Women Rewriting Boundaries

Women Rewriting Boundaries:

Victorian Women Travel Writers

Edited by

Precious McKenzie Stearns

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Women Rewriting Boundaries:
Victorian Women Travel Writers

Edited by Precious McKenzie Stearns

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9731-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9731-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association for beginning this discussion of Victorian Women Travelers. Many thanks to the dedicated and thorough anonymous peer reviewers for each chapter. Their knowledge base is wide ranging and their comments were insightful and helpful. Also, I am especially grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such a diverse and talented group of scholars on this project. The contributors are to be commended for their dedication and professionalism. Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

PRECIOUS MCKENZIE

Women Rewriting Boundaries was inspired by a special topics panel, "Women Writing Boundaries," presented at the 2013 Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association's annual convention. Panelists and audience members raised thought provoking points about Victorian life. From our discussion grew a desire to expand the scope of our studies and share our research with a much wider audience than a conference could provide. Hence, the birth of *Women Rewriting Boundaries*.

Scholars from all over the world were eager to share their research. The selection process was time consuming and difficult. Many well-deserving essays are not included in this project simply because we could not find room for them. The essays that are included in this volume speak to the variety of experiences of Victorian women, from invalids to mountaineers, to artists, traders and land owners, pilgrims, and spectators. Most of all, this edited collection is centered on social revolution.

The chapters in this book highlight women who, one by one, moved toward social change. They reevaluated what it meant to be a woman in the nineteenth century and opened doors for others to follow. Each chapter reconsiders the boundaries– physical, imposed, and imaginary–that Victorian women travelers crossed.

CHAPTER TWO

CHASING INDEPENDENCE: THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN SARAH HECKFORD'S *A LADY TRADER IN THE TRANSVAAL*

JENNIFER PEARCE

In 1880, when caught amid a siege in Pretoria at the height of the Boer conflict, Sarah Heckford penned her first work of travel writing, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (1882). She had voyaged to South Africa two years previously, after pouring most of her fortune and the inheritance from her late husband into a land purchase scheme run by the Transvaal Farming, Mining, and Trading Association.[1] Travelling alone, but for a teenage servant boy named Jimmy, she expected to receive training in the skills of farming and trade, but after trekking over 500 miles on horseback and by cart from Port Natal, Durban to Rustenburg, Heckford found herself to be the victim of a con. The scheme into which she had poured most of her fortune had been a scam, and the land from which she intended to make her living did not exist. When she bitterly admits that "the scheme about the farm was a snare and a delusion; both the men who came out to work on it, and I, who had counted upon getting instruction there, had been utterly deceived,"[2] Heckford confronts her complete dislocation from the world around her. And while this moment does not

[1] Vivien Allen, "Heckford, Sarah Maud (1839–1903)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press 2006, accessed June 01 2013, doi: 38684 2006.

[2] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.43.

occur until seven chapters into her narrative, it is at this point that her journey to independence truly begins.

When Heckford arrived in South Africa in 1878, her fellow travellers were nearly all men who had journeyed to the Transvaal as volunteer soldiers amid the political turbulence which led to the Boer War. As she calmly explains that "two or three of the men, and Jimmy, went on to the farm, such as it was, the rest went as volunteers, and I had to shift for myself'," Heckford's journey becomes one without a destination, and she becomes a woman without a clear sense of direction, purpose or identity.[3] From this point, her experience is not simply a journey through the Transvaal, but a woman's journey to adapt and survive in an unknown landscape. Working at first as a governess, then a trader, before turning her efforts to writing, the once financially secure gentlewoman-philanthropist's sole focus becomes the matter of earning a living by adapting to the changing nature of her surroundings. As this fundamental need to work finds its way to the center of her world, the continual evolution of her professional identity and the landscape of the Transvaal are bound up as Heckford determinedly endeavours to chase her dream of independence.

Fearlessly taking up this challenge, Heckford's resilience becomes wholly apparent; her strength being something which was regularly tested throughout her youth. Born in Dublin to middle-class parents in 1839, her life took a turn for the worse when within a few short years she contracted tuberculosis which left her with a hunch-back and limp, then her mother died, and in 1848 her father committed suicide. Somehow, though, the young Sarah Heckford (née Goff) rallied. She was well educated, and as a young woman took a house in London with her sister, regularly visiting impoverished parts of the city on a philanthropic mission to improve conditions for the poor. Living off their parents' fortune meant that the sisters were financially solvent, but Sarah longed to train as a doctor. Unable to do so because of restrictions in the law she became a nurse instead, where she met her husband Dr. Nathaniel Heckford. He encouraged his wife to study medicine and eventually, with Sarah's money, the Heckfords founded the East London Hospital for Children and Dispensary for Women. The hospital was a success and after a visit from Charles Dickens, the Heckfords had enough funds to open another, purpose-built hospital which recently became part of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Hackney. Yet, London did not remain her home, for when her

[3] Ibid., p.43.

husband died of tuberculosis just three years after they were married, Heckford's travels began.[4]

These travels were both geographically and experientially wide ranging. When the new hospital was complete, Heckford went to Italy with the seventeen-year-old orphan Marian, whom the Heckfords had adopted when Marian was twelve. Once Marian had grown up and married, Heckford went to India as a missionary, offering medical help to the women there. It was on returning to England in 1878 that she purchased her shares with the Transvaal Farming, Mining, and Trading Association and began to pave the way for the life she tirelessly pursues throughout *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (1882). To place these travels in context, it is important to recognize that by the 1870s and 1880s, it was not unusual for women of fortune to travel with their husbands or if widowed, perhaps accompanied by a servant or companion.

