to experience the desert up close in a rather unconventional way, Davidson also tries to abandon all comfort zones in order to examine her inner self. Davidson describes her expectations of her journey being based around solitude and aloneness in order “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” (102). By prying herself away from the comfort familiarity and by following her own path during the journey rather than going strictly to the most popular sites, Davidson can be distinguished as a traveler instead of a tourist.

Even though Robyn Davidson suitably fits into the title of traveler, while she is amongst the Aborigines she often finds herself on the outside looking in and questions her identity as a possible tourist, rather than a traveler. For Davidson, a tourist is a
derogatory term. She states, “It was the tourists who were the nuisance value” (Davidson 140). The tourists continually hounded Davidson throughout her trip, as well as disturbed the Aborigines and the sacredness of their land. Given that Davidson despises tourists and their destructive actions, it was hard for Davidson to cope with the idea of being a tourist with regard to the Aborigines. After a group of Aboriginal women perform and then teach Davidson to dance, Davidson is faced with the possibility of being a tourist when she realizes she is unaware of their costumes. Davidson states:

I didn’t know then that it was merely a rule of etiquette to give some little gift at the end of a dance. I felt it as a symbolic defeat. A final summing up of how I could never enter their reality, would always be a whitefella tourist on the outside looking in. (153)

Davidson faces the fact that even though she may be a traveler in terms of taking on a journey in an unconventional way and even separating herself from the comfort of familiarity, she still lacks a connection and understanding of the Aborigines and their culture. As a result, Davidson can still be associated with tourism within the eyes of the Aborigines. Robyn Davidson is also faced with questioning her identity as a traveler when Rick Smolan, the photographer for National Geographic, decides to take pictures of the Aborigines. She states:

I had found out from the irate community adviser what Rick had done, knew that I was an accomplice and found it hard to look at them. Taking photos of secret business was far worse than desecrating a church could be to the staunchest of Christians. The Aborigines there sorted travelers into two sections, tourists and people: I realized that to them I had become a tourist. (Davidson 15)
Although it is rather difficult for Davidson to accept the idea of being a tourist, since the very concept of tourism she ultimately despises, Davidson is only placed into the category of being a tourist out of ignorance and the lack of understanding of the Aboriginal culture. To categorize Davidson as a tourist would be too critical because Davidson not only displays respect for the Aborigines but she is also attempting to learn about the Aboriginal culture. On the other hand, the Aborigines are so bombarded by tourists who carry misconceptions about their culture that they cannot distinguish between tourists and travelers. To the Aborigines, there is no difference between tourists, who are simply compelled by the well-known sights while disregarding the culture of the natives, and travelers, who seek the understanding of culture and the other. Furthermore, the association with tourism denigrates the ideal of her trip, and Davidson’s priority of learning about the Aboriginal culture is disrupted because of a wall the Aborigines built up against tourists.

Although Davidson reveals several reasons behind her trip, one of her priorities was to expose herself to the Aboriginal culture in order to capture the essence of who they are as people, instead of simply abiding by the stereotypical Australian state of mind. Davidson states, “I had read a good deal about Aborigines and that was another reason for my wanting to travel in the desert – a way of getting to know them directly and simply” (50). Throughout the work Davidson allows the reader to get a glimpse inside the Aboriginal culture while also disclosing the stereotypes and the effects the white population of Australia has on the Aborigines and their culture. In an interview Davidson discusses how *Tracks* depicts the Aboriginal people. She states:
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 Aboriginals living there and whitefellas who were coming through to administer the land rights legislation. (Youngs 24)

While Robyn Davidson is learning about the Aboriginal culture and the effects the white community has on the Aborigines, Davidson is also simultaneously exposing the reader to such knowledge. As Davidson states in the interview, she paints a clear picture of the hardships the Aborigines face. Davidson states:

The present government has made enormous cuts in the Aboriginal spending. (The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has recently been conducting a survey of Australian Aborigines. In the housing section, the question was asked, ‘How many Aborigines are homeless?’ In another section ‘homeless’ was defined as not including people living in humpies, lean-tos, tin shelters or car bodies.) (61)

As a reader it is interesting to learn that the government of Australia and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs are slowly disregarding the well-being of the Aboriginal people, as the survey dismisses the notion that the Aboriginal people are still without a home and essentially homeless, even though they have a weak and temporary shelter over their heads. Davidson clearly portrays how the culture of the Aborigines is slowly being destroyed. As the Australian government takes away land the Aborigines are set up in camps and forced to withstand poor conditions. Davidson explains, “There 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” (58). According to the author of the article, “Post Colonial Responses to White Australia,” Davidson presents “the issues of injustice, and thereby allowing readers the opportunity to know her point of view on the social conditions in contemporary Australian society” (Goodspeed-Chadwick 213). It is not surprising that Davidson would want to voice her opinion, but by informing the reader about the harsh treatment the Aborigines face, Davidson allows the reader to be aware of the negative effects the white community can have on an innocent group of people. Particularly as a reader from America, one can relate the treatment of the Australian Aborigines to the treatment of Native Americans, as the cultures are both disregarded and gradually destroyed by greed.

