

Exploring Tracks: Writing and Living Desert Space

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In 1977, Robyn Davidson set out from Alice Springs with four camels, 2,500 kilos of gear, a dog, a radio, and a contract from *National Geographic*. Her goal was to walk solo across the central and western Australian deserts, from Alice Springs to the coast of WA. Davidson had personal motivations for her trip: she wanted to prove a woman could do it, she was stubborn, she wanted to do something with her life before it was too late. But this is not a paper about a journey, it is about a text and a space.

When she published her travel narrative *Tracks* in 1980, Davidson initiated a traversal not of physical but of cultural space, of a landscape constructed in over 150 years of non-Aboriginal spatial discourse as empty, dead, passive, useless, flat, blank, and vacant. In keeping with the dominant tradition of exploration writing established by nineteenth-century explorers, Davidson's published narrative not only detailed the major events of her trip, but also, and more importantly, offered up a textual construction of land itself. Like nineteenth-century exploration accounts, *Tracks* was an immediate bestseller.

Two questions inform this paper as well as implicitly informing Davidson's narrative. First, when she walked and wrote her way over that final rise, what exactly did she enter? And second, as a post-colonial feminist, how does Davidson understand and produce Australian desert space? That is, how does Davidson write home?

It is by now all but axiomatic that space is not an ontological given, but instead is a complex and fundamentally ideological product. That is, conceptions and representations of land are not so much matters of scientific accuracy as much as they are battlegrounds for cultural power. The flurry of interrogations of maps and mapping in the 1980s cemented what is now the central tenet of spatial theory: that is, that maps—both cartographic and textual—have been since their inception about power, about erecting a version of the physical world which reflects and legitimates the values and practices of the ideological one. A key example of the connection between maps and power is imperial exploration. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the task of European explorers was not simply to chart coastlines, but to represent the world in European terms. As Paul Carter observes, 'the early travellers ... invented places rather than found them' (51); in the journals of the explorers, 'space is transformed symbolically into place, that is, a space with a history. And by the same token, the [explorer] inscribes his passage permanently on the world, making a metaphorical word-place which others may one day inhabit' (Carter, xxiv).

So what then does Davidson enter? Positivists have an easy answer: they say, she enters the desert, an arid climatic zone with sparse xerophytic vegetation. According to the positivist, the spatial relation has nothing to do with power: it is nothing more than a mathematical calculation, a putting of feet on mensurable soil. On the other hand, many post-colonial and postmodern critics argue the opposite: that what Davidson enters is a text or a discursive field, an ideological construction functioning in the service of cultural power. The spatial philosopher Henri Lefebvre expressed

frustration with this all-too familiar ontological binary which situates the positivists with handfuls of soil they call space on one side, and postmodern semioticians with handfuls of books which they call space on the other. While positivist constructions of space as merely 'out there' obscure their own ideological nature, Lefebvre argues that analyses which construe space as purely textual effectively fetishise language to the point where the material realities of land and bodies disappear under a wash of academic discourse. As Lefebvre argues, 'Nature is becoming lost to thought' (31).

In order to disrupt this stale binary, Lefebvre proposes a third spatial category which he terms lived space, and which Soja later developed under the heading third-space. Like Foucault's heterotopology, lived space is designed to articulate not only a theoretical methodology, but also the situation of the subject in physical space. Lived space, according to Soja, is 'the precise circumstances in which we live' (Soja 111) or the constant negotiation of physical, personal, and ideological versions of space. Lived space accounts for the complexity and the contingency of the spatial moment, opening up positivist and textual versions to disruptions and interpenetrations, while privileging neither. For Lefebvre, the subject produces space by incorporating it into conceptual systems, but at the same time the subject is constituted by the ground on which it stands. But lived space is not simply the playful postmodern paella that Soja envisages: while it is a site of convergences, it is also a site of disjunctures, where radically different textual and physical versions of the same space exist simultaneously. Lived space, it is clear, is what nineteenth-century exploration narratives attempt to erase. But lived space is explicitly the space which *Tracks* produces, opens up, and explores.

