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NAVIGATING UNSETTLED WATERS: OLD WEST MEETS NEW WEST IN WOMEN'S COLORADO RIVER BOATING NARRATIVES

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In the foreword to *Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico* (1914), Owen Wister, the famed Western writer, describes Ellsworth and Emory Kolb's historic voyage down the Colorado River in language ripe with Western overtones. He writes:

Every youth who has in him a spark of adventure will kindle with desire to battle his way also from Green River to the foot of Bright Angel Trail; while every man whose bones have been stiffened and his breath made short by the years, will remember wistfully such wild tastes of risk and conquest that he, too, rejoiced in when he was young (...) This place exerts a magnetic spell (...) Bend after bend this trance of beauty and awe goes on, terrible as the Day of Judgment, sublime as the Psalms of David." (ix, xi)

For Wister, this journey recalls the longings of bygone days, the freedom to explore, and the heroic struggle between man and nature evident in the Kolb's voyage through this dramatic landscape. It also entrenches the river running narrative as a sub-genre of the Western, making subsequent Colorado River Westerns heavily steeped in mythic landscapes, nostalgia, and perilous adventure for the male subject.

Juxtapose Wister's description with a scene from Elizabeth Hyde's novel *Into the Heart of the Canyon* (2009). Whereas Wister places a premium on the danger and associated adventure of the river's many rapids and the canyon's dramatic topography, Hyde upends the typical climax of Colorado River Westerns, which often culminate at Lava Falls, arguably the most notorious rapid in North America. Through her fictitious account of a two-week Grand Canyon river trip, she plays on the fascination of the river's rapids—a distinct male *topos* within this genre—to offer an alternative high point. As one of the male guides announces the boaters' own "day of judgment" as they are about confront Lava, the plot seems to progress as expected: the guides scout the rapid, the passengers give their life vests one last safety check, and then all hold on for dear life (225). And even when Amy, the obese, angst-filled teenager, falls overboard during her tumultuous passage through the rapid, the narrative seems on par with other Colorado River Westerns. But when she is rescued and brought to dry ground in Lava's tail waters, the real excitement begins. The unexplainable health issues Amy has experienced throughout the voyage come to a head after Lava as it is clear to all that the seventeen-year-old is in labor.

Shifting the climax of a Colorado River boating narrative from the excitement and adrenaline rush of pounding through rapids to giving birth, Hyde places her text within a growing body of boating literature that looks beyond this male-dominated genre that places adventure, wilderness, and individuality at a premium. By reworking these *topoi* along the lines of recent feminist scholarship about the West, Hyde offers a vision of the New West—both a place and an idea which embrace a more open and complex view of this mythologized region. For women's voices to reorient our understanding of the West, they must, as Krista Comer contends in her critique of the Old West as "wild landscape," "first expose it if they are to avoid being

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its victims. But to then go further and to survive with any kind of female subjectivity intact, they must reemplot it" (160).¹ This working within and against the status quo is echoed by Kristine McAndrews in *Wrangling Women* (2006), her study of the horsewoman in rural eastern Washington. Examining how the stories these women tell negotiate their own marginalized position in a traditionally male line of work, McAndrews explains that "When telling their stories, women in this community employ traditional male narrative techniques but stretch or undermine these strategies by introducing nontraditional images and themes" (xiii). Such is the case with the interviews, personal narratives, essays, novels, short stories, and poetry that represent the range of genre choices in women's Grand Canyon river writing that has proliferated over the last few decades.

As a result of changing gender expectations in recent decades, women have had greater access to outdoor recreation evident in Hyde's tale and the proliferation of Colorado boating tales starting in the 1990s which include Ann Weiler Walka's *Waterlines* (1993), Ellen Meloy's *Raven's Exile* (1994), Louise Teal's *Breaking into the Current* (1994), Patricia McCairen's *Canyon Solitude* (1996), Kathleen Jo Ryan's *Writing Down the River* (1998), Katie Lee's *All My Rivers Are Gone* (1998), and Laurie Wagner Buyer's *Side Canyons* (2004).² All of these examples represent women's voyages down the Colorado River or its tributaries in ways that employ techniques outlined in Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything* (1992) and Kristine Groover's *The Wilderness Within* (1999) to reemplot the Colorado River Western: the emphasis on action as a reaction against the constraints of domesticity, the aversion to talk, and what Tompkins calls the "monolithic austerity" of the landscape (77) as well as what Groover identifies as the pursuit of "the spiritual quest," defined by "heroic protagonists (who) undertake physical journeys whose destination is a greater understanding of or connection to the spiritual world" (1). While this quest "is a tradition which pointedly excludes women" (3), Groover clarifies that women also enact their own form of the spiritual quest evident in women's experiences in the realms of "domesticity, community, and storytelling" (11). Although many of the women who travel to the river perform a very similar quest evident in men's Colorado boating narratives as they seek out some of the nation's most rugged and iconic landscapes for personal enlightenment, they nonetheless do so by complicating both the typical male approaches and the essentialized triad of female discourses Groover prescribes for women writers entering the wilderness. Their accounts of this place in Comer's words "evidence female attempts to access public space, public discourse, public issues, public life, and public power" (28). As a result, they offer us alternative means by which to understand how the river shapes and is shaped by those who encounter it.

