GENDER AND THE NEW NATURE WRITING

This talk has its origins in a series of blog posts I wrote about gender and new nature writing. I became interested in the topic when I read Adam Nicolson's *Sea Room* (2001), his book about the Shiants. *Sea Room* is in many ways an interesting book, and appealing particularly for those of us who like to imagine the occasional escape from it all to an uninhabited island. Yet after a while I was particularly struck by how *gendered* Nicolson's experiences and his descriptions of the nonhuman natural world are. In fact, the narrative of the young explorer growing up – becoming a man – in the wilderness continually shows through in the book. For instance, Nicolson repeatedly calls the Shiants "a young man's place" (4) producing, "experiences [that] are wonderful for the kind of immature young men my family seems to produce" (347).

Today, I'll be arguing that new British nature writing is shaped by traditional explorer narratives that propagate a masculine experience of nature. This, I'll suggest, leads to a preferring of certain types of landscapes and ways of experiencing them which in turn influences contemporary perceptions of what we see as worthwhile nature.

Of the works I'll be exploring today, *Sea Room* is the most explicitly gendered – both in respect to stereotypical masculine experiences and in respect to masculinizing or feminizing the landscape. Yet, as I'll argue, in many of the works that have come to be known as new nature writing a similar gendered dimension appears, and authors such as Kathleen Jamie explicitly engage with it. At the same time, it's an incredibly complex topic, and – as responses to my blog posts showed – also an incredibly sensitive topic. One, female, reader

commented: “I enjoy nature writing and in particular that written by women, but have shied away from most of the work written by men without really understanding why. However recently I started reading Barry Lopez after seeing some wonderful quotes in a review by someone who has read a lot of his essays, not just on nature. I think it is this cross-over into something I can only refer to as *sensitivity to humanity* that sets him apart, or for me makes him as equally accessible and enjoyable as the women writers. Barry Lopez is the first in this genre I have come across”.[1] Another – male – commenter shared his impatience with what he called “the cold reaches in to my core, it’s so painful, oh woe is me” kind of writing of some male authors.

Of course I realize that there is a real danger of generalising when exploring this topic. One of the reasons why I think this is such a complex subject is that for many people it’s also a very personal subject. While thinking about this, I cannot help thinking about the way in which my own gender shapes my experiences – something I’m certainly not always happy about. Moreover, there’s a real tension between on the one hand the explorer narrative that I’ll argue much new nature writing is shaped by, and contemporary accepted views of masculinities. Although the explorer-type of masculinity is arguably still the hegemonic masculinity, in many social layers and groups, explicit masculinity of that kind is not accepted or desired. My argument moves back and forth between on the one hand recognizing dichotomies, and the other hand being open to and taking into account the ways in which they are both problematic and destabilized by other narratives.

[1] Claire, 11 February 2014.

Throughout I'll be using the term "new nature writing" to refer to the works I'm discussing. Although less so than gender, the concept of new nature writing is not without its problems. Various critics have defined it as both different from old nature writing, although others suggest it's really not that different. As Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford have suggested in their introduction to the *Green Letters* special issue on the topic, "not much" is new about new nature writing. Others have suggested that new nature writing is modest, personal, intimate and cautious in its approach, deals particularly with the local and intimate, is written in the first person, and experiments with a variety of genres, which are often combined. At the same time, new nature writing is also suggested to be motivated by the global challenge of environmental crisis (Hunt). This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of this term, and whether such a thing as *new nature writing* even exists, or if it's something made up by *Granta* magazine, critics and reviewers. So I'll be using the term loosely, to refer to works by Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Jean Sprackland, Roger Deakin and others that were published since roughly the turn of the century. Although I won't try to define these works, what they share is a higher level of attunement to the human dimension of natural landscapes. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts' *Edgelands* is one of the most explicit examples of this, of course, but a similar sensitivity surfaces in the works of the others I mentioned as well.