Throughout *Tracks* Davidson also reveals the intense racism the white population of Australia displays toward the Aborigines. One source of the stereotypes Davidson blames is the media, as she admits to being exposed to prejudicial remarks about the Aborigines miles away from Alice Springs. Davidson states:

> Even back in the city where the man in the street was unlikely ever to have seen an Aborigine, let alone spoken to one, that same man could talk at length, with an extraordinary contempt, about what they were like, how lazy and unintelligent they were. This was because of the press, where clichéd images of dirty, stone-age drunks on the dole were about the only coverage the Aborigines got. (22)

The Aborigines seem to be greatly misunderstood and misrepresented; as a result, the white population as a whole supports and encourages prejudices of the innocent people. Even when Davidson is in the midst of making her way toward Alice Springs by train, she is confronted by prejudicial remarks. After she explains to the man where she is
heading, he states, “Jesus Christ, mate, you’re not goin’ to the Alice alone are ya? Listen ’ere, lady, you’re fuckin’ done for. Them coons’ll rape youze for sure. Fuckin’ niggers run wild up there ya know” (Davidson 21). In *Tracks*, Davidson does not include a blatant remark regarding the man’s statement, which allows the reader to form his own opinion. It is clear that Davidson tries to prevent from pushing onto the reader her own thoughts and disgust with the average Australian’s prejudices toward Aborigines. Instead, Davidson attempts to make the reader aware of the prejudices, and by supplying the reader with both stereotypes and truth about the culture, the reader will be thoroughly educated and have enough information to form his own opinions.

While exposing the reader to the racism and tragic devastation of the Aborigines, Davidson also educates the reader about the Aboriginal community and culture. This allows the reader to further understand and conclude that the Aborigines are in fact innocent people who deserve respect. Davidson reveals that many people have formed misconceptions about Aboriginal women. She explains, “Women hold a very strong position in Aboriginal society. While men and women have separate roles, necessitated by environment, their roles are part of a single function – to survive – and both are mutually respected” (Davidson 174). The idea that women are lesser beings than men is often associated with uncivilized societies. By providing the reader with the importance and equality of women within the Aboriginal culture, Davidson reveals quality of the Aboriginal community. She also disproves the idea that the Aborigines live like wild animals, when in fact they have a structured society with respected roles.

Along with the importance of women within the Aboriginal society, Davidson also expresses the connection the Aborigines have with the land of Australia. Davidson
states, “Ceremonies are the visible link between Aboriginal people and their land. Once dispossessed of this land, ceremonial life deteriorates, people lose their strength, meaning, essence and identity” (172). Davidson makes it clear that the land is extremely important to the Aboriginal people and their culture, and “by denying them their land, we are committing cultural and, in this case, racial genocide” (172). Through Davidson’s explanations of the Aboriginal culture, the reader becomes aware of the seriousness of the land restrictions the Australian government is setting. With the continuation of disregard for the Aboriginal people, the white community is ruining an innocent culture and destroying a society that could potentially teach the world the essence of life. In fact, the Aborigines were actually one of the most influential aspects of Davidson’s trip. Before Davidson spent quality time with an Aboriginal man named Eddie, Davidson was more concerned with time and procedures, but after some time with Eddie, Davidson states, “Time melted – became meaningless. I don’t think I have ever felt so good in my entire life. He made me notice things I had not noticed before – noises, tracks. And I began to see how it all fit together” (178-179). With the help of Eddie, Davidson was able to focus on the little things that are usually overlooked. Without the worry of time and tedious procedures, her trip became less stressful and she actually began to enjoy herself. A scholar expresses, “It is by paying attention to Aboriginal culture that Davidson learns how to conceptualize the changing sense of self and environment that develops as she interacts with the desert” (Porter 42). Due to her interactions with the Aborigines and the process of learning about their culture, Davidson learns to appreciate herself and the experiences she faces while traveling across the desert. If people had the opportunity to learn from the Aborigines as Robyn Davidson, the world would have the potential of
being a better place. The white society would no longer be obsessed with time and influenced by greed; instead, society would appreciate the small gifts the world provides and essentially enjoy the experience of life.