To consider such alternatives, I turn to selections from Teal's *Breaking into the Current*, McCairen's *Canyon Solitude*, and Buyer's *Side Canyons* to embark on an initial foray into women's Colorado River Westerns and, specifically, those focused on river's stretch through the Grand Canyon. In doing so, I wish to underscore how a woman's voice is not an anomaly within this genre, but part of a figurative 'gathering of waters' where many women are adding to our understanding of the river and canyon. Of course, such a broad treatment of texts runs the risk of diminishing their contributions. However, my intent here is not be exhaustive, but rather representative. Through an examination of these texts' various discursive approaches that span poetry and interviews, essays and memoir and their engagement with and negotiation of the canonical Colorado River Western's *topoi* noted above, I argue that these women complicate the public/private representations of the river and canyon as the protagonists take on, in a very direct manner, the cultural constraints they face because of their identity. In doing so, they posit a vision of the New West, one which values the contributions of what I term tributary voices, the historically marginalized and oft-neglected perspectives of the river, which nonetheless mingle with and add to the dominant representations. Embodying this position, their work becomes incredibly instructive as it questions Old West ideologies that have made the river an exclusionary space and gives rise to the kind of awareness and open discourse needed to more equitably address the needs of this threatened resource.

¹ At the 2015 annual conference of the Western Literature Association Comer admonished the audience to take more stock of women's contributions to our understanding of the West, arguing that despite such gains over past decades, there is still considerable work to be done to recover and foreground their work.

² Very recently, an outdoor equipment company released a short video, "In Current," about Amber Shannon and her dream to guide dories, small wooden boats, through the Grand Canyon. See <http://yeticoolers.com/yeti-videos/in-current/>. Last visited 03/06/2016.



Colorado River Westerns draw their lineage to John Wesley Powell's *The Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons* (1895), which chronicles the first voyage through the Grand Canyon in 1869. Blending scientific study with Romantic descriptions of the canyon's unique landforms and the river's harrowing rapids, the account shares with the Western "the encounter with wilderness, the excitement of danger and challenge, the violent act of confrontation and commitment, the final slow surrender of freedom to advancing civilization" (Armitage 16). Frederick Dellenbaugh's *Romance of the Colorado River* (1902), the Kolb's *Through the Grand Canyon*, Edward Abbey's "Down the River" chapter from *Desert Solitaire* (1968), John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1971), Colin Fletcher's *River: One Man's Journey Down the Colorado Source to Sea* (1997), Jonathan Waterman's *Running Dry: A Journey from Source to Sea Down the Colorado River* (2012), and Kevin Fedarko's *The Emerald Mile* (2013) all follow in the wake of Powell's historic journey and tap into the genre's *topoi* to establish a long-standing perspective that boating the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon has been very much a man's domain.

However, this literary history overshadows the legacy of many women who have traveled the Colorado for nearly a century now. Edith Kolb traveled a portion of the river with her brothers and is believed to be the first woman to run a major rapid (Lavender 62). Bessie Hyde ventured down the Grand Canyon with her husband Glen on an ill-fated honeymoon trip in 1928 when both were drowned. Mary Remsen North, a ten-year old, traveled from the Boulder Canyon (Hoover) dam site to Yuma, Arizona and through the Delta with her parents, publishing her account in 1930.³ Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter traveled through the Grand Canyon in 1937 as part of a University of Michigan sponsored botanical survey to become the first women to navigate this stretch of the river (Lavender 96-97). Other notables include Doris Nevills, Mildred Baker, Katie Lee, Ann Zwinger, and Georgie Clark.⁴ Lee, Zwinger, and Clark left a significant impact on the river, both for their literary production and for their pioneering efforts on the river. Lee's *All My Rivers Are Gone* (1998) chronicles her excursions in Glen Canyon beginning in the 1950s and her vehement opposition to Glen Canyon Dam. She remained, up until her death in 2007, one of the most ardent advocates for a free-flowing Colorado. Ann Zwinger, the well-known nature writer, penned *Run, River, Run* (1975) and later *Downcanyon* (1995) to establish herself as one of the keenest observers of the American Southwest's flora, fauna, and topography. Clark's long-standing presence on the river, beginning in the 1950s, broke new ground in guiding river trips that continues to shape the industry today. Clark captures these pioneering efforts in her autobiography, *Georgie Clark: Thirty Years of River Running* (1977).⁵ It is within this tradition that the following examples emerge to take their own place as significant contributors to the history of the river.

1. *Breaking into the Current* (1994)

Louise Teal's *Breaking into the Current* is neither a novel nor a memoir like so many other Grand Canyon boating narratives but a collection of interviews with twelve female Grand Canyon river guides who address community, domesticity, and empowerment through the stories they tell. Even though these narratives draw on the Colorado River Western's *topoi* as in other works, they more directly tackle the issue of sexism on the Colorado and the means by which they address this discrimination while guiding. Teal, a river guide and writer, captures the voices of women who have made their way into a traditionally exclusive club of male river runners in the Grand Canyon. Dedicating the book "To all women navigating the changing currents of our time" (front matter), she acknowledges Georgie Clark's influence in opening the Canyon's recreational opportunities to other women and then turns to the experiences of those women who followed Clark in subsequent decades through 1990 when only sixteen percent of the Canyon's numerous commercial rafting companies employed women as full-time guides (xii). Despite the gains that women had made in many other industries during this period, guiding in the Grand Canyon was still very much a man's domain. However, when compared with the 1970s when Teal first began guiding, this meager percentage actually reflects

³ Dellenbaugh penned the introduction to North's account, *Down the Colorado By a Lone Girl Scout, Mary Remsen North*.

⁴ Nevills was wife to Norm Nevills, a renowned Colorado River boatmen and leader of Clover and Jotter's trip.