Feminist geography and rural studies

Although ecocriticism, ecofeminism and related disciplines have also explored the intersections of gender and nature over the past decades, I've found feminist

geography and rural studies particularly useful for this paper, especially in relation to the ways in which our experiences of nature have been gendered. Feminist geography, which emerged in the 1980s, has a number of aims, such as remedying the lack of attention in geographical work on issues such as childcare and domestic work. More recent work has shifted emphasis from gender roles – which are relatively static – to gender relations – how male power is established and maintained. Particularly valuable in the context of this talk is the way feminist geographers challenge that there is one way of looking at the nonhuman natural world. Being aware of this also means recognizing that knowledge is subjective, and that indeed we may be so influenced by our cultural codes that we read certain gender relations into situations and descriptions that are not inherently gendered – if that is even possible. Moreover, such a perspective emphasizes the pluriformity of these perspectives. For instance, both feminist geographers and rural scholars talk about *masculinities* and *femininities*, plural, rather than the singular *masculinity* and *femininity*.

Not only is gender constructed and pluriform, it is also tied to specific places and situations. Masculinity, Bob Connell proposes, is **[SLIDE]** "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (71). Masculinity – as much as femininity, for which this definition is also applicable –, then, is shaped by a practice and performance of certain roles, and the ways in which these intersect with bodily experiences, personalities and cultures. Nonetheless, as Connell also notes, at certain times and places some forms of masculinity are more accepted or preferred than others: many people's ideas about masculinity may, for

instance, be different from the kinds of masculinity celebrated by extreme bodybuilders. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell proposes, "is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations" (74). Hegemonic masculinity, then, is the version of masculinity that is regarded as normal or natural.

Indeed, as ideals of masculinity develop, and what is dominant or hegemonic changes, masculinities may conflict. Discussing the development of the American Geographical Society from the 1860s to the 1890s, Karen Morin notes that what she and others have called a "crisis in manhood" in this period led to an emphasis away from a geography focused on statistics, to a geography focused on exploration. Without wanting to suggest that we are experiencing a similar "crisis in manhood" today, some of the comments I received about this topic point to something like that nonetheless. Although many Western cultural images and narratives continue to propagate a distinct type of masculinity – associated with hardiness and strength, but also with working outside of the home and engaging in 'masculine' activities – many contemporary men do not feel comfortable with this image, and do not strive to attain it. Consequently, the hegemonic masculinity clashes with what may, particularly in certain social groups, be seen as another favoured masculinity.

Conceptions of masculinity, as well as femininity, then, take place on various levels: on the one hand, certain male behaviour is expected in certain places, while on the other, certain places and environments themselves dictate certain conceptions of masculinity. Hugh Campbell and Michael Mayerfeld Bell have tried to tease these two dimensions apart by distinguishing between, in

relation to rural studies, *the masculine in the rural* and *the rural in the masculine*. The masculine in the rural refers to "the various ways in which masculinity is constructed within … rural spaces and sites" (540). An example of that would be, as they note, the fact that the farmer is commonly constructed as "he". The rural in the masculine, on the other hand, refers to the ways "in which notions of rurality help constitute notions of masculinity" (540). As examples of the rural in the masculine Campbell and Bell refer to images like the Marlboro cowboy, pioneers and warriors. Significantly, whereas the masculine in the rural is explicitly tied to the rural environment, in the rural in the masculine this connection has been loosened, and images originally associated with men-in-the-countryside, such as the Marlboro man or the pioneer, have come to influence the perception and behaviour of men in urban settings.

These ideas from feminist geography and rural studies form the background against which I now want to explore new nature writing. As I said, I'll be focusing on two specific elements: firstly, gendered <u>experiences</u> of the landscapes, particularly in relation to exploration *beyond the local*, and secondly, the issue of a female (new) nature writing <u>tradition</u> and the possibility or impossibility of speaking about particularly feminine ways of writing about the nonhuman natural environment.

New nature writing, gender and the narrative of exploration beyond the local

A significant proportion of new nature writing, and particularly that written by men, takes place beyond the immediate local, or home, environment. As I'll discuss later, many of these narratives take the shape of journeys which, even though that's certainly not always the case, suggests longer stretches of time

spend away from home – something that, as Kathleen Jamie notes is not possible for her as a mother.

At the same time, it is also precisely this narrative of exploration that has traditionally dominated masculine experiences with the nonhuman natural world. Consequently, by drawing on and echoing this narrative, even accidentally, a considerable portion of new nature writing written by men replicates traditional explorer narratives and with that potentially problematic gender conceptions – problematic for both men and women.

