My earlier work has focused upon “outings” as the recognition and examination of lesbian/gay/queer possibilities in traditional ballads in North America (1995, 1997a, 1997b). Here I will consider a rather different kind of outing, associated with individuals’ movements from place to place: travel. The commonalities between these different forms of outings—as travel and “queering”—extend beyond their joking possibilities. Anything termed “queer” implies both oddity and suspiciousness, including its colloquial use to describe homosexuals and homosexuality. However, the noun queer’s appropriation and rehabilitation by gays and lesbians for self-description allows its verb counterpart, “to queer,” not only to recognize and allow for homosexual possibility but also signify various kinds of redirection.

Both forms of outings (homosexuality and travel related) and queerings (homosexuality and direction related) involve movement and change from a previous course. In their sexual contexts, outings and queerings require psychological maneuvering but may also have physical implications. After coming out or being outed, for example, an individual may move to a different community, either forced from a now-unwelcoming one or to identify with a more-queer positive one. With voyages, physical motion may involve psychological change; we often hear that travel broadens the mind. And these links continue in the songs I consider here. Most female journeys described in these ballads show fundamental differences from male ones in the same oeuvre, and certainly from conventional Euro-North American notions of travel; these outings, then, are queered, particularly by gender.

The ballads discussed come from Kenneth Peacock’s three-volume Newfoundland collection (1965), distinctive not only for its wonderfully comprehensive texts—no fragments here (see Porter and Contantine 2003)—but also because it crosses song genres. Its contents include versions of classic ballads, traditional British ballads, popular and sentimental songs, and local songs (see Guigne: forthcoming). This variety represents both singers’ repertoires and regional
oeuvres more accurately than do other collections from the same area (for example, Karpeles 1971; Greenleaf and Mansfield 1933). Peacock’s texts broadly represent the songs sung in those parts of Newfoundland where he collected during the first years after the province’s entry into the Canadian confederation. My methods for considering this corpus began with a close analysis of each text, including in my overall survey any ballads where a woman’s movement from one place to another was directly referenced. I then tried to locate patterns in the kinds of travel, in their motivations, and in their outcomes. From these I found, in short, that women’s journeys primarily affect the “symbolic capital” they hold in these songs and Newfoundland society.

Women’s travel, from conventional Euro-North American perspectives, raises problems. James Clifford’s work on what he calls “travelling cultures” (for example, 1992, 1997) argues that Euro-North American culture maintains a gendered, ethnocentric understanding: “‘Good travel’ (heroic, educational, scientific, adventurous, ennobling) is something men (should) do. Women are impeded from serious travel” (1992: 105). Representing gender, ethnicity, and travel as mutually constitutive, as Clifford’s work suggests, Newfoundland song texts involving women’s travel remove its direct associations with a particular series of “gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, specific means of conveyance, beaten paths, agents, frontiers, documents, and the like” (1992: 110). Even at the outset, it was clear to me that Clifford’s assertion that women are not seen as travelers applied most accurately to the way the two—women and travel—are perceived and constructed in elite and mainstream culture rather than everyday practice and nonelite cultural forms. And in Newfoundland ballads—definitely not elite cultural forms—women and men sometimes travel in similar modes and to similar ends, and when they do, their travel is usually of the conventional escape and discovery type. But when men’s and women’s travels diverge, they become more clearly gendered. Women are not restricted to the private sphere; we do not find men as travelers and women as stay-at-homes.

Some women, of course, do travel at least partly in the mainstream male format, generally dressing in men’s clothing and seeking adventure in sailing, soldiering, piracy, and highway robbery. But analysis of only those songs where such bold females are found would eliminate the majority of women characters. The limited—and, even in ballads, clearly male-gendered—concept of travel as involving escape and discovery fails to illuminate the lives of less-unconventional women. Male song characters are most often found on the road to unknown locations in the course of their occupations as soldiers, sailors, and
highway robbers. However, a woman song character often traverses familiar territory, or, as one song puts it, “places she knew very well” (Peacock 1965: 227).

My own work (Greenhill 1995, 1997a, 1997b) initially defined the many cross-dressing women of the originally British broadside ballads as generic travelers because, more than others of their sex who go on outings in Newfoundland songs, they epitomize the male concept of travel as seeking adventure and diversion. This is, of course, hardly surprising. Ballad and song texts usually operate within the realm of gender rather than sex; they are about culture, not biology. That is, in these songs women (like the female “Handsome Cabin Boy”) can function within the male sphere. Thus, the female—but male-identified—handsome cabin boy seeks adventure in male terms (“she had a mind to go roving where the foaming billows swell”) but in addition engages in sexual activity (“For the captain with his cabin boy would often kiss and toy”) (Peacock 1965: 280). Her resulting pregnancy unequivocally marks her as female, notwithstanding her clothes and roving mind:

“Oh doctor, oh doctor” the cabin boy did cry,  
The sailors swore by all was good their cabin boy would die.  
The doctor ran with all his might, came smiling at the fun,  
For to think a sailor lad could have a daughter or a son.

