

Gender Performativity in Mina Benson Hubbard's *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*

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Abstract

In 1905 Mina Benson Hubbard, the widow of explorer Leonidas Hubbard, began the project of exploring and mapping the Labrador region from the North West River to Ungava Bay initially undertaken by her late husband (who perished on the original expedition), Dillon Wallace, and his guide, George Elson, who would later accompany Mina Hubbard in her expedition. The press and the public both expressed shock that a woman would venture into the field of travel and exploration, which was conceived as a man's occupation. Moreover, women were not considered capable of the physical abilities or the scientific rigor necessary for such arduous endeavours. Mina Hubbard's published account of her exploration traces her arc from an inexperienced, middle-class woman to an accomplished cartographer of the Labrador region. This essay uses Judith Butler's theories of fluidity in gendered identity to examine the complicated roles female explorers in early twentieth-century Canada had to negotiate.

Keywords: Mina Benson Hubbard, Labrador, Canadian exploration, Judith Butler, Gender roles

In 1905, Mina Benson Hubbard, the widow of explorer Leonidas Hubbard, began exploring and mapping the Labrador region from the North West River to Ungava Bay, a project that was initially undertaken by her late husband, Dillon Wallace, and his guide, George Elson, who would later accompany Hubbard in her expedition. The expedition, which had cost Leonidas his life, was an arduous and perilous journey for any individual to pursue, but the act of charting unknown territory was perceived to be especially dangerous and difficult for a woman, due to prejudices of the era. There was essentially no framework for female explorers in the 1900s to participate in the mapping and

identifying of geographical systems, let alone to lead an expedition into an uncharted, unknown, and potentially fatal region. As an early female explorer of Labrador, Hubbard negotiated between concepts of femininity and the hegemonic discourse that equated masculinity with science, rationalism, and colonialism. As Roberta Buchanan discusses in *The Woman Who Mapped Labrador*, "Exploration was a man's game in the early 1900s, conducted in the full panoply of machismo rhetoric of penetration and conquest" (27). The historical limitations placed upon Hubbard as a female explorer in the early twentieth century restrict her writing to external

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considerations of an acceptable femininity and illustrate a sublimation of authority to the male guides accompanying her expedition through Labrador; these gender-based constraints also frame her narrative of the exploration in terms of her late husband's legacy.

In the 1900s, there were severe limitations on a woman's capacity to travel independently. There was also much disregard held by professional societies and the scientific community concerning women's roles in cartography and exploration. As Wendy Roy notes in *Maps of Difference: Canada, Women and Travel*, "Twelve years earlier the Royal Geographic Society in Britain had reaffirmed its disapproval of women explorers in general by renouncing its brief decision to elect women as members" (92). These normative and regulatory expectations imposed upon women led Hubbard to reframe her expedition in terms of a narrative experience, rather than employ the language of facts and statistics that she familiarized herself with, as demonstrated in her article, "Labrador, From Lake Melville to Ungava Bay," published in *The Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*. The article focuses more on statistics, numbers, and the topography of the region than on the literary affectations, florid prose, and romanticized naturalism found in *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. Even the byline of the original article attributes the work to Mrs. Leonidas Hubbard Jr. rather than to Mina Benson Hubbard. In her article, "'Just a Little Like an Explorer': Mina Hubbard and the Making of *A Woman's Way*," Lisa Laframboise comments on this practice: "When the woman writer simultaneously produces both travel narratives and scientific writings, the narrator's gender in the latter is frequently concealed" (13). Only by representing herself in terms of a masculine discourse, by assuming the linguistic convention of a male identity, is the legitimacy of Mina Hubbard's cartography expertise allowed. The adoption of her husband's name constitutes an erasure of her identity and reframes her accomplishment of mapping the Labrador Peninsula in terms of a male figure's legacy. The original article, and later the published book, construct a hagiographic portrayal of Leonidas:

Nevertheless, in utter physical weakness, utter loneliness, in the face of defeat and death, he yet wrote that final record of his life, so triumphantly characteristic, which turned his defeat to a victory. Immeasurably higher and more beautiful than the success of his exploring venture could ever have been accounted, and thus was compassed the higher purpose of his life. That his lesser purpose might not remain unaccomplished, I myself in 1905 undertook the conduct of the second Hubbard expedition, and, with the advantage of the information and experience obtained by the first, a larger crew and a three

weeks' earlier start, successfully completed the work undertaken two years before. (530-531)

The tension between the cultural norms of femininity and scientific exploration inherent in Hubbard's representation of identity in *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* necessitates a shift in responsibility. Leonidas' lesser purpose becomes Hubbard's higher purpose, thus creating a hierarchy of gender expectations predicated on false assumptions of early twentieth-century demands on women. The framing mechanism of Leonidas' expedition in terms of triumph and victory legitimizes Hubbard's subsequent success and makes her expedition's success more palatable to an audience immersed in the apparatus of strictly delineated gender binaries.

The question then becomes, how many of these disparate representations in the original article – as opposed to the book – embody a deliberate narrative strategy to recontextualize identity? Judith Butler's theory on the performativity of gender helps one understand the negotiated space Hubbard occupies and the various identities represented in Hubbard's different texts. As Butler states in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Cultural biases that categorize women as incapable of participating in – nonetheless, leading – an expedition into an uncharted region are codified as an objective and biological reality. In the article, "'Hidden Country': Discovering Mina Benson Hubbard," Sherrill Grace reflects on the differences between Hubbard's literary style in *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* and her more formal approach in *The Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*: "What emerges so clearly from these two articles – and this is central to my argument – is Mina's ability to perform a complex, multiple identity. In one piece, she is a lady traveler and amateur; in the other, she is a scientific explorer and successful leader of an expedition" (277). This represents, as Grace affirms, a fluid movement through an assemblage of gender identities. Hubbard may also adopt the cultural matrix of the time to please her readers and function within the restrictions imposed upon women explorers as a necessity.

Many of the passages in *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* represent the conflict between the cultural expectations of women and the experiences Hubbard encountered during exploration, such as when the male guides dictate that Hubbard not go near the river while they are portaging:

Waiting in the lower wooded parts was not as pleasant. Once I announced my intention of

setting up my fishing-rod and going down to the river to fish, while the rest of the outfit was brought up. Sudden consternation overspread the faces of the men. In a tone of mingled alarm, disapproval, suspicion, George exclaimed: 'Yes; that is just what I was afraid you would be doing. I think you had better sit right down there by the rifles. There are fresh bear tracks about here, and Job says they run down there by the river.' I could not help laughing at the alarm I had created, but obediently sat down on the pile of outfit by the rifles strongly suspecting, however, that the bear tracks were invented, and that the real fear was on account of the river. It began to be somewhat irksome to be so well taken of. (64)

Despite Hubbard's role as leader of the expedition, and, therefore, the individual responsible for the organization of the trip to explore Labrador, she is relegated to an infantilized position subordinate to the men. Hubbard complies but also expresses discomfort with relinquishing authority to the male guides. Her role as exploration leader is subverted on the basis of gender stereotypes and a materialist essentialism that posits that femininity is equated with physical and emotional fragility. For Butler, "the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculinist and heterosexist oppression" (33). The cultural markers of a patriarchal apparatus impose restrictions on women and travel predicated on considerations of masculinity and femininity. Thus, Hubbard must submit to cultural assumptions regarding early exploration and travel and defer to the male guides, in effect, compromising her autonomy.