Adventure itself is, as critics such as Richard Phillips note, "in general, a 'masculinist' narrative" (Phillips 591). As both historical research and work on contemporary outdoor pursuits demonstrates, many narratives of adventure and exploration replicate a traditional type of narrative often associated with Victorian and imperialist exploration. The Victorian adventure tale – both fictional and nonfictional – generally presented "a male hero who was strong, courageous and persistent, in search of gold, land or other imperial dreams" (Morin 2008 908). The struggles that these heroes inevitably went through, Lisa Bloom notes, "served as 'trophies' of masculinity" (qtd in Morin 2008 908). In discussing R.M. Ballantyne's *The Young Fur Traders* as an example of Victorian adventure fiction, Phillips echoes the 'trophy'-idea by suggesting that adventure and exploration served as middle-class rites of passage. The way in which this happens is through both the absolute absence of sex, and the role of the landscape. As Phillips holds, "[t]he adventurer's manhood is constructed, naturalised and normalised in and through the setting" (598). The masculinities presented in these explorer narratives, then, function on both the level of the *masculine in the rural* – the archetypal explorer is male – as well as on the level

of the *rural in the masculine* – the figure of the explorer becomes synonymous with hardiness and toughness, even outside of the context of exploration.

At the same time, as Phillips notes in respect to Ballantyne's fiction, and much scholarship about historical exploration emphasizes, these adventure narratives show a general absence of women. Rather than defining the masculine in direct relation to the feminine, as would be the case if traditional female roles were also mentioned, it is defined through the *absence* of women. Yet the feminine here is not deliberately ignored to emphasize the masculine. Rather, in both traditional explorer narratives as well as in contemporary rural spaces women are often less visible because they are simply not there. Partly this may be a result of certain landscapes, including rural, being perceived as more dangerous to women than to men – a point which I'll get back to. Also, even for children, as research has shown, the countryside and related activities, are seen as more appropriate for boys than for girls (Jones).

The absence of women in rural narratives is also a consequence of the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles in the countryside. In the mid-1990s Jo Little and Patricia Austin researched the relation between gender roles and the "rural idyll", what they define as "the positive images surrounding many aspects of the rural lifestyle, community and landscape, reinforcing, at its simplest, healthy, peaceful secure and prosperous representations of rurality" (101). These associations are instrumental in shaping and sustaining patriarchal gender relations. For instance, from interviews with women living in a small village it appears that both those who grew up there, as well as those who moved into the area more recently, name "a better environment for children" as one of the reasons for living in the village. At the same this, it is this belief – and the

related associations captured by the term "rural idyll" – that lead to traditional, and often limiting, gender roles. The absence of sufficient childcare and paid work in the village itself lead the majority of women interviewed to stay at home with their children. Furthermore, adhering to these traditional gender roles turns out to be vital to experiencing the rural idyll: without having children, many of them concede, they'd not reap the benefits of particularly the tightly-knit community that they see as an important part of the rural idyll. The relative invisibility of women in the countryside is hence a consequence of and accessory to traditional gender roles. Interestingly, this aspect is also reflected in some new nature writing, for instance in Hugh Thomson's *The Green Road into the Trees*, which recently won the first Wainwright Prize for UK Nature & Travel Writing.[2] In it, Thomson travels through England, following mainly prehistoric roads. Interestingly, of all the people he meets, only a few are women. The reason for this is that those people he talks to are generally people who work the land in some way, such as gamekeepers and farmers, and these are generally male.

Against this framework of adventure and exploration I now want to posit a crude dichotomy of male and female new nature writing. In terms of the narrative of exploration in new nature writing, a distinction can be made between those *going away* to discover or engage with nature, and those *staying put* to do so. This dichotomy runs largely along gender lines. For instance, in writings by male new nature writers such as Macfarlane, Thomson and Nicolson, as well as Simon Armitage, Farley and Symmons Roberts the journey motif dominates. Framing their experiences as journeys – and structuring the books

[2] Full shortlist: Charlotte Higgins, *Under Another Sky*; Patrick Barkham, *Badgerlands*; Esther Woolfson, *Field Notes from a Hidden City*; Simon Armitage, *Walking Home*; Hugh Thomson, *The Green Road into the Trees*; Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*.