(Peacock 1965: 281)

Clearly, there are texts where women are the adventurous travelers (see Greenhill 1995: 158), but they are only a small minority of songs and women travelers in Newfoundland songs. The majority of women song characters go on journeys with quite different purposes. Men’s occupational travel in ballads means that they are usually on the road accumulating material capital or objects for exchange. Sometimes they do the exact opposite of accumulating, as in murdered-girl ballads, when they divest themselves of an unwanted, implicitly pregnant fiancee. Women may also travel to accumulate: money, goods, supplies, objects, husbands, and sexual experiences. But they go on outings more often than missions or voyages. The accumulation and exchange in which women engage happens on a more figurative level. Covering territory, or even the simple acquisition of goods or objects, does not provide the ultimate purpose for their travels. They are shoppers rather than explorers. Shopping is serious business, though often dismissed, like so much other women’s work in Euro-North American society, as mere play. Remember that a good shopper uses her money
wisely, ideally purchasing goods for less than their value, for a net gain. At the very least, she should get her money’s worth. Of course, the opposite possibility, being ripped off or duped, also exists, as revealed in Newfoundland folk songs.

Newfoundland folk-song women may be on familiar roads seeking material capital, as does “The Rich Merchant’s Daughter” (Peacock 1965: 226–27), going to market. Outwitting the “young man” who tries to rob her and stealing his horse, she travels far. But she also accrues beyond all reasonable expectation:

She rode over mountains and valleys,
And places she knew very well;
She left him a trifle in fortune,
With about five shillings to tell....

She put her thief’s horse in the stable
And in his portmantle she found
Some hundreds of sparkling diamonds,
The value of ten thousand pounds. (Peacock 1965: 227)

Certainly, other women folk-song travelers deploy material capital in the form of wealth, money, or property, but pragmatically other forms of capital can be even more significant. Many folk-song women seek or acquire in travel what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”: “knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications” (defined by Thompson 1991: 14). “The Soldier Maid” learns valuable skills:

With my feather in my hat I will have you all to see,
My officer he taught me a stately man to be,
The soldiers all admired me, my fingers were so small,
And they learned me to beat upon the drum the best of all.

(Peacock 1965: 347)

The drummer’s value—her cultural capital—is so great that “I was guarded by my general for fear I would be slain” (347), and, upon discovering that she is a woman, her officer comments, “It’s a pity we should lose such a drummer as a maid” (347). There are other examples, particularly from the cross-dressing ballads, of women’s accumulation of special skills during and in the context of
travel. Often these acquired abilities are associated with their chosen occupations (see also Greenhill 1997a: 117–18).

Most frequently, however, Newfoundland song women are after symbolic capital, “accumulated prestige or honour” (Thompson 1991: 14). They do not merely want a husband, any husband. They want homes, suitable mates, financial and emotional security, fitting circumstances in which to bear and raise children and attain social respectability, adult identity and status, and/or autonomy from the previous generation.⁶

The ways ballad women deploy their social and cultural assets indicate the vulnerability of their symbolic capital. They are cogently described by Polly Stewart: “as the plots of [Child] ballads unfold, we discover that the women in them are in agonistic situations—they have something to protect or something to gain” (Stewart 1993: 55). Stewart argues that women may achieve personal and/or cultural success and/or failure. Cultural success for women involves meeting the expectations of men; cultural failure means not doing so. Personal success “consists in averting harm...or in reaching a goal” and personal failure “in being subjected to harm...or in failing to reach a goal” (Stewart 1993: 57).

Consider, for example, the numerous murdered girls traveling from home with their lovers. In “Sweet Florella,” the “jealous lover” invites her,

Saying, “My sweet Florella
Will you take a walk with me
Down by the dark green river
To fix our wedding day?” (Peacock 1965: 632)

Florella is not exploring or adventuring; she seeks to replace some of the symbolic capital she has lost by becoming pregnant out of wedlock. She fails, of course, and is instead murdered by her lover, but there are always risks in undertaking such travel and transactions with one’s symbolic capital.

Women’s travel, then, does not always succeed. But it can do so. The Turk’s daughter who follows “Lord Bateman” (Peacock 1965: 210–13) wants him to fulfil his promise to marry her; eventually, she does supplant his new bride. Similarly, the raped “lady” in “Sir William” follows him, traveling in decidedly difficult circumstances:

He mounted on his milk-white steed
So fast as he could ride,
She tied a handkerchief around her middle
And she ran by the horse’s side.