In the book *Tracks*, femininity is another aspect that contributes to the work’s complexity, while also presenting the reader with the potential of relating to the text. A scholar states, “*Tracks* is an interesting translation of gender core because despite the courageous, adventurous and ‘masculine’ nature of her solo journey, the text still manages to disrupt the overwhelmingly ‘manly’ gaze of the travelogue” (Lisle 73). Robyn Davidson’s femininity plays a major role throughout her journey, while it also greatly influences an adjustment within the travel literature genre. One major benefit that is produced due to Davidson’s femininity is her ability to gain more access to the Aboriginal people and culture, which white males are often denied. Davidson states when discussing the Aboriginal women, “contrary to what most white male anthropologists would have us believe, women hold a very strong position in Aboriginal society” (174). According to Davidson, the Aboriginal women along with the Aboriginal society as a whole are being misrepresented by white male anthropologists. Even though Davidson does not state the reasons for the skewed picture, it becomes clear that gender is the major factor that prevents white males from gaining access to the Aboriginal culture and contributes to the failure of connecting with the Aborigines through a common understanding and sympathy with inferiority. Since white males are denied the access of the Aboriginal culture, they are ultimately forced to make assumptions based solely on observations, rather than first-hand accounts. On the other hand, as a woman, Davidson is able to experience a dance ceremony and connect with the Aboriginal
women. Davidson expresses, “I melted into a feeling of belonging. They were letting me into their world” (152). Although Davidson is still a foreigner among the Aborigines, she is able to capture a moment of acceptance within the circle of Aboriginal women.

Robyn Davidson also gains a connection with the entire Aboriginal society, since she can relate to the hardships the Aborigines must face due to the domination of the white male world. Women in general face many setbacks as a result of their sex and the consequence of often being inferior to men. Furthermore, a woman such as Robyn Davidson is more likely to be able to sympathize and gain a deeper understanding with the Aborigines than a male from the so-called superior race. The Aborigines are continually forced to cope with the prejudices and misrepresentations from the surrounding white community. While presenting her plan of camping with the Aborigines to the locals, Davidson states:

> Everyone, from the chronic drunks to the stony men and women with brown wrinkled faces and burnt-out expressions, to the waiters in tuxedos who served and consumed enormous amount of alcohol, all of them warned me against it. The blacks were unequivocally the enemy. Dirty, lazy, dangerous animals.

(22)

Davidson can connect with the Aborigines because she is also faced with the feeling of being inferior to white males, as well as being misrepresented to the entire society. Throughout Davidson’s preparation and journey she is forced to frequently confront the men who question her abilities. In Alice Springs, a few police officers state, “You haven’t got a chance, you know, even men have died out there” (Davidson 79). Many locals of Alice Springs viewed Davidson’s journey as unrealistic with the full potential of
failure, simply because Davidson is a woman. Davidson is also faced with misrepresentations of the reasons for her trip, as the public cannot seem to grasp why a woman would want to possibly risk her life in a trek across the Outback. Davidson states:

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 threatened, jealous or inspired; some thought it a joke. (101)

No matter what society may think of Davidson, she is still set apart from the ‘norms’ of society and ultimately misunderstood, much like the Aboriginal people. As a result, Davidson is able to demonstrate a connection with the Aborigines and eventually realizes there are unfortunately too many differences between the Aboriginal culture and the standards of the industrialized society. Davidson states:

I also realized that coverage in a conservative magazine like Geographic would do the people no good at all, no matter how I wrote the article. They would remain quaint primitives to be gawked at by readers who couldn’t really give a damn what was happening to them. (149)

While being able to connect and relate to the Aborigines’ struggles with misconceptions and prejudices from the white male society, Davidson is able to reach the conclusion that no matter how she might attempt to educate the mass population about the Aboriginal culture, her knowledge and understanding will fail to promote a call to action and improvements between the two societies would continue to be nonexistent. According to Eleanor Porter, author of the article “Mother Earth and the Wandering Hero,” Davidson
“does not claim equivalence but uses her own experience of difference to inform her understanding of theirs [the Aborigines]” (43). As Davidson is aware and faces the effects of the continual battle between the two sexes among the general society, she is able to reflect on her experiences and knowledge in order to understand and connect with the Aboriginal people. Like Porter suggests, she never once expresses that the hardships faced by women are equal to that of the Aborigines; instead, she simply applies her experiences of inferiority and allows herself to witness the truth about the Aboriginal culture.