While Heckford's visit to Italy with her charge Marian plays into the tradition of the European Tour, and her expedition to India was a common undertaking for members of the Christian Missionary Movement, in relocating to South Africa, Heckford set out to achieve something relatively unheard of for women, even towards the end of the nineteenth-century. This is largely because she travels without the company of a husband or chaperone to a site of ongoing political unrest. The Transvaal had been a site of Dutch colonisation since 1600. [5] By the 1870s the Transvaal was bordered by the Orange Free State and the British governed Cape Colony. It was inhabited largely by the Boers or white Afrikaners who were descended from the Dutch colonists of the eighteenth century. Also living in the Transvaal were the Zulus whom Heckford refers to as Kaffirs. This term is now highly derogatory but in Heckford's day was used widely. Misapplied to the Zulu people native to the Transvaal, the term derives from the Arabic of the Middle-East and refers to a non-believer of Islam. In the 1850s, after the Zulu wars, the Boers set up several small republics across the Transvaal and Britain recognised the region's independence. However, when Heckford arrived in South Africa the Transvaal region had been annexed by the British. They did this to settle border disputes between the Boers and the Zulus and to enhance the

[4] Vivien Allen, "Heckford, Sarah Maud (1839–1903)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press 2006, accessed June 01 2013, doi: 38684 2006.

[5] Christopher M. Paulin, *White Men's Dreams, Black Men's Blood: African Labor and British Expansionism in Southern Africa, 1977-1895* (Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2001), pp.15-17.

protection of their diamond mining economy in the Cape. While the Boers did not object to the British governing the Cape, they rejected this interference and tensions began to rise.[6] This state of unrest verging on conflict was what Heckford came to experience the longer she stayed in the country. Despite the dangers, Heckford longed to experience self-sufficiency and independence, believing this to be a setting she could shape and call her own. In this way, hers is a journey more akin to those of the frontier men and women who travelled across the United States in search of a new life and new prospects, where women could transcend traditional gender constructs and redefine themselves as working professionals.

In *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (1982) Sandra L. Myers stresses that "These hardy and self-sufficient women stepped out of woman's place with few regrets." [7] While some frontier women worked to assist their husbands: 'others learned because of necessity and gained economic and technical expertise through hard work and often bitter experience [and] often to their own amazement, found that they enjoyed earning their own livelihood and controlling their own lives, and they became enthusiastic entrepreneurs."[8] The harsh conditions of the frontier forced both married and single women to learn skills which would have been withheld from them in more comfortable circumstances. Like Sarah Heckford in South Africa, frontier women learned to ride horses, rear livestock, and handle rifles, as well as manage the administration of local businesses, and whether or not they felt that they were behaving in an unfeminine manner, they forged a new path in the experience of women's work. Defining themselves by their skills and entering the marketplace as professionals meant that these once marginalized women might master the landscape of the frontier and call it home. Heckford's time in the Transvaal, then, is not simply about experiencing a foreign land in order to acquire a degree of knowledge or 'taste', or visiting a foreign land on a mission to 'improve' or impact the lives of others. It is a journey in which she works for her own gain to cultivate and trade off the land, so as to construct a professional self and independently own both the product of her labor and the space she inhabits.

---

[6] Denis Judd and Keith Terrance Surridge, *The Boer War: A History* (London: Tauris and Co Ltd, 2013), pp.17-28.
[7] Sandra L. Myers, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), pp. 269-70.
[8] Ibid., p.268.

For a long time, scholars have considered how self and space reciprocally impact one another in this manner. In the fields of social and geographical philosophy, Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey agree that space is something that is socially "produced" or "constructed" when it is experienced and represented. [9] Harvey in particular suggests that who we are, and the space we inhabit are intrinsically linked, for while we envision the world "through abstract representations (words, graphs, maps, diagrams, pictures, etc.)…we do not live as material atoms floating around in a materialist world; we also have imaginations, fears, emotions, psychologies, fantasies and dreams. These spaces of representation are part and parcel of the way we live in the world."[10] The idea that our representation of space, imbued with our desires, drives the way in which space is understood and experienced, is echoed in other disciplines. In anthropology, Steven Levinson emphasises that "[j]ust as maps stand in abstract relation to real spatial terrain, so spatial arrangements can give us symbolic 'maps' to other domains. They can give us maps of the mind."[11] This notion also underpins literary approaches to travel writing. In *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions* (2002), Susan Roberson agrees that "[t]ravel, movement, mobility–these are some of the essential activities of human life. Whether we travel to foreign lands or just across the room, we all journey and from our journeying define ourselves."[12] It is this way the narrated space of *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* offers a window to Heckford's mindscape, where the changing descriptions of the Transvaal landscape can be read as spatial metaphors, signposting the evolution of her professional identity and illustrating her desire for independence.