⁵ Clark swam sections of the river in 1945 and 1946 with friend Harry Aleson. In *Georgie Clark: Thirty Years of River Running* she explains, "I wanted to make the river accessible to everyone regardless of age, sex or physical condition" (90).



substantial gains for women within the guiding business. Then, she says, “you could count the number of women guides (...) on one hand” (xii). It is within this context that Teal works to capture the unique contribution that women have made within the canyon.

Challenging the perceptions about the Grand Canyon which is, in Teal’s words, “the last bastion of the male river god” (51), she emphasizes stories and experiences by female guides that speak to the unique position women have on the river. These passages both align with and challenge Western themes that aptly define this traditionally male-dominated profession. For Teal, gathering stories is an integral part of the river experience. She explains, “When you stick your oars in the water, you’re feeling the whole story. There’s no words, but it’s the language of the formation of the earth” (59). Teal’s engagement with the river is one where words do not need to be expressed for a place’s story to surface. If one is observant and willing to listen to the lessons the river can share, then the mysteries of the canyon will reveal themselves. In a similar vein, as one rows down the river the stories of those who have passed before emerge. Through her text, Teal seeks to bring to the surface the “whole story” of these pioneering boatwomen whose river experiences have largely gone unnoticed, but which add necessary depth to understanding how the river has shaped those who make their living by reading its features.

Employment on the river is one of the significant stories that Teal shares in the text to delineate how women’s river work differs from that typified by men as embodied in the Western. Tompkins identifies work and action in the Western as another theme that reasserts the Old West. While she suggests that Westerns have functioned as an escape from everyday life to which work would belong, she argues that “hard work is transformed here from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of human endeavors: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs body and mind, and directs one’s life to the service of an unquestioned goal” (12). Such work takes on this crucial aspect in the Western because it is this struggle against one’s surroundings whether human or non-human that gives purpose to one’s life. As Tompkins elaborates, “the trouble with ordinary work isn’t, as people generally assume, that it demands too much of you but that it doesn’t demand enough” (15). The Western on the other hand provides action that requires one’s utmost attention and focus. Life in the Western depends on the ability to toil and sacrifice, which thereby “satisf(ies) (...) a hunger not for adventure but for meaning” (15).

Teal emphasizes the role of work in the lives of her female colleagues to show how women are as capable of doing this male-dominated job while similarly interested in finding greater purpose for their lives. “Working long hours,” the female guide “doesn’t punch out at five o’clock each day during the 225-mile trips that last eight to eighteen days,” Teal observes (1). In fact, she informs her audience that “Sometimes we row against seemingly endless upstream winds. Our skin is dried out by too much sun, and our brains are fried by hundred-degree heat. We face other assaults on our bodies, the largest being some incurable form of foot rot” (1). But for the women who routinely endure these particular hardships, this is a small price to pay for being in the canyon. Like the Western hero who finds true purpose for living through his unique labor, these women find meaning to their lives and come away with a greater sense of self as they take on challenges traditionally faced by men.

Teal’s description of work also attempts to challenge the exclusivity of the guiding profession in a way that establishes a collective identity among the disproportionately few women in this industry. Marilyn Sayre, a predecessor to Teal in the canyon, recalls her experiences with some of her male coworkers:

I felt, although they never said anything overtly, that some of them did not want me there, that they would rather have another guy. It was the first time in my whole life that I ever really experienced what I’d call male chauvinism (...) Maybe I was a threat to them, and they couldn’t warm up to me. It made it hard for me to work down there. (31)

This reaction is not an isolated case. Buzz Holmstrom, one of the pioneering boaters in the Grand Canyon, once remarked that “Women have their place in the world, but they do not belong in the Canyon of the Colorado” (Lavender 94). Such beliefs that women were inferior for this particular line of work exacted both emotional and physical tolls on the female guides. Yet, these conditions helped solidify the spirit of sisterhood that Teal and others invoke throughout the text which lead her to claim, “these women speak for us all” (xiii). Thus, this text is far from just a collection of adventure narratives, the usual fare so readily available in a quick perusal of the Grand Canyon’s boating literature. Instead, it represents a powerful



rhetorical act, one which strives to carve out a special place for women's experiences both on and off the river, further evident by Teal's admission that this book is not only for those intrepid women of the river who "only follow(ed) their hearts amidst the pressures and possibilities facing all women in our particular era," but an homage "that honors all women" (xiv).

At the same time, her description of the working conditions also functions to establish her credibility as an insider—to show that she and the other women in the text know what it takes to be successful as a river guide. Only those who have awoken at 4:30 in the morning to brew coffee, cooked over a stove in 110 degree heat, continually loaded and unloaded multiple rafts, attended to the group's toilet needs, led hiking expeditions, and dealt with irritable tourists all while being the ever-gracious host knows the unique challenges of this line of work. But Teal also recognizes that complaining does little to improve such difficult tasks and one's status among the other guides. Since, as her fellow guide Liz Hymans acknowledges, "Boatmen seemed to thrive on an atmosphere of competition, . . . so you had to look like you were made of steel the whole time," Teal is quick to move beyond the challenges of a guide's work to provide the reader with a more favorable depiction of this labor—one that captures the real reason why she, and others like her, continue to return to the river year after year (43). "But for the six-month river season," she writes, "these minor irritations are more than offset by watching that massive pile of rock, the Grand Canyon, work its particular magic on folks" (1). From the accounts that follow, the canyon and the river's "magic" work not only on those paying customers, but on the subjects of Teal's book, who, with her, "were all in the same romance" (xiii). The river and the work performed in leading commercial trips is not a chore, but a delight for these women, a unique occupation whose benefits are paid in uncompromising beauty rather than consistent employment and retirement plans.