The fact that Robyn Davidson is female also promotes unwanted publicity and attention throughout her journey. Davidson continually struggles with the hype and glorification of her journey as her travels “through the outback becomes a tourist attraction” (Smith 56). With the exposure of the media including National Geographic and the curiosity of the tourists, Davidson’s trip becomes complicated and stripped of its original meaning. Davidson has a hard time understanding why people are so wrapped up in a woman traveling through the outback. Davidson states:

   Why was everyone so goddamn 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 … The trip was beginning to lose its simplicity. (101)

As Davidson continues to struggle to comprehend why so many people are interested in her travels, the attention and publicity only intensifies throughout her journey, since she is a woman surviving through the extreme measures the desert provides. A scholar states,
“As a woman traveler, Davidson must contend with being categorized as something special, something mythical, and something extraordinary” (Lisle 74). Davidson is consequently widely known as the ‘camel lady’ and her simple identity is lost. In Davidson’s eyes, the identity of the ‘camel lady’ has a negative connotation, while she also suggests that a man on the same journey would not have been affected. She states:

And that term ‘camel LADY’. Had I been a man, I’d be lucky to get a mention in the *Wiluna Times*, let alone international press coverage. Neither could I imagine them coining the phrase ‘camel gentleman’. ‘Camel lady’ had that nice patronizing belittling ring to it. Labeling, pigeon-holing – what a splendid trick it is. (Davidson 238)

If Davidson were a man, the publicity would probably have been extremely limited and it is frustrating to Davidson that simply because she is a woman, her journey as well as her identity is branded as extraordinary. Even though she is not fond of her new identity, Davidson does realize that the message the identity represents has the potential of benefiting women as a whole. Davidson states:

I was now public property. I was now a kind of symbol. I was now an object of ridicule for small-minded sexists, and I was a crazy, irresponsible adventurer (though not as crazy as I would have been had I failed). But worse than all that, I was now a mythical being who had done something courageous and outside the possibilities that ordinary people could hope for. And that was the antithesis of what I wanted to share. That anyone could do anything. If I could bumble my way across a desert, then anyone could do anything. And that was
true especially for women, who have used cowardice for so long to protect themselves that it has become a habit. (237-238)

Although it may seem that Davidson’s travels revolve around the image of the ‘camel lady,’ the successful completion of the journey proves that women can step out of their comfort zones and challenge the male world with success.

Femininity not only promotes benefits and challenges throughout Robyn Davidson’s journey, but on a larger scale, Tracks’ feminine attribute also contributes to a change within the travel literature genre. By adding women travel writers to a generally male dominant genre, new elements of the texts are illustrated and distinctions between female and male texts are made. Traveling itself is considered a masculine activity and when women survive “the rigorous travels that only men are supposedly capable of” (Lisle, 71), they challenge the general expectations and are labeled extraordinary. As Davidson survives the struggles she faces throughout her journey across the outback, she is overwhelmed by the publicity and the concept of being labeled the ‘camel lady.’

Moreover, because Davidson is marked as extraordinary and becomes a mythical symbol as the ‘camel lady,’ she is ultimately separated from the norms and “identified against women rather than with them” (Porter 44). On the other hand, while men attempt new and adventurous journeys, they are simply labeled as heroic and audacious and not necessarily distinguished separately from society. According to the author of the book Moving Lives:

One of the most distinguishing differences between woman as adventurer-traveler and man as adventurer-traveler is that he becomes even more what he is naturally understood to be, while she un-becomes the feminized woman trapped
in her reliance upon rituals, spectacles, and degraded embodiment of normative femininity. She becomes other to herself. (Smith 62)

In order to survive the harsh conditions of the desert, Davidson is forced to adapt and essentially become more masculine. Davidson states:

   My threshold had reached absurd heights. I had always been jealously in awe of people (particularly men) who could hurt themselves, and pretend they didn’t feel it. Now I was the same. I would cut scrape a great wedge of flesh out and just murmur ‘oops’ and promptly forget about it. (193)

As Davidson continually gains physical strength and feels “like a cast-iron amazon” (123), she slowly recedes from society’s standards of a woman and corresponds more with men. But no matter how masculine a woman traveler may become, there are still some aspects that continue to separate male and female travelers. A scholar states:

   Emphasis on the special conditions attaching to the female body features in the texts in description of physical conditions encountered and managed by the travelers. Although the more intimate details are omitted (how, for example did they cope with menstruation?), there is usually some reference to the difficulties faced by a woman traveling in an essentially male world. (Foster 9)

Even if the female body builds up to having the strength of a man, a woman’s body will still fail to adapt physiologically. Davidson briefly addresses the inconveniences of traveling as a woman by stating, “And what about menstrual blood? From my position, it didn’t matter a damn whether it followed the natural laws of gravity and ran down my leg, the way it was meant to do” (212). Although men also face many difficulties throughout their travels, men are usually less affected by personal hygiene. On the
contrary, women are forced to address adversities such as menstruation while traveling in a masculine world, an element that will continue to set women’s travelogues apart from travel texts by men.