Once Heckford discovers that her farmland does not exist and she must find another way to earn a living, her route to achieving self-sufficiency appears to be almost entirely obstructed. For rather than forging her own path and making her own choices, Heckford is forced to rely on a network of local men who, in a matter of days, find her a position as governess to the children of a preacher, Mr. Higgins. This reliance, and the affect it has

---

[9] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* translated by Donald Nicholson Smith (London: Blackwell, 1984) p.26. David Harvey, "Space as a Key Word" in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* (eds.) Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (London: Blackwell, 2004, 2006), p.418.

[10] Ibid., p.8.

[11] Stephen C. Levinson, "Language and Space" in *The Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1996, Vol. 25, p..397.

[12] Susan L. Roberson, *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions* (Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 2001), p.i.

on Heckford's identity as a working woman traveller, permeates her description of her surroundings:

> One beautiful evening, after a very hot day, I was standing at the door of my little room, enjoying the cool air, and admiring two fine grey horses that were cropping the grass in the street, watched by a mischievous-looking Kaffir boy of about nine. They were evidently fresh arrivals, for I had not seen them before. While I was standing thus and chatting to Mrs. Brown's protégé, a fine-looking man, dressed in a riding-suit, with high boots and a wide-a-wake hat, and with a sunburnt honest face, merry blue eyes, and a fine reddish-brown beard, sprang up the steps that led to my little door, and touching his hat said, "Mrs. Heckford, I think; I'm Higgins. I came while you were out," he went on; "those are my horses" pointing to the animals I had been admiring. We settled everything in five minutes. I told Mr. Higgins that he might inquire about me from Mr. Richardson, who would be able to tell him who I was, and what were my antecedents; but he said it was of no use, that he was quite satisfied with what he had seen and heard of me, and only wanted to know when I could start. I said I should be ready to start early next morning; and so my stay in little Rustemberg, and under the friendly roof of Mr. and Mrs. Brown, came to an end.[13]

At this early stage in her narrative, Heckford's depiction of the surrounding space is tantamount to how she envisions her role in the foreign land. First, she presents an architectural echo of her circumstances, in which the female traveller gazes out at the Transvaal landscape from the confinement of her "little" doorway and "little" room, prevented from pursuing her unconventional dreams by the shackles of Victorian gender convention. While her male counterparts would have been likely to find work as farm labourers, learn the skills of the trade, and at least move in the direction of becoming independent traders, Heckford is forced to find work within a domestic setting. As she gazes out at the young Kaffir boy and grazing horses positioned at the side of the open road, the limitations of her own circumstances are mirrored. For while the boy, with his native knowledge of the landscape, and the animals with their strength to take on its terrain have the power to navigate the Transvaal, their propensity to draw on these ingrained abilities is limited by the controlling hand of colonial patriarchy. Bearing this in mind, there is something ironic in the way Heckford first introduces her readers to Mr Higgins. He bounds into the narrative in the manner of a pantomime hero, appearing suddenly in a

[13] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.44.

theatrical display of movement and colour. His role, it seems, is to rescue Heckford from idleness and inactivity and escort her into a world of work which sought to extend the reach of the British Empire by establishing Western modes of behaviour, and in this case traditions such as governessing, in so far 'undeveloped' locales. Not only does he provide her with a place to stay and a salary, but in his assertion of ownership: "those are my horses," he offers himself up as a role model; a Transvaal citizen of British parentage, a landowner, and an independent agent. Albeit out of character and in many ways contradictory to what she ultimately hopes to achieve, Heckford's first steps towards financial security, self-sufficiency, and independence are steps she takes alongside, and with the aid of, a man. Yet, while Heckford is fond of Higgins, and admires the work he has done to make the Transvaal his home, she notices that he has no interest in her skills. He values the idea of what she might bring to his children - knowledge, accomplishment and gentility - but only because another man, Mr. Richardson has advised him thus. Despite the fact she will earn a living and establish a degree of financial security, as a governess Heckford is a resource in someone else's enterprise, not the designer of her own destiny. This status of semi-independence underpins her time in the governessing profession and influences her perception of her surroundings.

Despite being thousands of miles from home, in a dangerous and largely unexplored landscape, Heckford's move into the governessing profession would have been considered to be appropriately feminine. Up until, and well into the nineteenth century, upper-class women were not expected to work for a living. Governesses were generally of middle-class birth, but when their families failed to provide for them, were forced to challenge traditional ideas of gender and find employment. This was largely because by 1861 "the population [of Britain] comprised 1,053 women for every 1,000 men,", and there were not enough available men for young women to marry.[14] These "odd women", as they came to be known, as per the title of George Gissing's novel, had little choice but to enter the profession in order to survive, sometimes leaving the country to do so[15]. Many found situations with employers looking to take their children on a Continental tour, some went to work for British families in Middle-Eastern colonies, and a few, through political connections and

[14] Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2001), p.31.
[15] George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1893, 2008).