accordingly – suggests the ability to spend a longer period of time from home. Not only does this motif, then, echo traditional narratives of exploration, it also implies the absence of financial, racial, gender and other constraints, including family responsibilities. Works by Kathleen Jamie, Jean Sprackland and Esther Woolfson on the other hand, are structured as essays and, in the case of Woolfson, diary entries. Even though Jamie undertakes journeys as well, the way in which the book is structured suggests, and also reflects, that these are not explorations and adventures of the Victorian kind, but rather more brief outings whenever domestic responsibilities allow. The structural restraint of a collection of essays consequently echoes the physical, material and domestic constraints these female authors experience. Both in their form and use of the journey motif, then, new nature writing echoes, even replicates, the dichotomy of the private and the public that in early Victorian geography determined the natural history studied by women – in private – and that by men – in public.

A stock feature of exploration and adventure are the hardships suffered by the explorers. Although new nature writing generally does not take the form of a battle with nature, experiencing hardships and potentially dangerous situations are often part of the genre nonetheless. Of these hardships, sleeping outdoors is generally the most common: although probably not the most risky of outdoors activities, it is something that the majority of contemporary *male* nature writers I've explored engage in and none of the women. Another stock feature of nature writing, including *new* nature writing, is seeking out remote locations. This is the celebration of feeling completely detached from the world *outside* of the natural space – what Macfarlane in *The Wild Places* describes as the inability to even *think* outside of it (60). Jamie, on the other hand, seems to have

a hard time experiencing this level of forgetting. During a trip to the Shetlands, for instance, contemplating nature has to compete with picking out a plastic tiara for her daughter (*Findings* 23).

Of all the works that I'm discussing today, *Sea Room* is probably the one which is both most explicitly gendered in a masculine sense, and the one which draws most explicitly on explorer narratives. Just as both the journeys themselves as well as the locations Victorian adventurers explored were out of bounds for women, so are the Shiants. Describing the rough living arrangements on the islands, Nicolson concludes:

> I don't mind this crudity. It is quite unfeminine… Women don't like it much. Compton MacKenzie [one of the first owners] could never persuade his wife to stay here with him. My own mother only went once and never again. Sarah, my wife, has braved it twice but not with much enthusiasm and will not, I think, return.…Of course, for centuries it must have been as much woman's as man's country, but the islands' modern isolation has masculine them, as though they have become part of the sea, which is the male domain" (65)

Indeed the landscape of the Shiants itself is explicitly gendered by Nicolson: he describes the sea as male and as characterized by "its masculine severity" (43). The Shiants themselves, on the other hand, are "stretching their arms around me", with one of the three islands – Mary Island – being "the sweetest, the softest, the lowest, the most feminine and most fertile" (44). Another remarkable instance of the gendering of the landscape occurs when Nicolson describes the last family to live permanently on the islands. In his story about the family's two daughters – so attractive that they lured young fishermen to the islands, and, in

some cases, their deaths – Nicolson describes both the island and the young women as sirens, displaying the "excited sexual naughtiness [that] was common among Hebridean girls" (329).

In gendering the landscape, Nicolson's narrative also echoes the way in which the landscape itself was commonly feminised in narratives of exploration and adventure. Discussing the roots of modern, Cheryl McEwan notes how "[a] powerful parallel existed between geographical conquest and sexual conquest: landscapes were feminized, penetrated, assaulted, conquered and subdued" (218). Similarly, Jay Griffiths suggests that "the land was female to the explorers because it was inconstant, unpredictable, unfixed" (293).

Yet landscapes can also be gendered without explicit reference being made to masculinity or femininity. A landscape can also be gendered in terms of being hostile to women – or, less frequently, men. In *Wanderlust* Rebecca Solnit suggests that walking in itself – taking part in the public space – has long been problematic for women, and continues to be so: "Women have routinely been punished and intimidated for attempting that most simple of freedoms, taking a walk, because their walking and indeed their very beings have been construed as inevitably, continually sexual in those societies concerned with controlling women's sexuality" (233). Indeed she notices that in the history of walking that she's been tracing, the principal figures are men. Describing her own experiences of harassment and intimidation in public spaces, Solnit concludes that "[h]aving met so many predators, I learned to think like prey, as have most women, though fear is far more minor an element of my everyday awareness than it was when I

was in my twenties" (242).[3] Indeed certain contemporary acts of exploration are off-limits, or potentially more dangerous, to women. In their discussion of narratives of urban exploration, or urbex, Carrie Mott and Susan Richards note that many spaces of exploration do not hold the same meanings or risks to everyone. Yet this doesn't just go for the drains, sewers and construction sites favoured by – male – urbexers. A similar emphasis on the dangers that typical explorer behaviour holds for women, and the constraints that keeps them from going away, recurs in the writings of female nature writers. Jamie engages with this most explicitly.