Another element that women travel writers contribute to the genre is the disclosure of emotions and setbacks. The author of the book, *An Anthology of Women’s Travel Writing* states:

One of the narrative events which occur with surprising regularity in women’s travel accounts is the description of accidents and setbacks. Accidents are extremely frequent within men’s narratives, since they are often employed as incidents where the central character can display his strength and quickwittedness; however, within women’s accounts, accidents sometimes are represented without the narrator being shown in a position of power. (Foster 255)

Most male travelogues present the picture of a strong, intelligent heroic traveler who can withstand and succeed through extreme measures. Due to this image of an honorary man, if the male hero was to exhibit deep emotion or fail to gain control and power, the traveler would be labeled as weak and un-masculine. On the other hand, women are correlated with motherhood and natural sense of sentimentality. As a result, women are able to freely reveal emotions and weaknesses, while presenting the experiences of the masculine activity of travel. Throughout the text, Davidson often presents the emotional struggles and accidents that leave her powerless. At one point in her journey, Davidson begins to lose her sense of reality while her mind is in disarray. Davidson explains:

There was nothing but chaos and the voices.
The strong one, the hating one, the powerful one was mocking me, laughing at me.

‘You’ve gone too far this time. I’ve got you now and I hate you. You’re disgusting, aren’t you. You’re nothing. And I have you now, I knew it would come, sooner or later. There’s no use fighting me you know, there’s no one to help you. I’ve got you, I’ve got you.’

Another voice was calm and warm. She commanded me to lie down and be calm. She instructed me to not let go, not give in. She reassured me that I would find myself again if I could just hold on, be quiet and lie down.

The third voice was screaming. (158)

From Davidson’s state of mind it is clear that the journey through the desert is taking a toll on her emotions and affecting her ability to be rational. Davidson clearly presents herself in a situation where she is powerless and ultimately out of control. Furthermore, even though Davidson regains the strength to continue her journey, she does not glorify the recovery and present herself as a hero; instead, Davidson simply continues on with the journey as she tells herself “You must do this” (158). Davidson also reveals an emotional and powerless incident when she is forced to shoot her dog Diggity after the dog eats poisoned bait. Davidson explains:

She was on her side convulsing. I blew her brains out. I knelt frozen like that for a long time then I staggered back to the swag and got in. My body shook with uncontrollable spasms. I vomited. Sweat soaked into the pillow and blankets. I thought I was dying too. (224)
As Davidson’s body goes into shock, it is clear that Davidson is emotionally attached to Diggity, while also acknowledging her connections with the dog when she states, “Diggity had become a cherished friend rather than simply a pet” (Davidson 229). Even as Davidson maintains enough control to continue her trip after being forced to kill her dog, Davidson still reframes from glorifying her strengths and portraying herself as a potential hero. Instead, she merely allows herself to mourn the loss of her friend and then proceeds to complete her journey. The emotional appeal and the uncontrollable accidents that Davidson and other women travel writers present to the reader are an important element of travel literature because it allows the reader to view the traveler as an everyday person rather than a mythical symbol. A scholar states:

> These accounts reverberate for readers, as they do in so many stories of quests, yet perhaps they resonate more deeply because the narrators are ‘real’ people who present themselves as ordinary, not heroic or noble, in other words, not that very different from the readers and frequently bumbling and vulnerable.

(Groom 2-3)

By presenting themselves on an emotional level and as ‘real’ people, women travel writers allow the reader to have a deeper connection and understanding of the text. As a result, most readers can sympathize with the traveler and appreciate the struggles one must overcome in order to complete the journey.

A piece of travel literature could not possibly be considered good travel literature if the traveler did not demonstrate change while trying to uncover one’s true self. Author Eileen Groom explains, “Although the thought that the grass must be greener on the other side of the hill is a cliché, that cliché nevertheless finds a home in many psyches, keeps
us on the move, and plays a significant role in travel literature” (4). In search of one’s true inner self, a traveler is often driven by the dissatisfaction in his own life and sets out to seek a better understanding of the world around him. While explaining the reasons for her travels, Davidson states:

I had also been vaguely bored with my life and its repetitions – the half-finished, half-hearted attempts at different jobs and various studies; had been sick of carrying around the self-indulgent negativity which was so much the malaise of my generation, my sex and my class. (50)

Davidson is rather dissatisfied with the direction of her life, so she attempts to seek change and a better understanding of herself by setting off in an unfamiliar territory amongst people with a drastically different culture. A solo journey across the outback seems to be rather extreme when the traveler is simply trying to find a sense of self; however, self-discovery and change, as a rule of thumb, can only occur when a person is removed from comfort and familiarity. Davidson’s friend Nancy states:

It’s important that we leave each other and the comfort of it, and circle away, even though it’s hard sometimes, so that we can come back and swap information about what we’ve learnt even if what we do changes us and we risk not recognizing each other when we return. (Davidson 49)

Even though Nancy is specifically referring to herself and Davidson, the notion that one must be removed from the familiar in order to find one’s inner self and possibly change, can be applied to most travelers.