British Ambassadors, were asked to provide a sought-after English education to children in wealthy Eastern households. Between 1862 and 1886, 302 governesses, out of 405,000 single adult women in Britain, left England for Australia and New Zealand with the help of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society. With the support of various wealthy patrons, the society, founded by Maria Rye in 1862, ensured that the women who applied for her help were educated to a reasonable standard, before offering them interest-free loans repayable over two years to facilitate their move overseas so that they might find work as governesses. The reality was that more of these women found their way into domestic work rather than governessing, and many were married not long after they arrived overseas. It seems, then, that going abroad with the intention to work as a governess, did not do enough to challenge gender convention to enable these women to become wholly self-sufficient and independent.

This was often the case with the kind of work that was available to women. As discussed in Beatricé Craig, Robert Beachy and Alastair Owens's *Women, Business, and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres* (2006), shows that while women had a presence in the marketplace, this came with limitations: "Women were permitted to enter the world of trade and commerce as long as their activities reinforced rather than undermined gender stereotypes."[16] Various other scholars of history and literature such as Allison Kay, Stana Nenadic and Wendy Gamber, also show how women capitalized on typical ideas of femininity by working as seamstresses and milliners and entering the retail sector. In many ways, Heckford's work as a governess in the home of Mr. Higgins falls into this category. In this role, Heckford's quest for independence is put on hold because she is trapped in an appropriately feminine state of semi-independence. The money she earns is her own, to do with what she wishes, but the house she lives in and the rules she is forced to live by are the Higginses'.

This conflict is prevalent in her descriptions of the landscape and the language she adopts to paint a picture of the world around is infused with a sense of discord. Within the space of a few lines she flits between a picturesque travel narrative style, gazing up at the impressive mountainscape in awe, to a style more reminiscent of an agricultural manual. As she describes a den-like space in the ravine, "carpeted with ferns," and presents a metaphor in which the outdoors is portrayed through the

[16] Beatricé Craig, Robert Beachy, and Alastair Owens, (eds.) *Women, Business, and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres* (London: Berg, 2006), p.10.

language of interior design, the domestic element of her liminal role between the public and private sphere, work and home, at first saturates her narrative.[17] From this point, though, there is a shift in Heckford's tone, and when she knowledgably informs her readers of how a dam functions to serve the community, the voice of the trader begins to emerge:

> This process is called "letting water," and is a very important one in this dry country, also a very troublesome and tedious one…The stream of water and the dam are the first things to be looked to in buying a farm out here, also their relative position to the ground to be cultivated. The dam has frequently to be made by the purchaser, then he must be careful to see that he can make one of sufficient size above what he means to be his lands.[18]

In passages such as this Heckford moves beyond the world of domestic interiors into land ownership. As she considers how the landscape can be manipulated to serve the wider community, the previously picturesque imagery gives way to a vision of the land which is measured, functional, and mechanical. This passage illustrates Heckford's state of mind at this point in her journey and her struggle to amalgamate the voice of the governess and trader. While her information seems out of place in describing a leisurely stroll, she insists on including it in her memoir, but a problem seems to lie in the fact that while governessing is a suitably feminine profession, the life of the landowner, though something she longs for greatly, is kept at arm's length because it is considered a masculine role. Perhaps this is because as Tim Dolin suggests, in *Mistress of* the *House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel* (1997), "[t]he internal self-division of the subject as owner was, in this formulation of subjectivity, reserved for men in the market place."[19] While one could argue that Heckford speaks of "the purchaser" via the pro-nouns "his" and "he" purely for the purpose of grammatical universality, there is no denying that in doing so an impregnable linguistic barrier is thrown up between women and ownership, Heckford and her dream. Despite her penchant for breaking with convention, Heckford struggles to form an identity which can facilitate the "self-division of the subject as owner" and combine the 'lady' and the 'trader' referred to in the title of her book. Consequently, the vocabulary of trade jars with the rest of her narrative.

---

[17] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.49.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Tim Dolin, *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p.7.

The first step to resolving her perception of land ownership as a masculine act is the result of her employer's thoughtfulness. Being a kind employer, Mr. Higgins helps Heckford to find and purchase a suitable horse which Heckford names Eclipse:

> Mr. Higgins allowed me forage for my animal, and I groomed him, fed him, and bedded him up myself. No hand but mine touched him… At first he was trouble-some to groom, but he soon got accustomed to it and fond of me…Eclipse knew as well as most horses how to distinguish between a master who treated him well and never punished him except when he deserved it, and one who neglected him and spurred him to make him show off.
>
> I certainly felt much happier after getting my horse…and although I had no time to ride much… many a ride I had, generally with one of the children with me on Dick, and I felt now that if there were danger I could get hold of Jimmy.[20]

Upon purchasing Eclipse, Heckford alters in two ways. Her ownership of, and sole responsibility for, the horse give her a greater sense of authority, and though she is still financially dependent on her employer, she too becomes someone upon whom another life depends. While Heckford admits that her governessing duties mean her opportunities to ride out are limited, the main thing Eclipse offers her is a greater sense of independence. Where more traditional governesses, if ever permitted to visit a friend or relative, would have to rely on public transport, or that provided by their employer, Heckford knows that she can venture out on her own. By extension, the land on which she travels is made more accessible, and thus traversing the space at her own will, by her own means makes the possibility of a life of land ownership and trade seem more achievable. Intriguingly, this step towards the independent life of a landowner is not a complete move away from governessing, but rather it is an extension of it. There is something very governess-like in Heckford's firm but fair treatment of her horse and it seems that this creature, whom she nurtures and cares for, comes to replace the young charges that the figure of the governess could never call her own. Heckford was a renowned animal lover, and her book is sprinkled with nostalgic anecdotes involving her horses, pet dog and her day to day routine which at first revolves around the Higgins children, later incorporates the care and

[20] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008),p.55.

management of both her pets and livestock. In this way her move into the field of trading signals the evolution, rather than mutation of her professional identity.

