

IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE: NELLIE J. HALL WILLIAMS AND THE CONUNDRUM OF GENDER AND TRAVEL IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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As recently as ninety years ago, traveling simply for the joy of it was an activity charged with implications regarding gender roles. For women in the United States, traveling involved navigating a social landscape as well as a physical one, a situation that many women living in Western democracies would be unfamiliar with today. A lot of the research revolving around the social barriers inherent in traveling is centered upon female travel journals, on which there is a substantial amount of academic research (Bunkers; Smith; Schlissel). Scholars have studied women and girls who crossed boundaries in the arena of female travel as well as those who stayed within the lines of decorum, yet either way, diaries are unique and valuable tools for understanding “historical, social, and self-construction” (Bunkers and Huff 1).

In this article, I examine the 1923 travel diary of Nellie J. Hall, who was just twenty-one when she traveled from Maryville, Missouri, to Fresno, California, with her mother. Her diary falls into the “ordinary” category, noting items such as the food she eats, the types of plants she sees, and the kind of transportation she uses, without reflection on wider social themes or even deep personal feelings. Rather than embracing her situation as a trailblazing traveler, her journal reflects what she believed she was supposed to feel and “acknowledge[s] the conformist power of the dominant culture” (Braham 56). Such narratives, though more commonplace, offer a glimpse into the realities of living and traveling during a specific time period, and it is this kind of ordinariness that should be examined in order to get a more cohesive picture of what it meant to live in a certain era. Nellie Hall’s rhetoric offers an interesting look at the intersection of societal pressures, gender roles, and the experience of traveling, all of which she negotiates in a very specific way. In order to reject any notions of negativity in regard to her travel, Nellie chooses to project the identity of a “nice girl” by incorporating certain diction, subjects, and responses to her experiences that both underscore her support of traditional female roles and mitigate the liberalizing effect of travel.

Travel, Gender, and the “New Woman”

Since diaries are closely associated with the historical context in which they are written, it is important to examine the history of travel from a gendered point of view in order to fully contextualize Nellie’s travel diary. For most of recorded history, men have been the traveling sex. We have abundant examples of a variety of travel narratives, from ancient travel stories (Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Pausanias’s *Description of Greece*) to accounts of men forging exploratory trips in the “New World” (Christopher Columbus’s journal, Lewis and Clark’s journals). In contrast, we have very few travel accounts written by women, and it does not take much historical sleuthing to figure out why. Women were the domestic rock, both socially and biologically; thus, they were at home, raising children and keeping house, rather than forging contacts in new domains and discovering continents. As women’s studies researcher Sidonie Smith describes it, in terms of freedom to travel, women were “sessile,” which she defines as “permanently planted, tenaciously fixed, utterly immobile” (x). Thus, travel was

historically a male activity, a place for men to demonstrate their entitlement to agency as well as their masculinity, while women remained stationary.

This gaping division in travel experience was the state of things for most of history; however, new rights for women and a greater access to convenient mobility in the nineteenth century gave women unprecedented freedom to travel, even alone. According to women's travel researcher Elizabeth J. Clapp, travel indicated much more than the opportunity to see sights and learn about other cultures. Instead, travel "represented an escape from the confines of domesticity, and gave [women] a chance for a freedom of action and thought that was unthinkable at home. Free of their male-dominated, household existence, travel offered a sense of adventure, independence, and a degree of control that few women enjoyed in other aspects of their lives" (63). This revolutionary new freedom was thus translated into new power, and as one might expect, the transition between "sessile" woman and adventurous, worldly woman was not smooth in terms of societal acceptance. In fact, historian Kathy Peiss characterizes the early twentieth century as a "period of ferment for middle-class Americans, when new ideas about womanhood, sexuality, and leisure time were actively debated" (163). To further complicate this issue, not only were traditional members of society pushing back against a woman's power to travel, but women themselves were grappling with issues concerning their leisure travel. It was thrilling to have more agency, but there were some unfortunate side effects to this new freedom. Most pertinent to this paper, many women faced identity issues, as traveling "signaled femininity displaced from its founding attachment to domesticity and the requisite sessility" (Smith 17). Therefore, there existed a major tension between the increasingly old-fashioned notions of extreme chastity and strict decorum that exemplified the Victorian woman and the concept of the "New Woman," which questioned the formerly rigid divisions between the social roles of men and women, including within the arena of leisure travel.