In her essay "Markings", from her 2005 collection *Findings*, Jamie describes an activity typical for nature writing: walking alone in the hills. Although she acknowledges that she's not used to being out in the hills on her own, and that she feels unnerved when she can't see the place she started out from anymore, she also enjoys the experience and the landscape. This feeling is rudely interrupted when she sees movement a little way off. Her description of this experience is full of gender references:

> as I was standing there, thinking these grand thoughts, something in the glen moved and my heart lurched. I took it at first for a man, a lone hillwalker or a shepherd. A man's presence wouldn't have surprised me much. A lone woman's would. My first mothlike instinct– don't know why – was to hide myself, but I was standing on the skyline, obvious to anyone

[3] The description of "women as prey" is echoed by Griffiths who describes the figure of the – always male – explorer in the wild lands she travels: "With few exceptions, men seem to want to be more predatory than a wilderness, to 'conquer' it. Ask women, and perhaps they understand more quickly how they might be prey; how to hide, be silent, not to obtrude, to draw no attention to yourself, listening like a deer or hare" (145-46). Women, Griffiths implies, might actually make better hunters precisely because they have traditionally not been hunters but prey.

> below. Instead I lifted the binoculars and focused – but it was only a cow, a sleek grey cow, paddling in the river (119)

Thinking back on this later, she writes, "What a loss that seems now: a time when women were guaranteed a place in the wider landscape, our own place in the hills. I'd taken that grey cow for a man. The presence in this valley of another woman, as I say, would have surprised me" (122). Women on their own, as Solnit and others have suggested, do not belong in the outdoors – because of social and cultural constraints, because of danger or perceived danger, or because the rural idyll, as Little and Austin conclude, includes and perpetuates the traditional role of women *inside*.

Of the writers I've explored for this talk, only the women make explicit reference of how their choice of landscape to explore is explicitly tied in, or framed by, personal and domestic constraints. Sprackland, for instance, cites her immanent marriage and related move to London as the reason for her year-long exploration of the beach near her house. Similar references – not being able to leave home, not being able to do so much as think when her children were babies – punctuate Jamie's writings, particularly *Findings*. Interestingly, a development takes place between *Findings* and *Sightlines*, her second collection published in 2012. While talking to a fellow passenger aboard a ship, Jamie says, "Suddenly I wanted to change my map. Something had played itself out. Something was changing" (16). That "something", I'd argue, is the fact of her children getting older, and requiring less care. As she notes when looking at a colony of gannets feeding their chicks, for her, "the baby days are over" (83). Indeed, compared to *Findings*, there are far fewer references in *Sightlines* to her children as a constraining force in her exploration of nature. Indeed, when comparing the two

collections, the essays in *Findings* are set mostly in or around Fife, where she lives, whereas in *Sightlines* she ventures further away.

All of this, of course, is a matter of emphasis. I certainly don't mean to suggest that the male new nature writers are oblivious to their families and neglect them – that's not the point I'm trying to make. And indeed, writers such as Robert Macfarlane and Charles Rangeley-Wilson, and others as well, refer to their families and children as both providing them with ways of seeing the world anew, as well as – like Jamie in *Findings* – constraints that keep them away from exploration. What I do notice, however, is that in the majority of books by male nature writers, the emphasis is largely, predominantly, placed on the outside, away from the home, whereas both Jamie and Sprackland place the emphasis quite explicitly on the domestic and the private. The dichotomy that I want to suggest then is that between on the one hand male authors going out to explore beyond the local, and as such tapping into and echoing traditional exploration narratives, while women stay closer to the local and are more aware of, and at times constrained by, gender and domestic issues.