Later in her account, but still within the governessing episode, Heckford describes a trip to Pretoria with the Higginses. While Mrs. Higgins and the children ride ahead in the carriage, Mr. Higgins and Heckford travel on horseback and her experience of the landscape continues to change:

> For some distance the road was uninteresting, its chief advantage being that it was good for cantering; but as we neared Moy-plas and crossed the tributary of the Crocodile River, which I had previously crossed when riding to Fahl-plas, we came to a farm which made a great impression upon me…it looked the perfection of a Boer farm, and made one picture to oneself what it might be if it were an English one.[21]

Initially this passage is not about the scenery, but more concerned with movement, mobility and freedom. In this way riding her own horse at an unlimited speed empowers the governess and Heckford goes on to look upon the landscape with more confidence, regarding the Boer farm as something she, a British citizen, might own. In this way both Heckford's body and gaze are fuelled with a greater sense of agency. However, while she begins to look upon the landscape as one who might own part of it in the future, she achieves this by mimicking typically masculine behaviour. As Heckford rides alongside Mr. Higgins, mirroring his movements, she begins to perform certain colonial behaviours generally associated with men**.** This begs the question of whether her feminist aspiration to become independent is more aligned with patriarchal imperialism and colonial enterprise than breaking down limiting gender conventions. Heckford begins to envisage the landscape in a more accessible light, but there is conflict in how this occurs:

> The owner of this fine property a tall, gaunt woman with a pleasant face, the widow of three husbands was standing by the gate of the little yard in front of her house, a yard trim as a room, with oleander and other trees round it, and shut in by a low whitewashed wall.[22]

Here admiring the owner of the farm: a widow who refuses to admit defeat and recalling the image of the house, shrouded by trees, Heckford describes a feminine space inhabited by a pleasant faced earth-mother. In

[21] Ibid., p.79.
[22] Ibid.

this way she realizes that farming, and essentially nurturing and caring for the land, can be perceived as an overtly feminine role. Yet, this approach to farming and land-ownership still does not appeal to Heckford as she discovers that the widow survives only by marrying one man after another. Instead Heckford's kinship with the farm comes down to her changing perception and gendering of the landscape itself:

> Stretching right across the valley and to the top of the ranges on either side, with water from two tributaries of the Crocodile irrigating it, with its broad lands, magnificent orchard, its out-buildings, and its small but trim farmhouse.[23]

Heckford's personification of the landscape, the imagery depictive of the sloping valley and lush, fertile terrain, and the feminine adjectives used to describe of the "small but trim" farmhouse play into the tradition of describing land in terms of the female body. Though the correlation of the rural landscape and the female form is nothing new, it has various implications in light of Heckford's desire to extend her professionalism and own land. Her coveting of the farm is undeniably disturbing, in that points to the displacement of the Boer owner and foreshadows the terrible fate many Boer men, women and children faced in concentration camps. Yet for Heckford, ownership and control of a farm does not simply play into colonial endeavours to conquer space, as much as it contributes to Imperial feminist discourse. Imperial feminism emerged in the 1790s and continued long into the nineteenth century. As Clare Midgely explains in *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain 1790-1865* (2007), within the ideology of Imperial feminism, certain colonial attitudes and the advancement of women's rights were seen to merge: "In the name of liberating colonised women, British women played an important part in reforming Empire through helping to bring about the end of colonial slavery; at the same time, positioned at one remove from the direct assertion of coercive imperial power, women were crucial in providing justifications for the continuance of imperial rule through its re-presentation as social mission rather than exploitation and violence."[24]

For a long time prior to her expedition to South Africa, Heckford had been supporting the work of Imperial feminism. While working overseas in India, she wrote for *The Times* campaigning for better medical treatment

[23] Ibid.
[24] Clare Midgley, *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press , 1998), p.148.

for women. At home she engaged in similarly philanthropic efforts, and in one article pleaded for support for struggling needlewomen in London ("A Working Women's Co-Operative Association": Aug 18, 1885:11). After her residence in the Transvaal she campaigned for improvements in women's education in the region and set up an educational programme for Boer women, but during her time there she was more preoccupied with the Boer conflict, than women's rights specifically. At this time the British had taken control of the Transvaal region, and though Heckford did not disagree with this as a political move, she was disturbed by the way British colonists went about this, and was fervently opposed to Boers being detained in concentration camps. Although accused of being pro-Boer in her writings for *The Times*, on the whole she merely campaigned for better ways of settling disputes.[25]

The way that Heckford comes to envisage and describe her surroundings is a manifestation of her Imperial feminism. As she describes the topography in terms of the female body, the land itself is gendered and becomes one of the victimized 'sisters' she sees it as her duty to help, nurture, and improve. On the other hand, the fact she sees the land as something passive stretching out before her puts her in a position of patriarchal authority over the fertile, feminine landscape and it seems that Heckford's Imperial feminism begins to be absorbed by the matter of colonial conquest at Empire's core. Whether she accepts it or not, her feminist aspirations contribute to British patriarchal aspirations for an ever expanding Empire.