As a result of this uncertainty, women were generally put into two categories: the "good" girls, those who are domestic and obedient, and the "bad" girls, who attempt to disrupt the harmony of domestic life and use their power over men to corrupt them. The alternative to the socially acceptable "virgin" was the "vamp," a representation that was based on much more than just wanton sexuality. In Serafina Bathrick's study of women in early film, the vamp is "posed as the True Woman's opposite. She is dark, she is sexual, she is volatile, she is mobile, and above all, she lives alone, outside the sphere of home and family" (qtd. in Kitch 61). This emphasis on the connection between mobility and evil would have led to confusion for girls or women considering travel. When combined with the perceived rejection of the domestic sphere that was attached to traveling, these ideas would be enough to frighten many nice women and girls away from traveling.

Nellie's Journal

Born in 1901, Nellie was living in the middle of this burgeoning conflict regarding gender roles and leisure activities. She was raised in Wilcox, Missouri, a small rural town near Maryville, and had lived what could be considered an average life for a girl in her geographic area and time period. She was from a large family, with four siblings and caring parents, and describes her childhood as "most happy." Nellie's mother Belle, whom she later described as a "wonderful Christian," ensured that the family attended church services regularly and encouraged her daughter to take up the family occupation of teaching, which is exactly what she did (Reminiscences). In 1922, Nellie had just completed high school and was teaching in a nearby one-room schoolhouse. Even though she was upholding the family tradition set by her father and extended family, Nellie was putting college on hold in order to

do so, a move that she was sure her “high school teachers and fellow students were surprised and concerned” about (“School’s Out” 2). Thus, Nellie is situated as a girl who follows the wishes of her family, which is one way to observe social norms. However, despite all the comforts of home and the dangers of traveling as a woman, in July and August of 1923, Nellie J. Hall and her mother Belle traveled from Maryville, Missouri, to Fresno, California, all on their own. The main purpose of the trip seems to have been social visits and sightseeing, as the women stopped along the way to see the sights in Denver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, visiting family and friends in each of these places. From a historical perspective, their journals are fascinating, as they offer a peek at the new modes of travel at the time, since Belle and Nellie rode on trains and in automobiles throughout the journey. From a cultural perspective, it is interesting that each woman kept an individual diary in which she recorded the basics of the trip, such as activities, method of transportation, food consumed, and persons visited. Nellie’s journal was an unlined, 4 x 6¾ inch Blue Jay brand notebook, bound at the top in a tablet style, the covers bluish gray paper with black and blue print. It was a fairly standard tablet for the early 1920s. Along with writing in their journals, Belle and Nellie also communicated with loved ones in Missouri, mostly through letters, although occasionally via telegram.

Although it is a modern sensibility that journals are intended to be a solitary affair, in Nellie’s time, diaries and letters were not so disparate in terms of privacy, and the evidence suggests that Nellie knew her diary would be made public. In Jane Hunter’s *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, she argues that journal writing was a very public affair, one that was prescribed to Victorian girls by a range of authorities, from periodicals to family members (38–56). Young women living in the newly developed middle class were thought to learn about the female ideals that they were expected to uphold through the act of literacy (both reading and writing). Thus, as literacy was an activity expected to “self-culture” young ladies, “writing was not simply an activity for moments of solitude and silence, but one which compelled attention even among friends and in company” (40). Although Nellie was not a Victorian girl by time period, Victorian ideals certainly informed and influenced the cultural notions that pervaded the subsequent Progressive Era. Therefore, it is appropriate to assume that Nellie’s diary would fall under the journaling precepts described by Hunter. Beyond that, there are additional hints that Nellie’s travel journal was intended as a public document. First of all, it is likely that Nellie shared her journal with her mother, especially when one considers the similarities of their experiences as well as their journalistic pursuits. It also must be noted that much of what was detailed in her journals was also described in her letters home, an association that suggests that Nellie’s trip was a subject that was openly available to many others. For example, on 10 July, Nellie writes to her sister Pauline that she “saw so many cute little English, Spanish, and French houses” (Letter), a comment that matched almost word-for-word her journal entry on 8 July. Nellie does a thorough job of describing her activities during the trip, but she leaves most of her personal feelings out of it, an issue that I will discuss in my analysis of her writing. Furthermore, later on in her life, Nellie allowed this journal to be transcribed and notated by her family member Paul Williams, which suggests that it was open information.

