

The Restlessness of *Permanent Tourists*: Genni Gunn's Shifting Landscapes

Interview with Genni Gunn

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DEBORAH SAIDERO Your recent collection of short stories, *Permanent Tourists* (2020), focuses on a host of restless characters who are part of a support group and are trying to overcome a traumatic loss of some sort (whether of a wife, a child, a husband, a lover or a parent). The journeys they embark on are both physical explorations of foreign landscapes and emotional, inner journeys into themselves, in search of some relief from grief and of an identity which remains elusive. It is the common experience of trauma and loss that seems to provide them with some temporary - or permanent - sense of interconnect-edness and bonding. What was your aim when you decided to make the lives and experiences of these diverse characters in-tersect in this collection?

GENNI GUNN The stories in the collection are connected by discon-nection. Although the characters have different life experienc-es and losses, they are all disconnected from themselves - from their own emotional centres - thus, tourists in their own lives. Marissa in "Beached" can't confront her husband's infidel-ities; Vivian in "Solitudes" escapes her promise to look after her sister, unable or unwilling to take on the responsibility; the four protagonists of the title story, "Permanent Tourists", are



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all avoiding facing their inadequacies or their guilt; Paris in "Bloodlines" is trying to force a connection to a father who, now, can barely remember her; Zoe in "Reunion" is avoiding – along with her family – the evidence of her sister's suicide attempts; Clara in "Erasures" has foregone emotional commitments with men after being 'erased' for years by a husband; Denise is in Thailand searching for her father, not wanting to confront the fact that her partner back home could have sexually harassed someone at work; and Skye in "Ghost Men" has spent a life denying the incest that has shaped her life.

As a result of not confronting their particular losses, they end up disconnected.

SAIDERO The title of the collection – we gather from the title story – was inspired by P.K. Page's 1954 poem *The Permanent Tourists*, which also investigates dislocation, dissociation and placelessness and how people find their identity as permanent tourists only when they experience alienation upon entering a foreign space. Can you tell us more about how Page has influenced your writing of these stories and your conception of identity in relation to place?

GUNN I used the idea of 'tourists' to signify people who are not fully committing to their lives, or experiences. The "terrible tourists with their empty eyes", as P.K. Page calls them, wander the world taking photos of themselves in front of monuments, yet "never enter the entire event".

So my characters are tourists in their own lives to some degree, not wanting to commit to other people, often running away to escape themselves. Many of the stories in *Permanent Tourists* are set in foreign locations, with Canadian protagonists in continuous movement, though their alienation has nothing to do with locales, but with their inner lives.

In terms of the support group, there's another of P.K. Page's poems that speaks to me about this disconnection. The poem is called *Contagion* and speaks of people as they "walk the twisted paths beneath the dripping trees almost as if their mouths were sealed and words forced to parade as ghosts". And at the end of that stanza, Page talks about the recognition of people who have this same disease. So I saw the support group as a place where these people recognized each other for their losses, and thus were more able to confront themselves.

It's a difficult question to think about identity in relation to place. Nowadays more than ever before, people are on the move globally – a moving global population of approximately 272 million, is the fifth largest in the world, between Indonesia and Pakistan. So how to link identity and place?

Many immigrants retain their birthplace as identity. So is identity linked to 'home'? and what if you don't have a sense of 'home' in your country of birth? Is it necessary to link identity to place? I'm thinking here of all the different identities people adopt. Can identity be tied to more than one place? In a way, identity - in terms of nation - is a problem mostly for first-generation immigrants; the second-generation will probably struggle more with their parents' expectations than with their own identities - and even this doesn't occur for everyone; and by the time the second generation has children that generation will most likely take on the identity of whatever country/culture they live in.

I must say that when I'm writing, the last thing on my mind is identity of any kind. I am who I am, doing what I do. It's not necessary for me to question and obsess over that. I am Italian by birth and Canadian by naturalization. I have passports for both countries. That's it.

DS Have any other writers or theorists inspired you?

GUNN When I was at university, my sister who was living in Zimbabwe at the time, recommended a book, *An Instant in the Wind* by Andre Brink, a South African author. What this book did was open my eyes to the idea and the possibility of form. The book was written in two first-person voices, often in the same sentence in the same paragraph, and yet there was no doubt who was speaking. The voices were so clear. And I thought, normally that's the sort of thing we writers say we should never try, because it's never going to work. Here it did work, and that excited me about the possibility of form and what new things you could create. I went on to read all of his other books and several have been made into films. He did not disappoint me because each book is a completely different experiment. In the end, that's what I'm interested in, creatively and artistically, because really, all the stories have been told. We know stories about love, jealousy, death, and they've been told sixty million times. To try and figure out how to tell a story in a slightly different way is, I think, what's interesting, to try and experiment with something, to find some other way to still make it just as appealing. *Permanent Tourists* was an experiment in connecting disparate stories through disconnection. Writers continue to inspire me. Some I adore: Damon Galgut, Rachel Cusk, J.M. Coetzee, Doris Lessing, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Tim O'Brien, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, Russell Banks, Elena Ferrante... The list goes on endlessly.