She ran till she came to the riverside,
And then she jumped in,
She swam till she came to the other side,
And then jumped out again.

She ran till she came to the king’s fair court,
She dangled at the ring,
And who came out but the king himself
To let this fair maid in. (Peacock 1965: 230–31)

She tells the king that Sir William has robbed her not of her “store”—material capital—but her maidenhead—symbolic capital. The king calls Sir William, who offers her gold in recompense. However, she replies that she wants his “fair body.” Of course, we find out in the end that

She proved to be a duke’s daughter
And he but a tinker’s son. (Peacock 1965: 232)

Perhaps because even at the outset she holds greater stores of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital than his, she bears considerable power. Yet she is willing to travel to avoid losing her capital, and she enhances it in marriage.

Often the economic and the symbolic/cultural are linked. “The Maid on the Shore” seeks to “comfort her mind” by “roam[ing] all alone on the shore” (Peacock 1965: 296); as travel may lead to psychological transformation, so may solitary reflection gain symbolic capital. But this maid also accumulates materially, turning the tables on the man who misinterprets her wandering (and her vulnerability!):

She robbed him of silver, she robbed him of gold,
She robbed him of costly ware-o,
And she stole his broadsword instead of an oar,...
And she paddled her way to the shore. (Peacock 1965: 297)

Sometimes traveling women have all the symbolic and cultural capital they want or need, putting them in a position of considerable power. In “Watercresses,”
the “brisk young damsel” who “come[s] tripping down this way” has clearly been to market:

She had a bunch of early onions and a half a pint of beer,
Some pickles and a bunch of watercresses. (Peacock 1965: 320)

The man she meets immediately offers her even more:

“I got cows, I got sheep, I got pigs, I got geeses,
Besides I have a dairy full of buttermilk and cheeses;
If you’ll consent to Missus, now, fair lady of all eases,
We’ll spend our time in love and watercresses.” (320)

She asks for money for her wedding dress and bills. He gives her a sovereign but finds out by letter the next day that she is already married.

So while the road can be a dangerous place for women—they can be murdered, raped, or abandoned there—it can also be a power location for them to accumulate material, cultural, and symbolic capital. “The Foolish Shepherd” provides a resonant example:

One day he wandered on the hill
All looking for a sheep.

He looked east, he looked west
Then had another look,
’Twas there he spied a fair pretty maid
All bathing in the brook. (Peacock 1965: 272)

Yet this maid’s vulnerability is more illusion than reality. Threatened with rape in a “pook of hay,” she offers an alternative:

“Oh you come to my papa’s house,
You’ll get a bed of down.” (Peacock 1965: 273)

And so,

They marched along together
Till they came to her father’s house.
“Now I’m a girl inside the gate
And you’re a fool without.” (273)

He curses her and threatens her with a knife. She counters with another curse and a threat with scissors. She insults him:

“My father keeps a rooster
He lives amongst the hens,
He flitters his wings but he dare not strut,
And you’re like one of them.

“My father keeps a dibby horse,
He lives in yonder barn,
He nods his head into the crib,
But he dares not touch the corn.” (Peacock 1965: 275)

Clearly, then, Newfoundland songs show women moving freely and often powerfully in spaces beyond their domestic contexts and deploying material, cultural, and symbolic capital. As such, they can provide a useful corrective to the frequent overstatement of the binary gendering of space, and of women’s and men’s culture and travel. For example, Gerald Pocius’s ethnography of the Newfoundland community of Calvert asserts a conventional gender spatial division, the semiotic linkage of male:female :: public : private :: wild space:domestic space:

If men generally know the wooded landscape, women find it unfamiliar. Names may be known, but the experiential dimension is lacking.... Women’s space is the home, men’s the woods and water.

(1991: 92–3)

He explains this division in terms of exogamy and virilocality: “Females never know where they may live.... Even if they did acquire the spatial acuity of their brothers with regard to the larger landscape, it would not be of any use if they move somewhere else” (99).

Yet Newfoundlander Andrea O’ Brien, born and raised in Calvert’s neighboring community of Cape Broyle, shows that women and girls participate in a variety of economic and social activities, from berry picking and trouting to
boil-ups and camping, which take them into the woods. They do not need male
guides on these outings, and they certainly do not get lost any more frequently
than men. O’ Brien argues,

Pocius should not assume that female cognitive maps are confined
to dwellings, yard and other family units within the community.
While their knowledge of the hinterlands may not be as extensive or
utilitarian as men’s, it exists, nonetheless, in varying degrees,
according to the amount of acculturation a woman has had with the
landscape. (1999: 82)

Any temptation to suggest that O’ Brien’s observations result from recent
cultural change—that, like other women in their twenties, she and her peers are
less socially and culturally restricted than were their foremothers—can be dis-
counted by the fact that women have long participated as gatherers in the sub-
sistence economy of Newfoundland outports. Men were often away on the cod
and seal fisheries, sometimes for long periods. Women’s independent knowl-
edge of what O’ Brien calls “the hinterlands” would then, as now, be necessary
for survival. And so the textual configurations of these Newfoundland songs
reflect a context in which women were and are by no means confined to the
domestic context writ small.