Hubbard's understanding of the relationship between the cultural signification of exploration as a male prerogative and the role of women in this endeavor informs much of the narrative style of the book. At one point, Hubbard reflects on nature and notes that "it seemed luxurious on Sunday morning to be able to loiter over washing and dressing, to get into clean clothes, to read a little, and to look at the day itself" (60). This passage appeals to the reader's concerns by presenting Hubbard as a docile icon of stereotypical femininity. As Roy states, this description has the effect of "domesticating the Labrador wilderness" (97). In another passage, Hubbard comments, "all day the mosquitos and flies had been bad, but now the rain coaxed them out in redoubled force, and they were dreadful. I could feel how swollen my neck and ears were, and wondered how I looked; but I was rather glad that I had no mirror with me" (66). While the image of a bug-bitten Hubbard contravenes that of luxurious Sunday morning domestic bliss, the mention of a mirror and its associated

vanity suggests a carefully constructed representation that is recognizably feminine and mitigates the dangers inherent in early exploration. In her introduction to Hubbard's text, Grace discusses the symbolism of the mirror: "In her search for a satisfactory way to represent herself in an historical moment and in the performance of a professional activity that tried to exclude women, Mina enacted a self-reflexive double-voicing that replaced the physical mirror she did not take" (ixxv). On the other hand, in Hubbard's article "Labrador, From Lake Melville to Ungava Bay" the affliction of insects is established in a different context:

The flies and mosquitoes, for which the country is famed, did not wholly fail of accomplishing their dire designs upon us; but their ravages are easily forgotten in the remembrance of the beauties of that lone land which can smile with so much grace, even though its mood has been one of such persistent cruelty. (539)

The context of a clinical and detached observation, as dictated by the article's scientific nature, places emphasis on nature as opposed to the individual. Adopting her late husband's spiritual legacy allows Hubbard to forgo the image of personal vanity expected because of gender norms and instead present an image of a woman enduring the harsh realities of wilderness.

The tension between gender and expectations is also seen in Hubbard's depiction of the rapids:

The men did not like to see me go near the river at all except when in the canoe, and warned me against going to the rapids. I promised to be careful, but not to keep away altogether, for they grew more and more fascinating. I wanted to be near them and watch them all the time. They were so strong, so irresistible. They rushed so fast, and nothing could stop them. They would find a way over or around every obstacle that might be placed before them. It made one wish that it were possible to join them and share in their strength. (55)

Encoded in her yearning to join the strength of the rapids is a repressed need to express strength in the face of adversity rather than participate in the constant display of helplessness defined by early twentieth century femininity. For Butler, "gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (10). The symbolic tension in the description of the rapids illustrates the intersecting factors that comprise Hubbard's complex identity. Hubbard reveals a deep-seated desire to display the same strength that is labeled as courage and valor only

when applied to men. This gender bias is a concept that Butler says "is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gender norms of cultural intelligibility" (17). However, Hubbard has to settle for a compromise with her fellow guides not to stray too far. Laframboise comments that "rugged endurance of wintry starvation would in a woman signify not a heroic and valiant fortitude, but foolhardiness and loss of decorum – proof that a woman could not be an explorer" (27). Societal conventions require Mina Hubbard to automatically defer authority to her male guides, causing her to lament about a later incident that "this was one of the very many things on the trip which made me wish I were a man" (66). Much to Hubbard's discontent, the binary frame of gender categories reifies the conceptual bias of masculinity as strength and femininity as frailty.

In determining Hubbard's historical role, it is useful to consider Grace's estimation that Hubbard's "expedition through unknown Labrador became for her a process of and means for exploring her own identity" (lxxiv). The relationship between gender expectations of the time, the continuation of her late husband's legacy, and the scientific backdrop of her cartography skills form a complex picture of Hubbard. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler states that "genders, then, can never be true or false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable" (528). Hubbard's perception of her identity in relation to its epistemological foundations resists clear definitions of masculinity and femininity, as well as their respective positive and negative associations. The textual fluctuations between gender representations can be ascribed to a socio-historical categorization of what is masculine and what is feminine, which are placed upon Hubbard by contemporaneous readers attempting to reconstruct her according to a strict binary ideology. Buchanan posits that Hubbard "is in the process of metamorphosis from lady to explorer, challenging the 'discursive constraints' of gender" (30). Hubbard's narrative demonstrates a constant negotiation with gender and expectations and displays a discontinuity in terms of expectations and certain hierarchical assumptions about masculinity, strength, and the historical role occupied by early female explorers.

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