By entering into the discourse of work that is cast within an idealism of hard labor, Teal engages a key Western *topos* while also emphasizing the unique perspective of a female river guide. This confluence with and divergence from the Western formula continues throughout the text as Teal emphasizes other stories that speak to the unique experiences of women rafting the Colorado through the Grand Canyon. Drawing upon the Western's celebration of the heroic figure, Teal includes stories that position the female guide as hero in the eyes of other guides and passengers as she goes about her duties to ensure that all under her care have safe passage through the canyon. Such a move places these women on equal level with men to debunk the "myth (...) that lingers still, that it takes a large, powerful man to row a boat through whitewater" (McCairen 152). A representative example comes from Teal's retelling of Suzanne Jordan's memorable run at 24 ½ mile rapid in the historic high water of 1983. After flipping her boat and being tossed through another rapid a short ways downstream, "it looked like she had jumped on someone's upright boat, tied the two flipped rafts to it, and was rowing all three boats to shore" (85). Suzanne's fellow guide, David, observed the entire event and marveled at the strength of this petite woman to recover the rafts. As Teal writes of David's reaction, "I had a hard time rowing one boat to shore at 62,000 (cubic feet per second), and here she was pulling two upside-down boats to shore" (85). Such a statement not only demonstrates that women are equal to the challenges of river work, but that they can, as is the case here, exceed men's abilities.

But strength alone doesn't fully describe the heroic qualities that Teal emphasizes in her subjects. When a flash flood in Havasu Canyon overwhelms a passenger and a guide who goes to rescue her, it is Suzanne who is in the right place at the right time with the rope to throw out to the two people being swept out of the canyon and into the Colorado. David, the guide she rescued, praises Suzanne stating, "She's always spot-on and one of the bravest people I've ever worked with down here" (89). This courage and foresight demonstrated in this example are indicative of the rest of the women throughout Teal's text. As every Western has its hero, so do these Colorado River Westerns as they emphasize the heroic feats accomplished along the river. Yet, Teal's purpose is to create new heroes through the stories she tells. Speaking of her fellow female guides, one boatwoman remarks, "They were neat to aspire to be like, that maybe you didn't have to be macho and look like a guy and act like a guy to be competent" (170). Very much a text about women for women,⁶ *Breaking into the Current* provides a valuable alternative narrative to the typical male version even as it reproduces some of its principle features. While the women in this text tap into similar *topoi* of the Western-like adventure, a love of grand landscapes, and hard work, they do so from their

⁶ Bill Brown explains in his analysis of Western dime novels that the genre is primarily concerned with "men writing about men" (32).



own experiences, emphasizing how they have had to struggle against pervasive stereotypes and prejudices to create their own space on the river. As she concludes her text Teal explains, “It is wonderful to watch another generation of women—young women who have grown up hearing river stories in which the storytellers are women and the heroes are heroines” (172). The stories this text tells promote a new version of the Western hero, one that is every bit as courageous and capable as her male coworkers.

2. *Canyon Solitude* (1996)

Two years after Teal’s publication, McCairen’s *Canyon Solitude* joined this growing body of female boating narratives to reenvision the Western hero as she appropriates and refashions the Colorado River Western to explore her own insecurities and joys as a single, middle-aged woman and to ultimately argue for the legitimacy of a woman’s experience on the river. This memoir chronicles her journey rafting the Grand Canyon solo and the experiences that led up to this momentous decision in her life. She begins her tale *in media res*, perched on a ledge deep within the Grand Canyon, unable to move for fear of falling. Revealing her fear of heights, she draws a connection to the same inaction that has defined much of her life and stalled her progress toward becoming what she truly desires. She confides:

The same fear that has kept me stuck in life so many times before, afraid to move forward, to take a step that would free me from the ordinary, the mundane, the insufferable. A crippling fear that deadens my potential and limits my relationship with the world. It’s so easy to cling to the familiar, even when it’s deplorable. (5)

Yet in the midst of such paralysis, she finds the will to move and slowly inches her way to safety, knowing that “I’ve taken more difficult steps in life, chosen pathways that required more of me than this single step” (5). She concludes the opening chapter stating that “The canyon has spared me once again” (6).

These three opening passages establish the direction of McCairen’s text and reveal her motivation for being on the river. Within them we find the traditional River Western *topoi* of being challenged by nature, facing fear, and achieving ultimate triumph. At the same time, however, McCairen’s sentiments embody a sense of humility not often seen among Western protagonists. Unlike the undaunted hero prepared to face any threat, she recognizes her fears which have long plagued her both in and out of the canyon. McCairen’s anxiety is a deeply felt sense of failure and inadequacy resulting from her inability to live up to other’s expectations and her own dreams. It is this kind of fear that leads her to stay in the same rut day in and day out, choosing safety and sadness rather than risk and possible freedom. Out of these opening pages surfaces a text that is at once ready to invoke a traditional male genre and reassert its *topoi* while also using those same elements to comment on the woman’s place in society and on the river. This continual negotiation between perpetuating a well-established formula and repeatedly critiquing it establishes McCairen’s text as one of the foundational Colorado River boating narratives that positions a woman at the center of the Western experience. McCairen is ever cognizant of her marginalized position as a woman and uses her trip down the Colorado with its trials and triumphs as a larger metaphor for how to challenge the status quo to create a new vision for women’s opportunities on and off the river.