SAIDERO Travel is an important part of your life. You define yourself as a restless traveller and acknowledge that some of the stories were written when you were a 'permanent tourist' in Cambodia, Mexico, Thailand, Italy, and the US. There are, indeed, numerous similarities between some of the stories and the travel experiences you recount in your 2013 travelogue *Tracks*, not only in terms of the destinations and locations described but also in terms of imagery, metaphors, symbols and recurring thematic threads. I'm thinking, for example, of the references to photographs as relevant narratives in "Beached", of the dogs in "Strays" which recall the wild dogs of Yangon, or the caves as symbols of the inner self in "Erasures" and "Permanent Tourists". How does your travelling forge your own identity as a writer? In other words, how does it come into the creative process? And does it differ in the non-fictional account of *Tracks'* autobiographical persona and in the fictional stories?

GUNN I don't consider myself a 'permanent tourist', but rather a traveller. There's a big difference. I've been moving around since I was a baby. For a variety of reasons, my father, mother, sister and I did not live together while in Italy, so my childhood was spent travelling up and down Italy - my father is from Udine, I was born in Trieste, my mother is from Puglia. They were travellers too, and perhaps my whole family has always moved about. My sister has lived abroad most of her adult life, currently in Thailand, my mother has lived in dozens of houses across Canada, and I spent many years on the road as a musician, scribbling in books as I went, as well as travels into foreign countries. So my identity is tied to movement, and this doesn't mean that I'm searching for an identity as much as I feel like this is my identity. I'm pretty happy wherever I am, and I also long for wherever I'm not.

As a writer, I'm always searching for the interesting story, the thing that catches my eye or my ear. Often, these are not large enough to be stories in themselves, but can be shaped into fiction to say something. For example, in "Solitudes", as you pointed out, some of the story takes the same incident which I witnessed and wrote about in the travel memoir - about the mentally ill man being stoned. That set me thinking about fear and I constructed the story around that idea, incorporating not only the social, but also the political. In the non-fiction accounts, I had to choose events that were dramatic in their own way for the inner truths they gave up.

SAIDERO The elusiveness of identity is a constant theme in your writing and is also connected with the idea that memory is equally elusive and unreliable. Geological imagery connected

to the shifting nature of the earth's surface is often used as a correlative for memory - from the poems in *Mating in Captivity* down to "Ghost Men", the final story in this collection. In these stories, you also explore both the drama implicit in the loss of memory/identity due to Alzheimer's (through the character of Cole in "Bloodlines") and the potential of voluntary/partial amnesia or selective memory to act as a remedy against loss, hurt and pain. Is it so? Can the suppression of memory and former identities release from pain? Or is it necessary to endlessly recall memories, value them like the fluorescent fossils in "Erasures"?

GUNN Such a good question. Memory is a very pliable thing, and perhaps that's why I like the earth as metaphor, because like memory it shifts and changes, and also remains stationary. Each time we pull out a memory, we put it back in a new place. So if we've added a small detail, the next time we tell that memory, the detail is in to. You can appreciate that after a lot of retelling, who knows what's read and what's embellished? So in a way, we do alter our memories to make them more agreeable. Families do this constantly - each person recalls a memory in a different way, etc. Without memory, we have no identity - this is the most distressing thing that happens to people with Alzheimer's. They don't know who they are. So I think we do need to endlessly recall memories, to remind ourselves of who we are, though of course, we also sanitize them along the way.

SAIDERO Geology, biology, archaeology, paleontology, astrology and natural history are widely used as semantic fields for metaphors to describe the characters and their inner worlds. In the first story, "Beached", for example, the stranded whale on the shores of a Mexican beach symbolically equates with Monica, the betrayed wife of a marine biologist. What is the origin of such a fascination for the natural world vs. other sciences?

GUNN The natural world is the perfect metaphor for everything in our lives. Look at paintings, brush strokes, look at fabric designs, architecture - they are all evident in the natural world, in the leaves of plants, in the coloration of strata in the soil, in the sky, in the air, in the caves, in the cliffs, etc. Everything we do is a kind of facsimile of the natural world. Reflections.

SAIDERO Some of the stories overtly criticize technology, phones, social media, dating websites and the like, which are opposed to books and face-to-face interactions. What is your stance on this?

GUNN Well, I'm totally connected in terms of technology. I had one of the first computers ever for sale. However, I don't care for social media. Yes, I have a Facebook account, but you will

never find me on Twitter or Instagram or TikTok, etc. I'm not interested in hearing everyone's opinion about everything. I'd rather read or listen to informed opinion. Sadly, there is such a disconnection between social media and real connection. Your friends are those who will show up on your doorstep when you need someone.

