
No Bo(a)rders Here: On The Road to Nowhere in Joy Williams' *Breaking and Entering*

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Abstract

In Joy Williams' 1988 novel *Breaking and Entering*, the postmodern travel narrative takes the form of a pilgrimage where all motion is a form of repetition, and all borders becomes mirrors. Willie and Liberty, the novel's main protagonists, are drifters who travel around Florida breaking into vacation homes and assuming their owners' lives, using their "perverse skill of inhabiting the spaces others had made for themselves." They are less boarders than impersonators. They travel in desultory fashion in search of an identity, a home, and a continuation of life into the next generation: "[the owner] was robbed, but they didn't take anything. Broke into her house and didn't take a goddamn thing." Identity theft merges with perpetual motion, producing a pilgrimage whose stations are stolen lives. But their quest is reflexive and doomed; belying her name, Liberty can only enter "room after room. Again and again. In an eternal, successful repetition." For Williams, the postmodern travel narrative can have no destination, so it cannot end: as Willie remarks after hearing Liberty's life described as the story of Goldilocks-looking for the right home and identity in other people's borrowed homes and identities—"There's something wrong with that story. That story doesn't end." The travel narrative here turns into a chronicle of nomadism, and Florida begins to represent a kind of interstitial nomad land—a site physically and culturally bordering the Atlantic coasts and the Americas, yet ultimately intraversable.

As John Berger argues, postmodern capitalism from its national vantage projects a falsely universal and homogeneous economic space, and a cultural geography without borders: "The entire world becomes a setting for the fulfillment of publicity's promise of the good life. And because everywhere is imagined as offering itself to us, everywhere is more or less the same." Willie and Liberty travel in the fear that everywhere is more or less the same; consequently, aimless wandering is all they can do. In many respects, they are seeking some recognizable border to pass beyond. Williams also couches the couples' loss of familiar boundaries and sense of place in terms of gender identity. Liberty's loss of her child is a key factor motivating their attempts to inhabit the lives of others. One of the families whose house they invade "protected their possessions as though they had given birth to them." The search for identity and possessions becomes conflated with the desire to renounce possession, much as Liberty had "renounced" her child. As a French woman tells Liberty while she inspects a doll house, "Lots of things can go wrong with girls, you know, with boys not so much. Girls lose sight of themselves more quickly." Liberty especially must confront that her lost generation—personally and collectively—is not only lost, but effectively redundant.

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