To effect this change, *Canyon Solitude* perpetuates a number of male River Western commonplaces. Along with the addressing the aforementioned *topoi*, McCairen feminizes the river to tap into a longstanding motif of American nature writing.⁷ McCairen describes the Colorado as “A sleek, beautiful goddess, alluringly seductive, forgiving to those who love her,” a river that “entices” and is “beguiling” (51, 52). But earlier passages reveal that the river is less a lover than a nurturer. Whereas in Edward Abbey’s account the author paddles “onto the brown silt-rich bosom of the Colorado” and equates his journey to “a pleasure almost equivalent to that first entrance—from the outside—into the neck of the womb” (191), McCairen communes with “Mother River” (22). Rather than construct the river as a passive object of desire, McCairen endows the Colorado with agency as it “is a power that teaches those who open themselves to her. Her lessons may be subtle, or frightening. She cares not if we learn: It is up to us to seek her out” (51). While her representation of the river reproduces what has traditionally been a male-dominated cliché of Mother Earth, McCairen’s

⁷ Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* (1975) is a foundational treatment on this topic.



view nonetheless endows the river with greater autonomy to build on Teal's view of the river as teacher. Similar to Hyde's shift in perspective discussed in this chapter's introduction, McCairen attempts in this scene to construct the river and canyon as a woman's place, distancing it from the typical feminized and sexualized river of various male authors. At the same time, as she studies the river and learns the techniques to successfully and safely negotiate the river's obstacles she discovers that "using the river's strength, direction, and flow helped me more than absolute control or total passivity" (170). This ongoing interaction with the river facilitates this ongoing awakening that McCairen experiences and establishes a close connection with the river that one should not attempt to completely control or give way to. She speaks to an intimate balance of give and take that allows her to move safely downriver and which provides a useful metaphor for our own considerations of the how we interact with the river.

McCairen's treatment of her relationship with her mother becomes another crucial aspect of her effort to carve out a space within the river's history and to shed her own feelings of inadequacy. Described as a hyper-critical woman, the author's mother represents the conventionality that McCairen seeks to escape. As she reflects on her journey that led her to a solo voyage through the Grand Canyon, McCairen notes the oppressive influences she felt dictated her life and looks to her mother as the full expression of that oppression. She writes of a "society that favored boys over girls" and the many male teachers throughout her adolescent years who "discouraged girls from contemplating college or pursuing a career" (93, 94). Yet, McCairen explains that in respect to this latter group, "My mother was worse" (94). McCairen elaborates: "Whether I expressed interest in acceptable female professions such as teaching or library science, or traditional male occupations such as zoology or law, her response was the same: "College will be a waste. You're just going to get married and have children" (94). Negotiating her mother's expectations with the unhappiness McCairen witnessed in her parent's marriage, McCairen concludes that "getting married and having children was a fate worse than death" (188). With these new realizations, McCairen pursues a life that on the surface rejects this domestic future as she seeks out solitude and self-discovery in the West's mountains and canyons.

However, while McCairen brusquely turns her back on the life her mother anticipated for her, she nonetheless embraces the elements of the home as she rethinks her place within the canyon. When she is reborn in a rapid during her first visit to the canyon with friends, she speaks of "My Mother River, My Father Canyon" (20) and her alter-ego Babe, who "Like a newborn screaming in her crib (...) demanded nourishment and attention (21).⁸ By evoking the nuclear family, McCairen's text reveals a latent desire to have the security and support represented within the traditional home and family. Yet, she constructs this home on her own terms, setting up as parental figures the river and canyon to which she now attaches herself. When she passes safely through Crystal Rapid, one of the most feared sections of whitewater in the canyon, McCairen remarks, "This river is my mother and she loves me" (171). Recognizing the failings of her own family life, which was marked by an absent father and a bitter, depressed mother, McCairen reconstructs her lineage within the canyon to formulate her ideal version of the family based on love, openness, and freedom.

Just as McCairen recasts the domestic sphere to better align with her own desires, she questions what she feels are unequal and unfair expectations that define men's and women's behavior and which prevent women from seeking adventures like her own. "Men, for the most part, have not been labeled peculiar when they go adventuring alone," she writes. "Rather, they are considered brave and daring. Of course, by keeping women tied to the kitchen and bedroom, a man has someone to come home to, someone to swoon over his heroic deeds" (199). Reacting against these constraints, McCairen posits an alternative option for those like herself who are independent and prone to wandering: "There are some of us who simply can't be tied down. It's a positive response to our nature rather than a negative reaction to our past. My restlessness and need for change, my curiosity to see the world, may make me an unsuitable mate" (200). McCairen's acknowledgment that her life is probably better off by being alone certainly hints at the male writers' desire for solitude in far off places. But her consideration of a life of solitude in and out of wilderness carries this desire beyond what the men's narratives suggest. Rather than a periodic escape from society to clear one's

⁸ Toward the beginning of the narrative she explains that "I was born on the Colorado River at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, thirty-five years after my initial birth in New York City" (12). It is this first experience on the Colorado and subsequent river trips that inspire her solo voyage.



mind, McCairen's account suggests a much more comprehensive withdrawal from society, domesticity, and the traditional woman's life.⁹ She must rely on the *topos* of solitary adventure typically associated with men in these narratives in order to distance herself from the conventional role of women, but as she extends it further than most male river narratives do, McCairen draws up a far more complex and conflicted perspective of what it means to live between these competing narratives that position adventure and freedom within a man's world and confinement and disappointment within a woman's.