Choosing “Nice”

It is in this complicated set of circumstances that Nellie Hall set out to California, journal in hand. Between confusing notions of gendered traveling and the public nature of journal writing, it seems that Nellie was in a difficult situation when it came to rhetorically projecting a self that was both socially acceptable and also a traveler. How did young women explore the world and protect

their reputation and lifestyle at the same time? My interpretation piggybacks on an interpretation of diaries that gives their authors a level of artistic license not usually associated with journal writing. In her discussion of the prevailing theories in the scholarly world of diary research, Jennifer Sinor writes that “diarists decide what to leave in, what to take out, and what to encode. And these decisions ensure that the writers are engaging in a conscious act of self-construction” (39). Therefore, Nellie’s rhetorical choices are intentional and purposeful: “like any text, a diary is a verbal construct that requires selection and arrangement of detail by its writer” (Bunkers and Huff 12). It is with this direct agency in mind that I propose that Nellie chooses a relatively simple method for coping: she represents herself as a good girl, using her writing to firmly anchor her in domestic life and the values that women have traditionally stood for.

One of the most striking aspects of Nellie’s journal is that she chooses mostly to write about domestic activities. This is important because in Nellie’s time, adhering to the dominant social structure meant embracing the domestic function of women. Writing about domestic pursuits was not only well within the limits of acceptability, but was actually encouraged by those who considered themselves to be diary authorities. According to Jane Hunter, the Victorian advice literature expounds that “it was better for a girl to have no diary at all than to have one which encouraged fantasy and ambition and distracted a girl from her domestic priorities” (43). Thus, domestic activities would have been strictly within the woman’s domain, and by writing about them, Nellie would at least partially negate the stereotypes associated with females and traveling. Writing about domesticity gives her an identity that is both acceptable and encouraged by society, and it is this type of “attentiveness to the social space of domesticity” that emerges as a trend found in some narratives (Smith 19). In short, the focus on domesticity is a mode of protection from the negative opinions of an audience.

One feature that stands out to the reader is Nellie’s preoccupation with food. Almost every entry involves some nod to a meal, but the way that she writes about food is extremely variable. She ranges from mentioning that she simply “had dinner” (8 July) to describing the contents of a meal (17–20 August) to naming her lunch venue (27 July). Sometimes she attributes the meal to a cook, such as when she notes that “Aunt Normandy gave a four course dinner” on 6 August. Even her brief entries generally have some reference to food. For example, the entire entry on 9 August reads, “Rested all day. Had dinner at Nellie Diedrichs.” Very rarely does she gush about the deliciousness of the food she eats; instead, she usually simply records that she ate a meal. Nellie does describe other items in detail, such as by cataloguing the names of the plants that she sees, but nothing else comes near her consistency for describing her meal schedule. There are several conclusions that could be drawn here. Perhaps Nellie does not want to forget where and when she ate, or perhaps eating is the highlight of her day. However, the bareness of some of her observations leads one to believe that there might be another motive. For a housewife, the observance of and preparation for mealtime is paramount. In fact, one could argue that a housewife’s day is invariably scheduled around breakfast, lunch, and dinner. These meals are static, unchanging; a family must always eat. Therefore, her records of her meals firmly attach her to a semblance of domestic life and situate her as a person interested in domestic activities. Nellie’s unfailing attention to the details of mealtime gives her the air of a proper young lady, one who is interested in the right kinds of things.

Another way to interpret Nellie’s focus on listing events and items is to see this quality in the light of historical diary conventions. It is interesting to consider that orderliness was a very common factor in Victorian diaries. According to Hunter, “advisers encouraged girls to devote themselves to the development of order in all features of their lives,” including both the act of diary writing and the

entry itself (42). Thus, many girls had ritualized times each day for diary writing and focused on conveying a set of specific details. Once again, Nellie was not a Victorian girl per se, but the reverberations of this convention can be seen within her work. As mentioned above, Nellie tended to list domestic activities (eating habits especially), which lends an overall orderliness to her diary. Furthermore, she rarely skipped a day, even when kept quite busy on her vacation. By keeping her journal consistent, Nellie is using her literacy as a tool for projecting the ideals of decorum familiar to her. Essentially, the regulation of her diary along with the specificities of her words can be likened to the distinction between verbal language and body language: although she is not saying that she keeps a neat and ordered life, she is showing it. Nellie's commitment to routine reinforces the themes of domestic activity that she writes about, combining both characteristics in order to create an overarching portrait of nice-girl respectability.