When Sarah Heckford finally acquires her own farm, her feelings of empowerment are wholly apparent. She elates in the statement "I must give a little description of the property I now called my own. It was perhaps as pretty a property as one could see in the Transvaal" and for a time there seems to be a kinship between Heckford and the landscape.[26] She describes a path which "gave the rider the chance of picking luscious figs and soft peaches without dismounting" and "stepping stones [which] lay in the water to help passers by" as if the rural landscape and she are instinctively in tune with one another.[27] Yet, extending her professionalism into the world of trade also complicates Heckford's

[25] Vivien Allen, "Heckford, Sarah Maud (1839–1903)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2006, accessed June 01 2013, doi: 38684 2006.
[26] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.90.
[27] Ibid., p.91.

position as a British woman living and working overseas. Ultimately**,** she finds that maintaining a professional identity and asserting her imperial feminism beyond governessing is impossible, and the reason for this comes down to a shift in power relations between herself and the country she inhabits. When Heckford moves onto her farm, which she names Griinfontein, she immediately plans to build upon it in a Western style. She longs for a working dam and a cottage, but finding reputable builders proves to be a difficult task, and she is frequently disappointed by the staff she employs. Many set-backs take place in her development of the farm and just when she is satisfied with the work of a good tradesman, Heckford runs out of money:

> From the time when I arranged to buy Griinfontein, I had known that to make it pay a certain class of buildings would have to be erected on it. It was not a farm, to the best of my belief, that could be made pay by working it in the hugger-mugger fashion of the country. I had been careful in making all my calculations…now I found that I had been grossly, although I do not mean wilfully, misled. The meaning of all this to me was, that I must give up Griinfontein or be ruined. Of course I chose the former alternative, but it was very painful. I dreaded parting from the Higginses, and going as it were out into the unknown again…However, the truth was too obvious; to me Griinfontein meant ruin… I could have cried as I turned my back on them, if crying had been of any use.[28]

For Heckford, giving up Griinfontein marks the beginning of the end of her life as a trader. She does go on to purchase another farm, but this too fails in the midst of the Boer conflict. Arguably her downfall is her attitude towards the development of the farm and her insistence that it not be done "in the hugger-mugger fashion of the country." While she sets out to start a new life for herself as an independent, self-sufficient, working woman, she ends up co-ordinating a 'civilizing' mission based on her inert, imperial assumption that the Western way is the best way. In this episode it seems then that when a woman working abroad moves beyond the liminal space of governessing, she cannot help but become an agent for imperialism. Yet, without any real connection to official networks of colonial enterprise, specifically those run male politicians and the military; these imperial values cannot be sustained economically. In the end, the irony is that although the networks created by the British Empire facilitate Heckford's move overseas, it is the drawbacks, and the overbearing patriarchal domination of Empire which ultimately sees her cast out and

[28] Ibid., p.126.

rejected by a country which resents her being there. Her failure in a profession other than governessing is why Heckford turns to extending her professionalism by another means, namely through the act of writing.

The transference of Heckford's focus from space to text, landownership to authorship is another example of an evolution, rather than a leap into a new profession. Heckford's work continues to be driven by her desire for independent ownership, not of physical space, but of her own intellectual property. In *Patent Inventions - Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (2004), Clare Pettitt considers how the development of other kinds of intellectual property in the nineteenth century affected how writers came to view their work as property which simultaneously belonged to them and their audience. Her theories can be applied to the way Heckford's work as a governess and trader later shapes her experience in the profession of writing and the text she produces. Pettitt suggests that to succeed in the professional world amid the development of patents, workers and inventors of intellectual property "tried to hold on to the ideal of the bond between the person and the property…while also needing the flexibility, and ultimately, the freedom of contract that allowed them not merely to own, but also to sell and disperse."[29] To strike this balance, Heckford attempts to write a text which traces the development of her professional identity and communicates a political message, while being a marketable and desirable product for audiences at home. The fact that other kinds of professionalism inform women's experience in the profession of writing is corroborated in Jennie Batchelor's *Women's Work: Labour, Gender Authorship* (2010). Batchelor tells us that work is "not simply a threat to be avoided or a hurdle to be overcome…work is crucial to many female authors' self-construction, their negotiation of the gendered politics of the work of writing forming the cornerstone of their identities as women and as writers."[30] What we find then, is that while governessing itself does not satisfy Heckford's desire for independence and professionalism, and her experience of trading is somewhat short-lived, writing about governessing and trading does exactly that. These forms of employment provide Heckford with "the vocabulary of professionalism" which "women were denied access to" and allows her to cultivate insightful accounts of the foreign land written by someone who

[29] Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions- Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.22.
[30] Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender Authorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.11.

has not only visited, but lived and worked there.[31] In writing *A Lady Trader* and attempting to benefit from its publication, Heckford draws on her experience of governessing and trading in the Transvaal region, and capitalizes on Britain's fascination with the figure of the governess in particular, to move into the professional field of social reform.