McCairen does not clearly resolve this conflict within the text. In the final pages of the narrative her quest for freedom through solitude turns on its head. As she moves slowly through the impounded waters of Lake Mead at her journey's end, she realizes that her "search for freedom has led me into a trap. It is only through commitment—first to myself then perhaps to another—that I can ever know complete freedom" (245). For McCairen, this solo journey through the depths of the Grand Canyon has allowed her time and space to probe the recesses of her soul to better understand her responsibility to herself and others and the liberty that can come by attending to both. Recognizing that she does not have to choose a life of complete isolation or of compromise, she reaches the trip's terminus enlightened by the emotional and physical strength honed on the river. Realizations such as these place *Canyon Solitude* in line with countless other texts in American literature where Groover's articulation of the spiritual quest is at the heart of the work. Yet, McCairen's ability to work within and against typical conventions of the androcentric river narrative embodies the complexity that McCairen and other female adventurers like Teal's guides must face as they describe their presence on the river. Torn between expectations of whom and where they should be, they negotiate conventionality to create a space for their own distinct voice.

3. *Side Canyons* (2004)

Similar to the previous two texts, Laurie Buyer's *Side Canyons* also engages the Western to reimagine the spiritual quest narrative and a woman's relationship to those around her and the land. Yet, unlike the others which craft their accounts through non-fiction, *Side Canyons* disrupts the genre conventions of the traditional Colorado River Western by blending poetry with the author's fictitious account of her own real-life journey through the canyon in unpredictable ways. This method is evident in the opening section of prose, "On the Ranch," which Buyer punctuates with poems "At Wellington Lake," "Disfigured," "Live Analysis," "Weeping," "Portrait of a Woman in a Box," and "Interlocking Limbs." In a formal sense, this experimentation departs from the linearity and predictability that typify river narratives. While Buyer's text does proceed chronologically overall, the poems move in different directions temporally and spatially as they shift between the narrator's interior and exterior experiences. That is, the poems inject a greater awareness of the narrator's feelings that are less developed in the prose. This disruption of the norm reflects what Susanne Bounds and Patti Capel Swatz observe in their study of women's desert writing wherein the author "is developing a genre of her own, one often not solely definable in terms of genre categorizations of poetry, prose, fiction, nonfiction or drama" (77). Thus, as Buyer modifies the genre's conventions, she boldly signals her departure from the status quo.

The text centers on Laurie, a woman depressed over a failing marriage with a man who is emotionally withdrawn except when drunk. Seeking respite from this relationship, she agrees to join Angie and her group of female friends for a vacation down the river—a journey which becomes Laurie's own spiritual quest. Like so many other Colorado River Westerns by men and women, *Side Canyons* emphasizes the wild force of the river, the sublimity of the canyon, and the peace found in solitude. Yet similar to McCairen's account, Buyer's narrative does not wholly reject civilization but works to acknowledge the role that a shared community plays in mending a broken heart and soul. Worn out by years of arguing and falling out of love, Laurie moves between needing her own space and time to her own thoughts while on the river and the support and reassurance of her fellow rafters. Although she is accused of "pick(ing) the oddest places to camp" (92) as she chooses secluded areas where she can commune with her surroundings, she also welcomes the company of others and has no problem joining a friend for a walk along one of the canyon's many beaches

⁹ The male river narrative shares a close affinity with what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls the "androcentric pastoral escape," a flight from society to the hinterlands that he sees as "the great tradition within American literary naturism" (25).



(92). Laurie's openness to her fellow travelers in a place where so many Colorado River Westerns emphasize isolation both nuances Groover's conventional notions of community and reinforces its significance beyond Teal's and McCairen's accounts suggest. As Laurie welcomes a community of like-minded river travelers, she turns her back on the domestic community from which she and so many of her sister boaters escape, even if only temporarily.

This more egalitarian community is evident later in the text when Laurie finds herself reflecting on the unique relationships she has established during the trip after a late night hike up a side canyon with friends. She explains:

I pulled my flannel bag out into the moonlight and lay there thinking about all the hands I'd held in the Canyon, how we helped one another get up from our soft seats in the sand or assisted each other in and out of the boats. While hiking, outstretched hands reached to pull me up a difficult place or guide me down a tough spot and a chain of hands guided me across hard-current creeks (...) I never reached out my hand that someone, man or woman, didn't take it, hold it, give it a quick squeeze, or pull into an embrace. In this unknown environment, holding someone's hand meant a moment of sheltered harbor where I felt safe.
(185)

Contrasting with the emotional and physical distance in her marriage, the repeated contact of another's hand sustains Laurie throughout her voyage. When faced with a "difficult place" or a "tough spot" she finds reliable support as her fellow travelers cooperate to lead her safely onward. Linked with this unique community that is bound together by a shared interest in the place, Laurie's reflections on these relationships offer a unique way of thinking about the river and canyon outside of the typical "isolation brings healing" *topos*. Just as McCairen is unable to entirely disregard community, Laurie sees the necessity for communal relations even in a relatively isolated locale.