The internal journey in contrast to the external journey the traveler physically takes is an important aspect of travel literature. As the traveler experiences the journey
through the traveled land, the traveler usually also experiences a journey through his own thoughts and reflections in order to seek out a sense of self. Furthermore, from the knowledge and understanding the traveler gains throughout the trip, the traveler is typically provoked to change as he comes to realize that he is no longer the same person he was before the journey began. Robyn Davidson in *Tracks* clearly develops and expresses the internal changes that occur while she is learning about the Aborigines and trekking across the Australian desert. Before her trip began and during the preparation in Alice Springs, Davidson expresses that she is uptight and always on the defensive. She states, “my grip on reality was a little shaky … I was self-protective, suspicious and defensive and I was also aggressively ready to pounce on anyone who looked like they might be going to give me a hard time” (Davidson 48). Instead of enjoying the preparations for the trip, Davidson spends her time being on edge and stressed from the surrounding atmosphere. While leaving Alice Springs without a sense of stability, Davidson uses the journey to help clear her mind and become in touch with herself. She describes the journey as:

> A giant cleansing of all the garbage and muck that had accumulated in my brain, a gentle catharsis. And because of that, I suppose, I could now see much more clearly into my present relationship with people and with myself. And I was happy, there is simply no other word for it. (Davidson 192)

When Davidson is able to escape the hostile environment at Alice Springs, she is able to focus on herself and reflect on positive aspects of her life, while also understanding how she relates to others. While reflecting on the trip Davidson states:
I had discovered capabilities and strengths that I would not have imagined possible in those distant dream-like days before the trip. I had rediscovered people in my past and come to terms with my feelings towards them. I had learnt what love was. That love wanted the best for those you cared for even if that excluded yourself. That before, I had wanted to possess people without loving them, and now I could love them and wish them the best without needing them. I had understood freedom and security. The need to rattle the foundations of habit. That to be free one needs constant and unrelenting vigilance over one’s weaknesses. A vigilance which requires a moral energy most of us are incapable of manufacturing. We relax back into the moulds of habit. They are secure, they bind us and keep us contained at the expense of freedom. To break the moulds, to be heedless of the seductions of security is an impossible struggle, but one of the few that count. To be free is to learn, to test yourself constantly, to gamble. It is not safe. I had learnt to use my fears as stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks, and best of all I had learnt to laugh. (222-223)

The internal journey that Davidson expresses throughout *Tracks* demonstrates her ability to define and understand her inner self as a result of reflections, lessons and change. After the journey is complete, it is clear Davidson is not the same woman who first set out at Alice Springs to walk across the desert. By gaining strengths and understanding her weaknesses, Davidson develops confidence and a stable sense of self. The internal journey of finding a sense of self, coinciding with the changes Davidson expresses throughout the text, are important elements of travel literature. As Davidson reveals the process of self-discovery, she allows the reader to possibly have a sense of comfort in
knowing he is not alone in the desire to search for understanding of one’s self. In the book *Methods for Teaching Travel Literature and Writing*, Eileen Groom states:

> One of the benefits of reading literature is how it grants us a feeling of fellowship with others, in our need for perspective, another benefit is the fellowship from becoming acquainted with a narrator who, like so many if not all of us, experience restlessness, accompanied by a need to belong and a wrinkled sense of who we are. (6)

While the reader develops comfort with the author and relates to the traveler’s want to define himself, the reader is influenced to potentially change with the traveler. In *Abroad* Fussell states, “And if the enterprise succeeds, the reader’s ‘brain’ will instinctively adjust itself to accord in some degree with the pattern established by the author’s travel, both external and internal” (204). If the travel text is constructed well and the author focuses on the internal journey in conjunction with the physical trip, the reader is likely to adopt similar changes within his own mind. The text *Tracks* clearly portrays Davidson’s internal journey; therefore, the reader is provoked to search within his own mind and construct a better sense of self.