Of course, this dichotomy is hardly watertight – not all contemporary female authors writing about nature stay close to home: Olivia Laing's *To the River*, for instance, uses the journey motif that I earlier characterized as typical of male explorer narratives. Many male new nature writers, on the other hand, explicitly discuss how it is precisely going away that helps them see the nearby anew. Also, as Macfarlane mentions in *The Wild Places*, he was inspired to sleep outdoors – something which I classified as seeking hardships, and part of the explorer narrative – by Nan Shepherd. "No one," she suggested, "knows the

mountain completely who has not slept on it. As one slips over into sleep, the mind grows limpid; the body melts; perception alone remains" (90).

Particularly interesting in this respect is Jay Griffiths' 2006 *Wild*. Earlier I said that *Sea Room* was most explicitly gendered, and the work which most explicitly draws on traditional explorer narratives. Yet this also holds true for *Wild*. But rather than celebrating masculinity, *Wild* is explicitly femininely gendered. Griffiths continually, and explicitly, connects the wilderness she seeks all over the world to women – women, she argues, are connected to the elemental wildness through menstruation, reproductive organs and their moods. Interestingly, she interprets this neither as biological determinism – she finds it liberating – nor does this association keep her from describing the same kinds of heroics and hardship characteristic of masculine exploration narratives. Although she suggests that she wants nothing to do with conquering mountains or being the first woman to cross a certain desert (3), her narrative is nonetheless shaped in the mould of the exploration narrative. In fact, she shows her "trophies", as Bloom them, early on. On one of the first pages of the book she sums up all the things she's had to suffer during her journey. Arguing that living for the fire means being burned by it, she lists dysentery, near death, loss of her toenails, climbing on despite severe altitude sickness, "whimper[ing] with sheer loneliness on Christmas Day in a jungle", fever and delirium (8). As such, she replicates typically masculine exploration narratives in order to conquer the wild for the feminine and create new pathways for writing about adventure and exploration – showing that exploration does not mean only masculine.

A female nature writing tradition

On the other hand, by framing her experiences as exploration narratives typical of male and masculine writing, Griffiths may also be said to exemplify the lack of a female tradition in this respect. Indeed, looking at contemporary nature writing, as well as more historical examples, suggests that the genre is dominated by a primarily paternal tradition. For instance, of the 131 authors included in the anthology *Nature Writing. The Tradition in English* (2002), 98 are male, and 33 female. Of those, just 3 are British women. While the anthology arguably has a clear American bias – only 20 authors included are British – this also suggests the lack of a female, British, nature writing tradition. Indeed, when I wrote about female nature writers on my blog, I got many responses from people recommending other female authors – the vast majority of whom were American.

The absence of a female tradition also shows when exploring the traditions that new nature writers place themselves in. The most effective way of doing this is through references to other nature writers. All of the authors that I'm discussing today do this, and it is common in non-fiction writing. Yet with a few exceptions, these references are all male. Edward Thomas is frequently mentioned, as are Richard Jefferies, Henry Williamson, Gilbert White and Henry David Thoreau. For instance, in the preface to *Strands*, Sprackland names those authors that she saw as her examples in writing the book: Gilbert White, Xavier de Maistre and Alain de Botton. A similar gender bias is shown in reviews, in which reviewers frequently "place" an author by comparing them to others. When I traced these references for another article I'm working on, I discovered

that in the 151 reviews studied, 196 authors are referred to – 21 times these are female.

It's safe to say, then, that a female tradition in nature writing is virtually non-existent. The absence of such a tradition is of course not only an effect of there being fewer women than men who write about nature – it is also very much an effect of which lines are traced. For whatever reason, what the geographer Gillian Rose calls "paternal lines of descent" are more dominant in nature writing than maternal lines of descent. Yet, as Rose also shows, a paternal line of descent is brought into being, and perpetuated, by authors themselves. Hence, the paternal tradition is often used as a kind of legitimation process, in which, she says "would-be great men cite men already-established-as-great in order to assert their own maturity" (414).