The central desert regions of Australia were first constructed as an empty space by nineteenth-century explorers who arrived in a place which neither their conceptual nor physical apparatus could master. To admit to this inability, however, would have been to admit to the inadequacy of British imperial epistemology. Faced with this crisis, the exploration writers deployed the fiction of *tabula rasa*: if they could not understand or conquer the desert, they claimed, this was because there was simply nothing there. This construction of the desert as empty had two central effects: it alleviated the threat of failure for imperial exploration discourses; and second, it erased the fact of Aboriginal ownership, knowledge, and inhabitation. *Tabula rasa's* logical counterpart is *terra nullius*. The iconised image of the empty desert punctuated only by the vertical figure of a surveying western subject was deployed throughout the nineteenth century, and was reified as one of the central myths of origin in the imagined community of non-Aboriginal Australia.

From the beginning of the narrative, Davidson positions herself as oppositional: she is a swashbuckling 1970s post-colonial feminist who chafes at the constraints of racist Australian patriarchy. Within the first two chapters, she explodes two of the key images of Australian desert mythology, vigorously signalling that *Tracks* is not going to be a reiteration of familiar cultural constructions. First, she characterises the white man of the outback not as the noble warrior or heroic adventurer of bronze statuary, but as 'almost totally devoid of charm. He is biased, bigoted, boring, and above all brutal' (34). Davidson clearly points up the strict gender and race limits erected around both the physical and textual desert: as a woman, she is denied access to the desert ('Listen 'ere lady, you're fuckin' done for ... You'll need someone to keep an eye on ya' (21)); and denied access even to talking with bushmen, or actively entering the realm of male mythology, first by a malevolent turd on her pillow, and second by the threat of rape (34). Similarly, Davidson devotes lengthy sections of her narrative to denounc-

ing the racism upon which dominant versions of Australian desert culture and mythology are premised. Clearly, what Davidson intends to write is what Sue Kossew refers to as the difference between nation and home.

What Davidson enters is now clear, but the second question still remains: how do you write home in a new country? As one who is rigorously excluded from desert discourses, how can Davidson write her way in? And further, how can she insert her spatial narrative into public consciousness, and how can it be assigned popular truth-value when what she is writing so obviously contests the norms upon which Australian cultural consciousness is based? As Sarah Mills explains, women's travel writing tends to be generically downgraded from the status of spatial document to that of autobiography (12). Mills also points out that women travel writers face a frustrating double bind: if they mention anything along the line of feelings, their writing is considered purely subjective and internal; but if they construct their narrative personae as heroes, they are marked as eccentric, slightly ridiculous, and not to be believed (199). Davidson encounters this devaluing in the popular media, which produces her not as a legitimate traveller, but as the romantic and lunatic 'camel lady'. Davidson writes: 'I [could not] imagine them coining the phrase "camel gentleman". "Camel lady" had that nice patronising/belittling ring to it' (238).

Faced with this dilemma, Davidson makes one of the most strategic moves of her trip: she writes an exploration narrative. Exploration writing is, as a result of imperialism, the most elevated and uncontested space-producing genre. While recent critics have admirably deconstructed exploration writing, no one can dispute its status as foundational, authorised, and authoritative. As with the popular reception of traditional exploration narratives, there have been almost no questions as to the veracity of Davidson's narrative. And perhaps most importantly for Davidson's subversive purposes, like traditional exploration narratives, *Tracks* produced a space for others to inhabit, and *Tracks* sold.