Even though the argument stands that travel literature demonstrates many complex elements, enabling it to be considered good literature in general, it is still important to face one negative aspect of the genre. Many critics of the travel literature genre claim the authors are not completely reliable and fail to supply the reader with the truth of the journey. Throughout the processes of traveling and even when writing the text, the author has many choices to make. But one question that is often raised is whether or not these choices alter the truth of the journey. A travel writer can be
compared to a photographer, since both the travel writer and the photographer only
capture mere glimpses of the actual event that occurs. When a photographer takes a
picture, the picture only represents one moment of time. Likewise, a travel writer is only
able to supply the reader with brief moments and details of the journey. Due to the
choices and the control the author has over the text, as a reader it is hard not to be
skeptical about the text, making it difficult to completely trust the author. On the other
hand, a scholar states, “likewise, but on a more general level, the travel writers of the late
twentieth and early twenty-first century are aware that what they present to the reader is
‘an arbitrary and highly specialized version of reality’” (Graulund 151). In another words,
travel literature is as truthful as the author sees it.

The choices that Davidson makes regarding her journey, and the composition of
both the National Geographic article and the book *Tracks*, tend to complicate the
reliability and truthfulness of each text. There are a lot of differences and discrepancies
between the magazine article and the book, making it hard to figure out which text is
more accurate and reliable: a magazine article that was written a few months after the trip
but went through extensive editing in order to fit the style of National Geographic, or a
book that was written three years after the journey and only based on memory. One of
the major discrepancies between the two texts is whether or not Davidson used a journal
or diary in order to recall her journey. In the National Geographic article, the introducing
quote proclaims that Davidson based the article about the journey on a diary by stating,
“Alone: daring the harsh and beautiful Australian outback, a young woman makes a
remarkable journey across half a continent. This compelling account is based on her
diaries.” The article also has the structure of a diary, since it is split into brief sections,
each with a number presenting the number of days traveled. On the other hand, in an interview, Davidson clearly states that she used very little notes and used only a few letters that she had written, while commenting on diaries by stating, “those awful boring diaries about how you feel today, so not very useful in terms of recalling things”. If Davidson is in fact telling the truth about not using any type of journal, it becomes even harder to trust the details of the journey. Even throughout *Tracks*, Davidson presents evidence of the lack of journals and diaries. She states, “Already, I had forgotten most of the days. They had sunk away from memory, leaving only a few peaks that I could recall” (Davidson 160), and “I remember that time now, as one of delightful calm. But it is a blur, it is undifferentiated” (179). The reader can commend Davidson for being honest and admitting when she does not remember an event to its fullest detail; however, her honesty also presents the reader with further skepticism on whether or not the remaining details of her journey are accurate.

Another discrepancy between the National Geographic article and *Tracks* that contributes to the overall reliability between the two texts is the fact that Davidson chooses to include or exclude certain information from each. Throughout *Tracks*, Davidson continually complains about the photographer and states, “Rick took pictures of us. We despised him for it – saw it as a form of parasitism, voyeurism” (141). Even with all the negative thoughts toward the photographer, Davidson fails to discuss the effects of having the photographer with her during the journey. A scholar states, “the text of the article does not discuss the conditions of its production; the photographer gets hardly a mention … but the book focuses upon the physical and intellectual disruption of her journey by others’ attempts to represent it” (Porter 44). Although the article and the book
represent two different aspects of Davidson’s journey, the ultimate truth of the journey will only be known by the traveler. In order to plead her case and convince the reader of the truthfulness of *Tracks*, Davidson states in an interview, “I swear to God when I wrote that book I remembered every single day of the journey with extraordinary clarity, every camp over nine months” (Youngs 25). In actuality, whether or not Davidson’s account of her journey is completely truthful does not affect the text as a whole. No matter what details or incidents are misconceived, Davidson’s overall journey still occurred and the lessons and changes that resulted from the journey exist. Furthermore, the text *Tracks* still displays many complex elements that enable the text to be considered a piece of good travel literature.

Before the extensive research of travel literature and the thorough analysis of the text *Tracks*, by Robyn Davidson, the travel literature genre was completely unheard of and even overlooked by a college literature major. Although travel literature is often confused with guidebooks, the texts of the genre prove to consist of complex structures and elements that touristy guidebooks fail to present. *Tracks* clearly demonstrates the important qualities of travel literature and why travel literature is a significant genre. *Tracks* like most travel literature also presents intricate topics such as the traveler versus the tourist, aspects of a foreign culture, gender issues, the struggles with change and the consequences of choice. While the travel writer develops the complex topics throughout the travelogue and reveals an internal journey coincided with the physical journey, the reader is often influenced to simultaneously examine his own mind. Moreover, the travel text can attain the emotional appeal of the reader, as long as the reader obtains a connection with the author while they travel concurrently in search for a sense of self.
Due to the complex elements travel literature presents and the connections the author obtains with the reader, the travel literature genre proves to be as captivating and influential as any other genre. As a result, the travel literature genre deserves the utmost respect and should no longer be overlooked.
The Afterward