On the one hand, this may be just interpreted as a matter of perception – either you follow the paternal line and don't look into all the female contributions, or you don't. Yet, on the other hand, it's much more than just a matter of perception: a certain tradition suggests that certain experiences are seen as valid, whereas others, that don't fit the tradition or line of descent, aren't. From my brief overview of new nature writing, for instance, it seems that narratives of exploration beyond the local, which happen to be written more often by men, are more valid than narratives that deal with local exploration, which happen to be written more often by women. Such a bias, feminist geographers have argued, creates a mistaken sense of objectivity that obscures the subjective experiences that we, men and women, able-bodied or not, and of whatever race, have of our environment.

Virginia Woolf emphasized the importance of literary forebears in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Tradition, she suggests, is vital: "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (85). Not having generally been included in "the experience of the mass" meant, according to Woolf, that female authors had nothing to fall back on when they started to write. In respect to new nature writing, the problems Woolf identifies do not seem to be an issue for Sprackland or Woolfson – Sprackland even takes male authors as her models while writing *Strands*. Jamie, however, explicitly discusses that for her the male tradition doesn't fit.

In *Findings*, Jamie describes her observation of a pair of peregrines roosting in her town. Reading J.A. Baker's classic on the topic, she notes a big contrast between his experiences and descriptions and her own. For instance, "There is no bird he doesn't know and cannot evoke. Myself, I keep the binoculars about me, and catch a glance at coffee-time, or before fetching the children from school." (38). In contrast to her own writings, which often include personal and domestic details, she notices that she has no idea about J.A. Baker: "He has utterly effaced himself from his book. The book carried the dedication 'to my wife' - that is the only clue to his life. But there is almost a tradition in literature of lone men engaging with birds" (38). Indeed, it is this tradition which seems to be the decisive difference between her and Baker's experience when she wonders, "Who was this man who could spend ten years following peregrines? Had he no job? Perhaps he was landed gentry. What allowed him to crawl the fields and ditches all day, all winter, until he could tell just by a tension

in the air that there was a peregrine in the sky?" (43). Her experience, on the other hand, is radically different:"The male peregrine turned up at exactly ten to three. I had to leave to fetch the kids from school, and glanced with the glasses just in time to see the resident jackdaws waft upward as he jinked through them" (44).

Yet female nature writing is not just a matter of female tradition, but may also be explored in terms of the existence, or not, of a feminine sentence. Woolf famously argued that the language used by male novelists was unsuited for female novelists. Exactly what this feminine sentence looks like remains unhelpfully vague – and French feminist critics' comments on *ecriture feminine* don't shed much more light on that either. However, certain topics and even certain kinds of descriptions of nature have traditionally been seen as more feminine or masculine. According to Stephen Jay Gould, Edmund Burke's division of feminine and masculine aesthetics is reflected in the writings of nineteenth-century female naturalists. These women, he argued, "tended to emphasize the 'beautiful' concepts deemed suitable for women by Burke's division into the beautiful and the sublime. To women belong descriptions of the petite, delicate, and colourful; in contrast to appropriate male emphases on grand, vast, awe-inspiring or mysterious entities" (35-36). Whereas I wouldn't want to argue that the female authors explored in this talk are more concerned with the beautiful than the sublime, and that the reverse holds true for the male authors, the emphasis that they place on the local and domestic seems to have been foreshadowed by nineteenth-century female explorers as well. Just as these explorers wrote more about accommodation, food and clothing than their male counterparts, domestic scenes, or references to them, recur more often in both

Jamie, Sprackland and Woolfson than in the works of the male authors (Morin 1999).

At the end of this talk I want to draw two conclusions. The first is that just as there is no universal explorer subject, there is also no universal new nature writer. There's not even a universal male or female new nature writer. The second is that the dichotomy I've sketched and the apparent domination of nature writing by men suggest a certain level of genderedness nonetheless. To the extent that there is a female nature writing it may be this: a writing that is more localized, often because of certain constraints rather than by choice, and more attuned to the ways in which, as Jamie notes when her children are young, nature happens often on the edges of life, rather than front and centre. And if there is a masculine nature writing it emphasizes not the local and domestic, but rather the rediscovery of the local through the absence of a journey, and the places domestic at the edges of the natural. Yet given the prominence of male nature writing in the literary market place – for whatever reasons, be it paternal lines of descent, quality or marketing – that also means that the narrative of exploration is bound to be the one that dominates our perceptions of nature. It means that, despite the eventual return home of the nature writer—explorer, it is the farther away that is seen as more worthwhile than the local.

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