Yet arguing that these songs “mean” in a literal sense, that they somehow
directly reflect actual Newfoundland women’s experience, fails to acknowledge
their fundamental value. Instead, they reflect upon the way being female
makes a character act and enact her life. Obviously, Newfoundland women
travel to riverbanks—whether alone, with other women, or with men—on nu-
meros occasions without fear of murder or attempted murder. They do not
expect, when on the road, to encounter complete strangers who will propose
marriage to them. Newfoundland ballads are not exhorting girls to dress as men
and leave home. Yet in their workaday activities, urban and outport women
must visit “places they know very well.” Indeed, Newfoundland’s marginalized
economy often requires them to travel to even more remote locations, sometimes
following after a man like the Turk’s daughter in “Lord Bateman,” sometimes at
his side like the lady in “Sir William,” and sometimes quite alone, as in “The Rich
Merchant’s Daughter” or “Watercresses.” This sociocultural situation is not
just an artifact of the current fisheries crisis but has happened throughout
Newfoundland’s history.
The songs I have discussed so far are not just from Newfoundland; like other traditional texts, they are found in many places. Yet more-localized Newfoundland texts reveal similar patterns and implications even more explicitly. Further, as women move into spaces previously unavailable to them, they transform them and their practices, for women and for men, just as the “girl” from Canada and the two “girls” from St. John’s do in “The Jubilee Guild,” composed by Arthur Keeping. Jubilee Guilds were formed to encourage instruction and collaboration in handicrafts, child care, domestic work, home nursing, and so on. Like much women’s work, their activities tended to be devalued, but they brought considerable economic and social benefit to the communities where they operated. Such groups and their members are pretty universally considered in mainstream North America as petty, trivial, and useless. Thus, Arthur Keeping’s song is unusual in recognizing and celebrating this aspect of women’s work and its positive effects on both sexes/genders. Keeping’s interpretation of women travelers strikingly mirrors those which preceded it.

“The Jubilee Guild”’s traveling women are outsiders (like the Turk’s daughter in “Lord Bateman”); they bring knowledge to men (like “The Maid on the Shore”), and so on. But they are also catalysts; the change they enact is within the community, not themselves:

...A girl came down from Canada, McLellan was her name,
She was a clever young girl, no need to be ashamed,
And two more girls from St. John’s town they joined her with a will,
To go out to Burnt Islands and start our Jubilee Guild.

When they came to Burnt Islands, ’twas welcome and good cheer,
The people came both young and old to know what they might hear,
They elected in the members belonging to this place,
And the women sot with eager minds and smiles upon their face....

Then the women all got together and a tea they did prepare
They served it in the Island school where each might get her share.
They said the boys were welcome up to their tea-and-chat
But all the boys got frightened case they’d have to weave a mat.

So now my song is ended, I’ll have no more to say,
But I could write a report, boys, to reach from Spaniard’s Bay,
Women’s outings in Newfoundland folk songs, whether queered by gender ambiguity like the cross-dressing ballads or more apparently conventional like the example above, extend the range of “places she knew very well.” Folk-song texts need not be taken as literal reflections of society to show how they can instantiate a wide range of possibilities. Women’s outings, gendered and queered, whether in ballads or personal experience, provide a range of possibilities absent from other imaginative worlds.

Notes

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1. Symbolic capital is sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s term and refers to “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” (1984: 291).
2. Indeed, though much more rarely, men (like the sailor in “The Shirt and the Apron” [Greenleaf and Mansfield 1933: 222–23]), can function within the female sphere.
3. A feminist anthropologist cannot help developing an ironic stance toward the fact that when shopping attracts the attention of a prestigious male anthropologist (Appadurai 1997), it gains respectability and significance. Women (for example, Waring 1988, 1996) have previously recognized the economic centrality and meaning of such practices.
4. Similarly, the streetwalker in “The Shirt and the Apron” (Greenleaf and Mansfield 1933: 222–23) steals Jack’s money and clothes.
6. As suggested by Roger deV. Renwick (personal communication, 1999).
7. Note that the woman chooses an object which parallels, but outperforms, the phallic choice of her male counterpart.

References