Davidson's first negotiation of the incommensurate site of desert lived space occurs early on in the narrative, on her third day out. She is meticulously tracing her route on the government topographical maps she carries, documents granted absolute authoritative status. She spreads the maps over the ground, overtly privileging the textual over the physical; she is reading her way through the desert along the written tracks produced by other, earlier explorers. In this sense, she resembles nineteenth-century explorers: she is carrying too much equipment, she is frightened by what she perceives as the lack of legible signifiers around her, and she is entirely reliant on her maps for direction and for meaning. The desert appears threatening and external, an out there which she describes as 'something like chaos. It was as if it were waiting for me to let down my guard, and then it would pounce' (133). And then comes the radical disjuncture: the road promised by the map simply isn't there. Davidson is paralysed at this incommensurability: the desert's ever-present threat of exceeding the confident bounds of western spatial configuration appears to have been realised. This is a recognisable anxiety in Australian spatial history, an epistemological crisis which has generated an almost hysterical urge to evacuate the desert of autonomous meaning. It is also a physical crisis: without her map, Davidson does not know how to find water.

Davidson looks up from the map in a move identical and in fact indebted to imperial explorers, produces the land as empty: a region devoid of meaning or structure. She writes: 'I felt the enormity of the desert in my belly and on the back of my neck ... And I felt very small and very alone in this great emptiness. I could climb a

hill and look to where the horizon shimmered blue into the sky and see nothing. Absolutely nothing.' (125). Although emptiness is manifestly not an accurate description of the land, she notes, as she looks about her trying to calm herself down, it is at this point the only desert vocabulary she has.

Thus far, the process of writing home modelled in *Tracks* has been a lengthy negotiation of received desert discourses: Davidson explores the iconised myth of emptiness, not rejecting it as spurious, but casting it as inadequate, and as incommensurable with the land. This process of reading the desert's spatial legacy is a crucial one: it is of course impossible to understand present space without first patiently anatomising the history of its production. It is at this point that many post-colonial and postmodern spatial analyses end: Soja, for instance, posits the negotiation of disjunctive spatial discourses as the radical postmodern explorer's desired destination (5). In their paper on the Australian spatial uncanny, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs follow a similar methodology to Soja: they destabilise dominant constructions of space, they foreground the multiplicity of discourses embedded in any space, and they clear a theoretical terrain for alternative constructions. While these deterritorialisations are of course necessary, they do not make much of a home. That is not to argue that the task of spatial critics is to forge some sort of monolithic homeland, but at times this opening up seems to produce more of an abyss than an inhabitable space in which subjects can orient themselves, and to which subjects can belong.

Towards the end of the narrative, Davidson signals her intention to write her way beyond the myth of emptiness she has traversed, and beyond the deterritorialised space which her deconstructive efforts have opened. Significantly, she asks the photographer, who wants to take some photos of this leg of the trip, to approach her camps from the side so that she will not have to see his tracks (194). The three pages in which she articulates this desert home mark the narrative's destination, and its attempt to depart from established spatial ontologies.

Davidson begins this section of the narrative by overturning the cartesian divide which separates the subject from space: she positions herself not as a vertical observer, but as a participant, a component of active desert space. It is no longer a case of Davidson and the empty desert: space, she writes, 'became an animate being of which I was a part' (195). She continues, 'the boundaries of myself stretched on forever. In the beginning I had known that at some level this could happen. It had frightened me then. I had seen it as a chaotic principle and I had fought it tooth and nail' (196). 'The self,' she writes, 'did not seem to be an entity living somewhere inside the skull, but a reaction between mind and stimulus' (197). But this is not an attempt to install a pure phenomenology as her spatial ontology; Davidson does not attempt to bracket out ideological thought. The self 'desperately wants to assimilate and make sense of the information it receives' (197), not to reject or to refuse thought. What is needed, it is clear, is a new mode for this assimilation rather than a romantic castigation of thought itself. Davidson suggests that no one will produce an alternative version of desert by meditation alone, or by silence. *Tracks* is, after all, an exploration narrative whose task it is to produce space. Thus, Davidson's self is reconceptualised as a factor of lived space, or of the territory between the hyperseparated categories of mind or text, and stimulus or land. 'The self in the desert becomes more and more like the desert' (197): as in Lefebvre's lived space, the subject and space inform each other.