The process of writing this paper was actually a lot easier than I had expected. At first when the professor announced that the page requirement for the thesis was 25-30 pages, while expressing that the ideal amount would be 30-35 pages, I just chuckled to myself with a ‘yeah right’ type attitude. The idea of writing 20 pages on travel literature seemed like torture enough; however, once I read *Tracks* and began the process of analyzing the text, I came to realize there was actually a great amount of substance being revealed throughout the text. I also thought the thesis was going to be difficult due to the fact that there is not much scholarly works on travel literature. Although there are several strong works that pertain to *Tracks*, most of the works only briefly analyze the text while others simply mention the text or the author in a few sentences. On the other hand, the benefit of having a small amount of research to refer to, allowed me to have more freedom in construct my analysis of the text. Overall, writing the paper was a journey in itself, and like a traveler, by being exposed to an extreme situation (the pressure of having to write a thesis in less than sixteen weeks), I have come to realize my strengths and weaknesses while ultimately exceeding the expectations I had set for myself.
Bibliography


*This source is an anthology of literature. It is a collection of both contemporary and traditional literature in order to give the reader a taste of different genres. Not only does this anthology include many excerpts, but it also includes essays that help aide the reader in becoming a better interpreter and analyzer of literature. Even though it did not contain travel literature, it was useful when trying to define good literature and literature in general.*


*Robyn Davidson wrote the article before the book Tracks as a part of the contract with National Geographic in order to receive funding. For this thesis, the article was used to compare to the book since the article was written shortly following Davidson’s trip while the book was written about three years after the trip.*


*A travel literature text that expresses author’s Robyn Davidson’s experiences and reflections of her travels across Australia. The text contains many elements such as the ideas of fate and destiny, gender issues, the concept of tourism and the Aboriginal culture.*

This source includes excerpts from many women’s travel writing including Robyn Davidson. Although this source does not specifically discuss Tracks in great detail, it does contain a rather extensive analysis on aspects of women travel writings including the difficulties women face as travelers and overcoming the masculine ideals set on traveling. This source is extremely helpful when comparing various women authors with a multitude of experiences and views.


When looking at the concept of travel literature and defining what texts of this genre may include, this source would be extremely helpful. Even though Fussell concentrates on British traveling between wars, the ideas and characteristics Fussell describes throughout the book help clearly shape and define the travel literature genre.


This book looks at the beginnings and the evolution of travel literature. The source was extremely useful in defining the characteristics of a tourist while also expressing the negative aspects that Fussell relates to tourism. In general, the book includes excerpts of different travel texts and would be a good source for getting a taste of the genre.


This journal article specifically looks at “contemporary Australian works” that seem to express the effects of broken families and communities within Australian. One of the
works looked at is Tracks by Robyn Davidson. In regards to Tracks, the article discusses the gender and race issues addressed in Davidson’s work.


The article was extremely helpful when analyzing why Davidson made the choice to travel across the desert. Also, the article addresses the concept of authenticity according to travel literature and what it means to the travel writers as well as the readers.


The book describes and explains how to teach travel literature as a class. Not only does the book include sample courses but it also addresses several concerns in regards to travel literature. Although this book pertained to teaching travel literature, it was still useful when trying to define good travel literature as well as the relationship between the writer of the text and the reader.


This source was not all that helpful in regards to travel literature. The article discussed children’s reading levels and how it is important for children to read books according to their reading development since reading draws on a child’s general knowledge. Even though this source did not pertain to travel literature specifically, it helped define the idea of good literature.

The article looks at the “conflicting representations of masculinity and femininity” in travel literature. With pertaining to Tracks, this source helped highlight both the masculine and feminine qualities Davidson pertains. Also, the article also illustrates the many difficulties Davidson faced as being a woman traveling across Australia alone.


This source focuses on the idea of a female nomad while comparing the works of Bruce Chatwin and Robyn Davidson. When discussing Tracks, the author discusses Davidson’s decision about National Geographic and about the changes the Aborigines provoked in her. In doing so this article suggests that there are many different aspects that contribute to traveling.


Keyword: Robyn Davidson.


The interview was extremely helpful in answering questions about the book Tracks and even about the magazine article. It was here that I learned about Davidson’s reasons for writing a book and whether or not she kept notes during her trip. The interview also helps
expand on some topics brought up in Tracks, such as the Aborigines and the choice of signing a contract with the National Geographic magazine.