Nellie demonstrates her nice-girl persona by how she writes her journal along with the subjects that she chooses to describe and assess. It is interesting to consider that in her descriptions of the people she visited, Nellie rarely offers any kind of evaluative comments. She simply details who is involved in the activity. Of course, Nellie visited a substantial number of family members and old friends during her travels, so it is only natural that she record her meetings with them in order to remember the specifics. For example, on 18 July, the entire entry is "Uncle Charlie comes. At John Neal all day." In fact, most of her diary entries reference people in a similar simplistic fashion, presumably to keep track of the events of her vacation. However, there is one notable exception that can shed some meaning on Nellie's rote notation. When she reaches her aunt and uncle's house in Los Angeles, Nellie writes, "Aunt Normandy is so nice—like her very much. She is so attractive and clever. Has wonderful clothes" (21 July). She then springs into a lengthy description of the Normandys' house, which is large, handsome, well furnished, and beautifully decorated. What is interesting about this account is that Nellie only offers an evaluation on objects that are well within the scope of female domesticity. She comments on Aunt Normandy's clothes, her looks, and her personality, supplementing this positive portrayal with hard evidence—her well-kept house. This is the sole description of a person that Nellie offers, and it is clear that she keeps to a subject that would be considered appropriate for her to comment on, once again demonstrating her interest in behaving like a domestically apt nice girl.

It is indicative of Nellie's rhetorical choices that her description of her Aunt Normandy is favorable, as most of Nellie's evaluations are exactly that. Actually, "glowing" might be a better word choice for describing the ways that Nellie portrays what she sees. Nellie is both sweet and uncontroversial in her comments, with the old adage "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all" certainly applying here. Nellie uses a very small variety of adjectives to describe what she sees. She uses words like "wonderful," "beautiful," "cute," "good," "lovely," and "nice" to illustrate the qualities of everything from mountains to zoo animals to houses. Nellie does not use a negative adjective even one time. Not only does her diction demonstrate key qualities in her personality (she is kind and nonjudgmental), but it also prevents her from saying anything that could be misconstrued. Because she adheres to the bland opinions of a good girl, it would be difficult to consider her in any other way. Just as her choice to write about experiences within the confines of domesticity protected her from potential negative interpretations, so does her method of description.

Along with this penchant for optimistic descriptions, Nellie's cheerful and positive tone is continued through a very relaxed method of evaluating the objects around her, a quality that forces one to consider the implications when her tone or diction is less than positive. The episode in which Nellie

critically considers Aunt Normandy is significant as it is the only instance in which she evaluates a person at all, excepting the two times when she refers to children as “cute” (21 July) or “very cute” (13 July). In addition to people, most of the objects that she encounters are favorably recorded in her diary. The “mountains were beautiful” (11 August), Grauman’s Metropolitan Theatre had “such wonderful dancing and skating” (27 July), and Nellie “loved” the trees in Fresno (19 July). Thus, when Nellie does pass some sort of negative (perhaps “unenthusiastic” would be a more appropriate word choice) judgment upon something, it is exceptional and full of implications. At the beginning of her trip, on the train from Maryville to Denver, Nellie comments on the attributes of her train ride as well as the landscape. In Colorado, she writes that “the land is pretty but wouldn’t like to live here. No trees and looks so lonesome” (8 July). The countryside in Nevada “doesn’t look good to me at all” (12 July). Compared to most of Nellie’s text, in which observations are related approvingly, these lone critical comments are quite unusual. One approach to deconstructing these comments is to see them in the context of Nellie’s journal as well as in the historical framework of gendered travel. Though Nellie’s commitment to presenting herself as a very positive commentator is obvious, these slight comments indicate that she is rejecting in some way the actual areas that she sees. Her double role as upbeat reporter and reluctant domestic female can be seen to intersect here, as it would be unseemly to remain completely enthusiastic about being away from home, yet it is polite to demonstrate her pleasure during her lovely trip. Thus, Nellie uses her criticisms to strengthen her connections to her home, as well as her commitment to domestic functions.

An interesting avenue to consider is the way that Nellie handles transportation (train, boat, and automobile) in her journal. Even though Nellie’s entries are formulaic, usually including who came, where they went, and how they got there, the way that she depicts her experiences with automobiles in particular is indicative of an adherence to a standard of gendered traveling. According to Smith, “women who drove themselves were seen to be undomesticated and loose,” and the more socially accepted way for a woman to ride in a car was to be a passenger (173). In fact, riding in a car was seen to be a status symbol for the privileged. Nellie’s depictions of her car rides certainly fit into this mold, as it is much more common for Nellie to mention who drives her than it is for her to disregard it. There are many comments like “Mr. J. Neal took us on the Kearny drive out to Kearny park this afternoon” (16 July) and “Uncle took us in his car” (24 July). Nellie rarely forgets to mention who was driving—usually a man—thus situating herself as a rule-abiding, submissive young lady.