This section also produces a model of desert space which incorporates this new subject. Davidson conceptualises lived space as a net or a matrix, writing, 'what was once a thing that merely existed became something that everything acted upon had a rela-

tionship with and vice versa. In picking up a rock I could no longer say, "this is a rock", I could now say, "this is part of a net" or closer, "this, which everything acts upon, acts" (195). This notion of ecological consciousness is not new, but what marks Davidson's space as distinct from that of, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari, is that Davidson's is an attempt to reterritorialise or to produce inhabitable space rather than to deterritorialise or collapse existent versions. Throughout this philosophical section of the narrative, Davidson is at pains to maintain the physical presence of the desert: her net includes not only language and identity, but also animals, birds, beetles, plants and dirt. It also includes animal tracks, which she positions along with the tracks of earlier explorers as legible texts, as lines to follow towards meaning.

Davidson notes that this sort of spatial consciousness, when written, is 'almost always going to be translated into the language of mysticism' (197). She thus insists that her lived space is not aimed at producing escape or divine communion, but rather that it is a means of survival. 'In different places,' she writes, 'survival requires different things, based on the environment' (196): producing desert space as an animate entity means that Davidson is able to find water, and to feed herself. Her spatial model enables her to inhabit the physical space of her own, inherited country. Survival, however, is not only a matter of locating nutrients: Davidson also suggests that non-Aboriginal Australian culture in general, which remains frightened by the very space upon which it finds its myths of identity, will only survive as a unique collectivity if it recognises 'the ability to be changed by the environment' (196), or to inhabit lived space. Finally, Davidson's desert space promises environmental survival: the disastrous physical effects of *tabula rasa* and of the hyperseparation of humans from land cannot be contained by patchy 'green' legislation, but only by a restructuring of spatial ontologies.

Davidson's negotiation of the fiction of *tabula rasa* allows her to see the physical ramifications of the myth of emptiness. The *tabula rasa* myths are of course still prevalent in Australian constructions of the desert, but as Rob Shields notes in his study of the *tabula rasa* myth in the Canadian Arctic, its use in contemporary culture has shifted. The persistent entrenchment of the pure centre myth today allows coastal Australians to deny the actual desert experience of massive land degradation through pastoralism, open pit mines, what Davidson calls 'genocidal [Aboriginal] policies of the [federal] government' (128), and forced relocations of entire Aboriginal communities into brutal marginal camps. The modern *tabula rasa* washes over and at the same time legitimises Maralinga's atomic bombs, Roxbury's uranium mines, and massive pastoral overstocking. What today's *tabula rasa* does then, is not only to obscure the existence of the desert as a fertile region, but also to deny Australia's ongoing internal imperialism (Shields 197) and Australians' complicity in the destruction of the desert environment and Aboriginal cultures.

Tracks, as this paper has mentioned, was a bestseller. Its popularity can to some extent be attributed to the media's fascination with its romanticised 'camel lady' and to the *National Geographic* article, ironically titled 'Alone,' which featured a windswept Davidson as its cover shot.¹ But Davidson's photographed image is an epiphenomenon: what readers wanted (according to Davidson) was Davidson's desert. 'I had hit some soft spot in this era's passionless, heartless, aching psyche,' she observes, 'and fired the imaginations of people who see themselves as alienated, powerless, unable to do anything about a world' (237) they inhabit but cannot understand. *Tracks* provides a careful exploration of received constructions of desert space, and then writes its way between, or into the lived space among them. In *Tracks*, the post-settler Australian no

longer stands, frightened and uncomprehending, against a land she must somehow master. *Tracks's* lived space implodes this impossible situation and produces a desert space which is inhabitable, active, alive, and part, rather than the ancient foe, of the non-Aboriginal Australian subject. Davidson does not mean that Australians should all rush out into the desert: lived space is not simply a matter of physical visitation. Instead, Davidson plots a new track, producing a space which the alienated community of non-Aboriginal Australia can inhabit, and can begin to comprehend. 'The embryonic beginnings of ... rapport were happening in me' (197) Davidson notes: in the lived space of *Tracks*, Davidson finally writes home.

Notes

- 1 Davidson, Robyn. 'Alone.' *National Geographic* (May 1978): 580-611.

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