Buyer also plays with this theme through the role that communication plays in the text.¹⁰ Laurie, a writer, is passionate about her craft having traveled throughout the country to attend various workshops. It is this intense desire for expression that she feels herself growing apart from her husband, John. Buyer portrays John as the traditional Western man: he's a tough Wyoming rancher of few words. When Laurie first broaches the subject of going on a raft trip through the Grand Canyon, John is concerned because she will be gone when the calves need to be shipped. When Laurie asks whether he could wait until she returns, John retorts, "Forget it. I can do it alone" (18). And when she suggests that he should ask the neighbors for help, Buyer writes, "he just stared at me with unspoken reproach" (18). When John does speak, he questions why Laurie has been away so much recently, adding the raft trip to her attendance at a writing workshop and enrollment in a Vermont school that have taken her from the ranch for extended periods of time (18). Interestingly, Buyer writes that as John says all of this, he is peering out the window at their dog, Blue. Rather than looking at Laurie in an attempt to read her expressions and understand why she wants to leave, he's staring at man's best friend. While a small detail, it underscores what Buyer attempts to communicate through her depiction of John. With his attention centered on his dog and his reluctance to respond to Laurie, John isolates himself from his wife's attempts to engage him and thereby rejects this moment where an emotional connection could be made. Unwilling to face the reality of their situation that Laurie is trying to communicate, John finally asks "Well, I wish I knew what the hell it is you're searching for" and then leaves the room (18). Buyer closes the scene with Laurie responding but to no avail. "Not knowing if his nonresponse meant that he had not heard me or that he chose to ignore me," she writes, "I did not follow" (18). John flees the situation perhaps going to consult with his dog, a stand-in for the Western hero's faithful steed.

Contrast Buyer's characterization of John and his complete aversion to communicate and nurture relationships with Robb, the raft trip's lead guide who, in many cases, preserves the image of the classic

¹⁰ Tompkins contends that language and the Western hero are a great odds with one another as the expression of language represents everything the hero hopes to resist: "Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real. [...] Doing, not talking, is what it values" (49-50).



Western hero. Yet, surprisingly, Buyer looks to this figure as a way to reinvent the male river guide, casting him as a more sensitive man, one who welcomes community and is willing to listen and express feelings while still retaining his charisma, knowledge, and masculinity. Instead of creating a guide like Powell, whose indomitable, larger-than-life ambitions often created tension within the expedition, Buyer transforms the convention to depict her leading man with a greater sense of compassion and acknowledgement of others' needs—qualities John does not seem able to give Laurie. Throughout the journey, Laurie gravitates to Robb, admiring his humility, kindness, and reverence for his surroundings. On their third day on the river, just below Spector Rapid, Laurie considers her interest in Robb. She describes him as “a keen observer, not only of the Canyon and the river, but also of all of us in his care. Calm and quiet, he appeared everywhere at once” (107). She continues:

he pitched in with every facet of camp life: he cooked and washed dishes, moved the (toilet), loaded and unloaded the gear, built fires, helped set up the kitchen and take it down again (...) he remained patient and kind, spending time with each person in camp. Attentive to everyone's needs, he seemed to know before anyone asked what was wanted. (107)

Like some river god, Robb is both omniscient and omnipresent, fully in control of his environs, never bothered by any situation no matter how big or small it may be, never afraid to work. He's also willing to perform tasks traditionally assigned to women. And these qualities cause Laurie and her friend, Lana, to express their deep admiration for the man, suggesting that they too could possess “his connection to the Canyon, his affinity for wildness, this love affair he has with the river” (109). Through such comments, it is clear that Robb is the object of these women's desire, not so much in romantic terms although there are repeated hints of this throughout the text, but as the embodiment of everything they wish the men in their lives could be: free, calm, at perfect ease with oneself and the world. Of course, one expects a guide to attend to a paying customer's needs. However, the idealism and earnestness with which Buyer endows Robb sets him apart from even the most attentive guides.

While Robb embodies many of the qualities of the typical male hero, his depiction questions the text's success in countering traditional views of women. Buyer writes, “Sharing an easy camaraderie with the men, he offered his knowledge of the river and the Canyon openly. Sensitive and conciliatory with the women, he offered a sympathetic ear and a tender touch. Never playing favorites, he found ways to be magnanimous to each of us” (108). Robb does seem larger than life. He is both strong yet sensitive—he is for Buyer's representation of these women what a ‘real man’ should be, their ideal. As such, Robb is able to communicate with the women and men on the terms Buyer suggests, which, despite efforts to show how Robb is different from John, also reinforces traditional gender expectations. Suggesting that Robb uses reason to engage then men and emotion to appeal to the women, Buyer somewhat undermines the ground she has gained in challenging norms. However, on the following page, she is quick to clarify that knowledge is also shared with the women as “he tells us about astronomy, geology, and biology, the environment” (109). Herein lies the difficulty of trying to make Robb everything to everyone. To challenge the male hero, Buyer elects to make him more in-tune with his female companions, but in doing so, she establishes clear divisions between the other boaters who represent traditional female and male roles.

Notwithstanding this example, the narrative critiques overall the Western's depiction of the hero by reaffirming Robb's penchant for communication that meets the protagonist's needs. When Laurie and company near the end of the trip, she is gripped with melancholy, sad to see the journey come to an end when she has seen and experienced so much new physical and emotional territory. After some misunderstandings between the women come to a head, Laurie shrinks off to find Robb in whom she can confide. She explains, “There's so much I want to say,” and yet she struggles to put to words all the feelings inside her, feelings of hurt, sadness, love, and liberation (240). When Robb replies that he understands, Laurie wonders “if he could know that the river changed me in significant ways, that I felt like I finally knew who I was, that some long-ago wound had healed” (240). The river experience proves in many ways to be the balm Laurie so desperately needs to heal her soul, and such a transformational experience for this woman would initially seem difficult for a man of John's type to understand. But not for Robb. “Yes,” he answers, “I do. I understand the words you don't know how to say” (241). Like Teal who learns to understand the river's story without words, Robb reads Laurie to sympathize with her new-found sense of self.