Nellie and Belle also take the train, which was the most convenient mode of transportation to California at that time. Another benefit to riding the train was that in the early twentieth century, trains were considered to be very agreeable methods for female transportation, as women were encapsulated within a room that protected them from any kind of vulnerability that arduous travel might induce. According to Smith, “in a sense, . . . the world of locomotion offered women miniature domestic sites along the rails” (128). Nellie deals with her train experience in an interesting way. She makes several comments about her train ride, in one instance detailing the type of train car (7 July), but more significantly, she tells a funny anecdote that occurred while traveling on the train. Nellie writes that it was “Lots of fun running from our dressing room to our sleeper. While Mother was on her knees taking off her corset the train gave a lurch and she fell over on her nose” (8 July). This is the only time that Nellie tells a humorous anecdote in her entire journal, and one wonders why exactly she felt compelled to do so here. In light of Smith’s observations on the relative social safety that was involved in train travel, it appears that the comfortable space of the train allowed Nellie to escape her good-girl persona and feel free enough to tell a joke. Since the train was considered to be a conventional mode

of travel for a respectable lady, Nellie was able to take advantage of her highly acceptable situation and still be viewed as a very good girl.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the way Nellie chose to construct her diary, with frequent allusions to socially acceptable subjects and a distinct lack of assessment (personal or otherwise) could be attributed to factors other than adherence to social norms. Some people undertake travel journals simply to record the bare bones of the experience in order to spark memories later on, while others look at a travel journal as an opportunity to personally explore the new experiences that travel affords them, and Nellie could be a member of the former group. Another approach to this research dilemma is to compare Nellie's diary to that of another diarist in similar conditions. In this case, Belle's diary could be a useful tool for comparison, as she was not only Nellie's travel companion but also her mother, and as such was aware of the same social conventions as Nellie was. In an analysis of Belle's journal, it seems clear that she and Nellie follow many of the same conventions. Belle exhibits the same attention to detail when it comes to food and members of social parties, frequently indicating what she eats and whom she sees by name. She also uses cheerful adjectives, with "fine" being particularly common, as when she writes "fine eats" in reference to a homemade dinner (19 July). In general, it appears that Nellie and Belle wrote about the same subjects and were generally positive in representing these subjects.

However, certain distinctive qualities in Belle's journal stand out to the reader. Belle has the tendency to describe her experiences in more detail and with a higher degree of emotion and attachment. For example, in the 11 August entry, she writes that she is "just crazy about these pretty [mountains]. Words cannot describe their beauty," demonstrating great joy to an extent that Nellie never does. Belle also keeps track of more precise details than Nellie, noting the cost of items and what time events occurred, although this may be due to her role as the mother (and therefore planner) of the duo. Finally, she is able to describe improper happenings, which never occur in Nellie's journal. Belle writes that as they were ascending a mountain, "we saw convicts working on the road. Say, they were hard lookers. One long haired man especially" (13 August). Though this same incident was observed by Nellie, she chose not to write about it—a very interesting choice considering the negative impact these "convicts" made upon Belle. It would seem that she chose not to write about happenings such as these, as an innocent, good girl would never want to ruminate upon anything scandalous. Thus, Belle's diary seems to be more direct and realistic, while Nellie chooses to ignore the more unseemly side of the trip, including unsavory events and the costs of different activities. This comparison seems to underscore the analysis that situates Nellie as a girl committed to a nice-girl persona.

Conclusions

Nellie J. Hall was an average girl in complicated circumstances, and the major themes of her travel journal, like domesticity, agreeableness, and a devotion to convention, have much to tell us about the junction of societal standards and personal beliefs. Nellie used her journal to accentuate her status as a good girl while embarking on a journey that could earn her the label of a bad girl, a choice that allowed her the freedom to travel without consequences. Her ability to straddle the fine line between liberated traveler and domesticated nice girl is inspiring, as she was able to synthesize both roles in order to reevaluate what it meant to be a good girl. Basically, Nellie's journal demonstrates a new way to be a good girl, one that involved traveling, as she was able to take a long trip and come out on the other side with all of the same qualities that she held dear at the start intact. Her experience, when combined with that of other girls who remained good even after traveling, becomes part

of the catalyst that eventually changes the status quo. However, despite all that is to be learned by deconstructing the overarching themes of travel and gender and the resulting effect on “good girls” like Nellie, what I would argue is most illuminating about her diary are those sheer mundane details, such as the orderliness of her writing or her focus on food. There is much historical information hidden in the unobtrusive, “discardable” qualities of ordinary journal writing that make it “a highly productive site for investigating how both writing and culture get made *every day*” (Sinor 10). It is these run-of-the-mill details that make a journal not only a reflection of the environment or a deconstruction of societal themes, but a very personal reaction to the surrounding world. And for the many female journal keepers throughout history who, like Nellie, negotiated the lines of decorum along with their own desires, it is in these ordinary details that we discover the remarkable strategies they employed to become actors—even if not trailblazers—in the world around them.

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