SAIDERO Human cruelty and difficult human relationships run through the eight stories of *Permanent Tourists*. There is heartless violence like the stoning of a man in "Solitudes", racism against a gentle Mexican man who saves baby turtles, betrayals between spouses and lovers, neglect of children and among siblings, sexual exploitation of women and girls, pedophilia, etc. This is quite a scary, but unfortunately realistic, portrait of our current society. Like the characters, we seem to be headed toward their dysfunctional outcomes which include suicide and destructive behaviours against themselves. What way out - if any - do the stories suggest? How can we invert the lack of self-esteem occasioned by power-over relationships? Is dialogue, exchanging personal experiences and mutual support a valid healing method?

GUNN I don't know if there is a way out - I didn't write tidy endings to the stories, simply because life experiences don't have tidy endings. Probably for some people dialogue and exchanging personal experiences have value, but others deal with these things through their own examinations. I'm not a great fan of oversharing - I think there's a lot to say about spending time in one's own head and heart. That said, of course, everyone finds different ways of dealing with things. Some people garden, others write poems, others climb mountains, run around tracks, paint landscapes, etc. It's all about how we express our inner lives.

SAIDERO History is another feature of these stories. References to the historical ghosts like Cambodia's genocide or Mussolini's rule that haunt every country seem to confirm human cruelty as a universal condition, which will lead us to our demise, while the earth - we read in "Erasures" - will continue its ebbs and flows without and despite humankind. Is confronting history - both personal and collective - a necessary stage in the process of changing our relations with ourselves and others?

GUNN Absolutely. Like memory, if we don't pay attention to history, we are destined to repeat the same mistakes. It's a cliché but true. However, I don't place much hope in this - we have only to look at the state of the world at this moment to see that the lessons of history have not been learned. We may end up blowing

ourselves up, but the natural world will continue without us. History also exposes one of my fascinations. I research endlessly when I'm writing, and often out of that research I discover fascinating things I knew nothing about. In terms of place, before I write anything, I spend a lot of time researching, visiting the locale, making connections between past and present, interior and exterior, etc. It's an endless process, one that's very satisfying and illuminating.

SAIDERO The stories are set in many places across the globe. The diverse settings are not mere backdrops to the characters' experiences but influence them as well. How would you describe the role that place has in your fictional world?

GUNN This is an interesting question, and ties into form in a way, in that form and content should be married in a story. The setting of the story - the place - should enhance some aspect of the story, possibly reflecting theme, or perhaps contrasting theme.

For example, "Beached" is set in Mexico, which is synonymous with holiday and good time, while in this story the couple is on the cusp of a breakup. The story "Strays" is set in Thailand where there are millions of stray dogs, but also thousands of stray older men who go in search of young women. "Solitudes", a story about fear, is set in Cambodia, which has a terrible history of fear. So I would say I treat place as a character in my stories, and one that does influence the protagonists.

SAIDERO Music is also an important part of your life and enters your writing in numerous ways, not only through characters like the rock star Cole who belong to the music business, but also through direct musical metaphors and images, like the dripping of water that provides a soundtrack to Marisa's grief in "Solitudes", or the cacophony of sounds produced by birds, frogs, crickets, and the waves in many stories. Does your musical background also influence the creation of your stories, I mean in terms of their structure?

GUNN In general, my musical background does influence my writing, in that I'm very attuned to the rhythm of sentences, of words. Sometimes, I spend hours searching for the right word, because it has to have three syllables or begin with an 's' or something. This is probably more true in poetry, though I also hear it in prose. Each sentence has its own rhythm, and taking out a word can alter that. In terms of structure, yes, I've used musical forms in several of my stories - not in this collection though. Musical forms are very interesting to examine, because they are very well adaptable to written forms. Essentially, all musical compositions are based on four structural elements:

sound, harmony, melody and rhythm. To translate these into words – sound and rhythm are easy to understand; melody and harmony imply theme and variations. The melody of a song could be translated into the theme of a story; and harmony necessitates another voice, so it can become variation. Exposition, development and recapitulation – which really not only defines a short story but our lives as well. Beginning, middle and end.

SAIDERO The collection ends without real closure for the characters nor for the readers, but with the evocative image of Skye cupping her hands like seashells over her ears to contain the whirl of waves, the ocean of ghosts roaring in her head. This last image establishes a circular pattern with the opening lines of “Beached”, where panic is equated to the ocean tide lapping in benign ripples on the sand, which then suddenly rise in swirling breakers that smash to the shore. What are you implying with these marine metaphors?

GUNN This probably goes back to the metaphors embodied by the natural world. The ocean is unpredictable – like panic and life – sometimes calm, sometimes terrifyingly dangerous. I almost drowned once, and the ocean has forever become something I’m wary of, respectful of, frightened of. So I probably use the marine metaphors in this context.