Because these two have spent so much time together over the course of the trip, sharing feelings and listening to one another's stories, Robb is in tune with Laurie and her awakening. Their non-articulation of these feelings is more powerfully communicated as they lie on their backs staring up out of the canyon at the moon overhead. They choose not to exchange words, not because they desire emotional isolation but because they already understand each other perfectly through the expression of silence (202). Where words once failed, now silence communicates.¹¹ After this intimate moment shared with Robb, Laurie returns to the final campfire of the journey. Enjoying drink and stories she notes that "I hated to give up those last minutes of companionship, so I stayed a little longer" (242). On a night when so many emotions are near the surface, an understandable reaction would be to seek out solitude in order to process and make sense of the myriad thoughts and feelings that flooded Laurie's heart and mind. However, she chooses to spend those last few moments of firelight with her fellow sojourners. Opting for community over solitude, Laurie demonstrates her reliance on others for support and her willingness to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in order to work through her personal challenges, share joys, and draw strength from those around her.

Interestingly, despite the numerous instances where Laurie emphasizes the need for companionship in the canyon, she explains that she probably would not want to return with the same group on another trip. She explains to Angie, "There are just too many people. It's too hectic and unsettled for me. If I come again I'd like to find a way to go to a remote place and be alone with the Canyon" (252). While this statement seems to undermine all that Laurie has said about her need for others, in light of the transformation that has taken place within her, she is now able to face challenges more on her own two feet. Such a statement would not have been possible before this trip as she was too vulnerable, too insecure. But having drawn strength and experience from this small boating community, she is now confident to navigate her own path in the canyon on a more intimate and independent level. Asked whether the river trip changed her life she replies, "Yes. I'm not the same. I don't know what that means, but there it is" (251). Empowered by the community experience, Laurie must now decide her future. While much self-discovery awaits her, she is now endowed with greater confidence and buoyed up by the healing effects of the raft trip to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

The initial pain and suffering that brought Laurie to the river in the first place have given way to a new independence and resolve. But this liberation does not come from fleeing society or imposing one's will on nature as the traditional Western and Colorado boating narrative often suggest. Rather, it evolves from working with others and listening to what the canyon has to teach just as Teal and McCairen demonstrate. On her voyage Laurie articulates the lessons she has learned from observing her experiences: "Go slowly. Step softly. Take time to look and listen and feel. Be considerate. Help out. Hold hands. Allow yourself to be immersed in awe. Make reverence a daily ritual" (150). Although a Romantic strain runs through this passage with its attention to the aesthetic and spiritual sublime, Buyer places the transformative experience alongside the companionship of others. With this revelation, Laurie can return to John and her Wyoming ranch equipped with the tools not only to survive, but to thrive. With a new sense of self born on the river and forged through the relationships she made with her traveling companions, Laurie may embrace her future with determination and a contentment that the memories of being on the river will always be there to remind her of the progress she made in the company of others. This subtle reorientation of the wilderness experience embraces a different set of values that reimagines the genre as something much more than a tribute to the Colorado boating experience. Emphasizing the role of community throughout the text and the role it plays in empowering a woman to face with confidence future trials, *Side Canyons* advocates for a reconsideration of the river experience and what benefits can come through community to those lacking a voice or the power to effect such change.

In "Wild Women: Literary Explorations of American Landscapes" (1971) Sarah McFarland considers the absence of women from the American nature writing tradition that "has been burdened by a discriminatory history, influenced by wilderness exploration and scientific study that excluded women" (41). Like Groover, who challenges this forced absence in the spiritual quest, McFarland argues that "The exclusion of women from nature writing is not a problem only because it disguises the fact that the very concept of wilderness is a male construct, but also because it leaves careful readers with the impression that nature is no place for women" (41). While the accounts I have considered in this article do not fall under the umbrella of nature

¹¹ Of his sparse conversation with his traveling companion as they languidly float through Glen Canyon, Abbey writes, "Words fail" (202).



writing for their lack of botanical and zoological attention, they nonetheless demonstrate that nature, and particularly, the Colorado River and Grand Canyon, are very much a place for women. As Teal's, McCairen's, and Buyer's protagonists travel through the canyon, learning to navigate the river's many challenges while drawing on their surroundings to make powerful connections to their own lives, the women are empowered as they shed prejudices and find a new sense of individual worth.

The lessons that emerge in their texts as they are read in light of the Western demonstrate why such a consideration is particularly valuable to understanding how the Colorado has shaped both the imagination and the actual lives of those who have traveled its renowned waters. While Westerns have often been denigrated for their perpetuation of stereotypes and escapism, they prove useful as they reveal much about what a culture values and what it denigrates. In the case of the Colorado River Westerns of the Old West we find that the river is a place for men to find adventure, beauty, fame, and a panacea from the ills of urban living. By examining these female narratives as Colorado River Westerns that appropriate the genre's principle themes for their own purposes, we come away with a very different picture of the river and for whom it flows. More pointedly, as we consider these texts which celebrate the beauty and wonder of the river and this canyon, we see how they appropriate a genre and its many *topoi* to create what then become powerful rhetorical tools that create room for marginalized perspectives. Jane Tompkins reminds us in *West of Everything* that the Western has "influenced people's beliefs about the way that things are" (6). If, as Tompkins further suggests, "what the hero experiences is what the audience experiences; what he does, they do too" (6), then it stands that alternative models for Western heroes could have equal sway in shaping the public's perception and actions about the river and region. By reading the female boating narrative into the traditional/historical discourse of river accounts, we open ourselves to stories about the Colorado emerging from the New West, stories like those evident in these women's texts that emphasize a more cooperative role in facing challenges and healing old wounds. With a watershed under such distress by the endless competing demands of government, commercial, and private interests, such a shift in perception from "the way things are" is needed now more than ever.

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