To pique the interest of her middle-upper class readers at home, there are various moments in the earlier chapters when Heckford's account is both reflective and reminiscent of the governess novel. She describes becoming a governess as "the first plunge into a cold bath on a frosty morning" but more intriguingly accepts: "it was part of the part I had to play now, and I wondered how I should play it. I had always pitied governesses, and had also always objected to be an object of pity myself[sic], even to myself. I never could see the use of self-commiseration, which to some seems to be so delectable."[32] Heckford's absolute refusal to wallow in self-pity is a hint towards the idea that while governessing itself might be less than desirable, it has the potential to provide some fascinating material for her book. Heckford's reference to her new job as if she were to act out a part in a play also suggests that Heckford was aware of how novelistic her life had become: not only because she was stranded like Robinson Crusoe, but also because, like many governesses before her, she had fallen in status from a gentlewoman with a fortune to a servant entirely dependent on her employer. It is here that we gain a sense of how, when trapped in Pretoria, Heckford employs some clever marketing to make an adventure story of, and therefore capitalize on, her experience of governessing. Because of this there are many more moments in the text when *A Lady Trader* reads more like a work of fiction than a real life travel narrative. There is theatricality as she describes tearing across the South African terrain, "going into a wild country [with] a revolver in a case strapped round my waist, and another in a holster on my saddle."[33] There is comedy as her servant Jimmy's belongings tumble from his horse while Heckford unhelpfully remains on her horse and laughs. Heckford herself even makes references to the literary structure of her text, referring to the kerfuffle of being lowered in a basket from the ship to a rowing boat as "a fitting prelude to life in South Africa, where, so far as my experience

[31] Ibid., p. 11.
[32] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.45.
[33] Ibid.,9

goes, everything is exaggerated - dangers, difficulties, beauties, and advantages."[34]

It is via this adventure story element that Heckford's narrative blends into a much more political strand. The way this occurs is quite striking, and it begins in the early days of Heckford's governessing episode at the Higginses'. During this time of political instability, the possibility of a Boer invasion was a great concern for many inhabitants of the Transvaal. It is intriguing, therefore, that Heckford pays the threat of attack little attention. Arguably, this is because there are frequent false-alarms of an impending battle. On being warned of a Boer attack that never came she recalls:

> Mrs. Higgins and I held a council of war on the verandah that afternoon…The invaders were to be allowed to take what they liked, but if they…insisted on forcing an entrance, we would use our pistols and knives; also that we would do the same if they attempted any liberties with either of us…We really felt quite dull after the Boer excitement was over…It seemed to me quite stupid to settle down to common-place life again, after talking of pistols and knives; and I know the children had the same feeling in a different way. They quite enjoyed the Boer scare, and once Ada dressed herself in my mackintosh, and girding on my belt with knife and pistol, blackening her eyebrows, and putting on a cork moustache, she gave the Kaffirs in the kitchen a fine start.[35]

Heckford often makes light of the idea of an invasion. The fact that their plans to defend the property would most probably have proven ineffectual demeans the idea of a real invasion, and her "council" with Mrs Higgins on the verandah is depicted as if it were part of a game. This is emphasized by young Ada's dressing up in a mackintosh and carrying a knife and pistol; an image which invokes one of Peter Pan's lost boys from the early twentieth century. Referring to the frightening possibility of an attack as "excitement," feeling "dull" when they find they were misinformed, and the fact they all "enjoyed the Boer scare" points once again to the colonial game-playing Bradley Deane speaks of in his article on Barrie's work:

> Two years after the Boer War… Pan is born of late-Victorian conceptions of competitive child's play and of the adventure stories in which they were popularized. Peter Pan embodies these ideas so richly and convincingly

[34] Ibid., p.4.
[35] Ibid., p.59-60.

> that he has come to stand for a transcultural and transhistorical archetype…where the endless, circular struggle of lost boys, pirates, and redskins means nothing except for the pleasure of play.[36]

Heckford's making light of the idea of an invasion certainly plays into this archetype, but her drawing on this style is not simply about entertaining her readers or conveying propagandist designs. The fact that this episode is shown to relieve the monotony of governessing exposes how dangerous and highly problematic it is to engender young minds with this attitude towards war, purely for the purpose of entertainment, with no consideration for how it effects real lives. Rather, Heckford toys with the adventure story genre and this idea or imperial gameplay in preparation for the juxtaposition which occurs later in her narrative. Her borrowing of this discourse provides the preceding calm necessary for a twist in her tale, whereby the adventure story gives way to a frightening and politically charged reality:

> There was beginning to be a feeling of insecurity in Pretoria. There was nothing to be seen, but people felt that the air was electric. I was pretty sure that the Boers would fight, after a certain conversation I had with De Clerc at his farm…
>
> 'I will tell you our plans. I don't count you as an enemy. This is what you will hear. Some man will refuse to pay his taxes; then your government will seize property to the amount of what is due; and then we shall rise; and we shall take that property out of the hands of the authorities, and if they interfere with us we shall fight.'[37]

For Heckford, it takes her own neighbor to threaten attack before she finally worries about the political unrest in the Transvaal. There is little trace of the adventure story style previously adopted here. Instead, there is anxiety in Heckford's tone. War is no longer a game in which to play a part but an all-consuming state of things in the air itself. These moments highlight Heckford's unusual position whereby although she is British, she does not "count as an enemy." This largely results from the fact that during her time in South Africa, she openly disagrees with some aspects of British colonialism while remaining in agreement with others. Finding

---

[36] Deane Bradley, "Imperial Boyhood: Piracy and the Play Ethic" in *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political, and Cultural Studies*,Vol. 53, No. 4 (2011):785.

[37] Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008), p.192.

herself in between cultures politically certainly has its advantages as it means she is forewarned of the invasion. At the same time it places her in what readers at home might deem to be a position of authority on the true state of things in the Transvaal. Once she has turned the notion of imperial gameplay on its head, and established the authenticity of her account, her professional identity is seen to evolve once again as she moves into the field of social reform and delivers her political message with full force.

Of the annexing of the Transvaal Heckford says: "It has always been my opinion that although the English Government were perfectly justified in annexing the Transvaal, the manner in which it was annexed was not only an unjustifiable blunder but an unjust act."[38] This passage epitomizes the conflict present in *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal's* political message for while she finds that she cannot deny her imperial principles, and corroborates the overall idea of annexing the Transvaal, at the same time, the process by which this takes place is to Heckford deeply disturbing; so much so that she feels "bound to side against [her] own nation."[39] Arguably, this ability to challenge the overarching values of her nation is only possible for Heckford because of having lived and worked in the Transvaal. There, she experienced a multi-cultural society where for at least two generations, white immigrants and Black tribes people had lived together, the Boer people themselves being the descendants of eighteenth-century Dutch immigrants. Amid all the conflict in Pretoria, among such a vibrant mix of cultural heritage, Heckford becomes aware how nationality means little if one does not share the ideas and values of their nation. In this way *A Lady Trader* is certainly a text which challenges the blind practice of supporting one's nation for nationality's sake**.** Instead, Heckford encourages her readers to question their patriotism and establish their values based on morality not nationality. Saying this, Heckford does not provide an alternative to nationality in terms of self-identification. What she shows us, and what leads her into a state of depression, is the fact that there is no place between nationalities for Heckford to inhabit**.** In the end Heckford's text offers a captivating and intelligent political critique but fails to provide realistic, workable alternatives to accepting one's nationality and in times of conflict, siding with one's nation of birth. The closing paragraph in Heckford's *A Lady Trader* sums up this sentiment:

[38] Ibid., p.205.
[39] Ibid., p.206.

> I think what I have told will show those who read it, how ruin has come to numbers owing to the war and the subsequent Convention, without being due to any looting on the part of the Boers. The compensation offered by the Government, even if it be paid, which is doubtful, will come tardily, and only direct losses are to be admitted. As a fact, most of the people who have been ruined, have been ruined by indirect losses, and this without counting the loss entailed by the depreciation in value of landed property, which is such that properties which would have fetched a high price before the war are now unsalable…All that I have to add is, that I took Jimmy with me to Natal, where he got a fairly good situation; and that Eclipse and Dandy, and little Moustache, are well, and still belong to me. Herewith I make my bow, and end my story.[40]

In these moments Heckford's political message, albeit a limited one, is at its most poignant. She makes no suggestions of how to improve the state of things in the Transvaal and does not presume to know better than those managing the expansion of the British Empire. She only highlights, through the somewhat bitter afterword "and yet this is what has been done in the matter of the Transvaal," the hopeless and irreversible nature of the conflict caused by British colonization. She shows that however colonization is justified, whether it is believed to be a patriarchal service to the empire or a dutiful civilizing mission, in reality its most apparent outcome is economic collapse, social chaos, and death. The fact Heckford withholds from offering any answers emphasizes the fact that the more the Empire seeks by its own standards to make something of the Transvaal, the more it does to destroy it. This largely reflects Heckford's own personal situation and her attempts to evolve professionally. It is the empire which provides her with the opportunity to travel and move beyond traditional gender constructs, but at the same time it is the imperial values of the British Empire and the undeniable pull of nationality, which means Heckford is forced to give up her self-sufficient lifestyle. Her only way out of the conflict is to return to Britain and thus the same Empire that facilitates her journey across so many geographical, political and ideological borders, is the reason Heckford must return home.

Within the pages of *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* this is where the evolution of Heckford's professional identity and the chase for independence come to an end. Yet, while her disappointment at having to leave the region and her work as a trader behind is undeniable, her travels and the experiences they proffered to her meant that Heckford continued to make waves in the field of social reform. Rarely steering away from the

[40] Ibid., p.240.