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TRAVEL AND THE SELF IN MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD'S *THE GREAT CIRCLE*

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In this article, I analyze Maggie Shipstead's *The Great Circle* (2021), a novel in which travel represents the nexus between the two female protagonists, fictional aviator Marian Graves and Hollywood actress Hadley Baxter. Marian's attempt to fly a great circle around the world doubles as an inner journey of self-discovery, while Hadley interprets Marian in a biopic and, through this experience, identifies with her and finally overcomes her internal conflicts. The two women have similar tragic family histories and, though living half a century apart, are both oppressed by a patriarchal society that deprives them of agency and condemns the transgression of gender roles. By close reading the novel, I therefore argue that Shipstead deploys travel and travel writing to ask what it means to be a woman in the United States and to explore the contribution of physical and metaphorical journey to the discovery of both other people and the self. I also maintain that Shipstead reworks the conventional symbolism of the circle evoked by the novel's title to further complicate her epistemological inquiry by betraying expectations about completion and unity.

TRAVEL AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE SELF

Jan Borm defines travel writing, or travel literature, as "a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel" (13). As such, the term accommodates the "travel book" or "travelogue" – which, as Carl Thompson remarks, "professes to be a representation of a journey, and of events on that journey, *that really took place*" and might be read as much for pleasure as for the useful information it provides (15, original emphasis) – alongside a wide range of narratives, as different in form, genre, and/

or style as in the way they relate to travel. As a novel deeply concerned with ontology, epistemology, and the interaction of the two, *The Great Circle* fits under this broad heading by deploying travel – intended as a movement through space that also entails a metaphorical inner journey of self-discovery – to raise questions about the possibility of knowing anything, especially people. To this purpose, Shipstead combines information from multiple sources, which represent just as many examples of travel literature, to tell the story of aviator Marian Graves. This information intertwines with Hadley's first-person account of her own research and discoveries on Marian's life in preparation for impersonating her on set. The novel thus acts as a meta-narrative that fosters reflections about the inevitable artificiality of storytelling, both in general and with particular reference to travel writing.

In so doing, *The Great Circle* also highlights the fact that, as Susan Lee Roberson points out, "[t]he reasons women travel may be similar to the motivations that drove men to journey, but the degree to which their choice of travel is free, the kinds of experiences they relate, and the metaphysical roads they travel can be quite different" (214). Additionally, Roberson remarks, "even though women have shared in experiences of travel with men, much of the critical attention to travel has focused on the male traveler or a male paradigm of travel" (214). Shipstead's novel engages both these aspects of the relationship between travel writing and gender, exposing the differences and similarities between past and present forms of women's discrimination. For example, as I explain in more detail later, Marian repeatedly violates social norms from a very young age to cultivate her passion for flight or exploit her piloting skills for work. Even after women's contribution to WWII, these norms do not significantly relax and, similarly to the feats of other (real) women aviators (who were never as celebrated as their male counterparts), her epic flight around the world is soon forgotten after its tragic epilogue. Hadley remembers reading about it as a child:

> After I returned the book, I pretty much forgot about Marian. Almost all of the brave ladies of the sky are forgotten, really. There was the occasional spooky TV special about Marian in the '80s, and a handful of die-hard Marian enthusiasts are still out there spinning theories on the internet, but she didn't stick the way Amelia Earhart did. People at least *think* they know about Amelia Earhart, even though they don't. It's not really possible. (Shipstead 9–10, original emphasis)

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By the end of the novel, both Marian and Hadley have reached the conclusion that total knowledge cannot be achieved, but its pursuit remains important, if not irresistible, because the journey is what really matters. Their understanding of the personal and cultural value of travel thus progressively shifts from the dominant, typically male paradigm of travel as a search for wholeness or as an epic quest for some absolute truth to a more feminine epistemological framework that remains inclusive, flexible and open-ended.

Shipstead's narrative develops this alternative feminine worldview within the socio-cultural context of the United States, where according to Wendy Martin, travel literature, perhaps more than any other genre, provides us with a means for understanding how the nation-state was historically imagined (252). In fact, travel – along movement in general – is a central element in several of the US foundational myths, such as the myths of discovery, of the Promised Land, and of the West (the frontier). Anglo-European men, however, have been the undisputed heroes of these narratives. By deploying travel to connect the stories of two American women to one another, to their relative social and historical contexts and, implicitly, to US culture, Shipstead addresses the marginalization of women in hegemonic accounts of US national identity and experience. Marian's and Hadley's thus become examples of women's travel stories that, to borrow from Roberson, "relate spatial practices of mapping the self and [...] provide a way for us to examine how women [think] of their mobility and position in the world" (215). In Shipstead's novel, this mapping exposes the constraints that have historically oppressed women in the US and that continue to operate, changed in form but not in purpose, to attempt to shape them into patriarchal ideals.

Marian (born in 1914) is an aviator from Missoula, Montana, who in 1950 attempts a flight "around the world north-south, over the poles" (Shipstead 510) – the titular great circle. The enterprise, pointlessly dangerous from most perspectives, is not dictated by ambitions to glory, fame or success, but by the fact that, since childhood, the "belief that she would fly saturated her world, presented an appearance of absolute truth" (97). According to official records, Marian disappears – hence presumably dies – during the final leg of her flight between Little America III, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica, and Auckland, New Zealand. In 2014 Los Angeles, Hadley is a Hollywood actress in her early twenties involved in a sex scandal that threatens to destroy her career. In the attempt to exploit the situation to reinvent herself, she accepts to play Marian in an indie biopic. However, the main reason she is interested in the part is not money or professional prestige but the connection that she feels

with Marian. As she explains, they are "both products of vanishment and orphanhood and negligence and airplanes and uncles" (216). In fact, both women were raised not by their parents – who were either dead or absent – but by a negligent uncle who dies when they are in their late teens/early twenties. More significantly, Hadley's parents died by crashing with their Cessna into Lake Superior. Since neither their aircraft nor their bodies were found, Hadley used to wonder whether they had really died or simply abandoned her. The debris of Marian's airplane was never found either and, because of these similarities in their stories, Hadley thinks that by interpreting Marian, she can finally find closure, as well as her own way in life.

However, having worked first in TV commercials and become a movie star at a very young age, Hadley never learned to understand her desires or make independent decisions. She wants to be courageous and free, but admits, "I didn't know what that meant—I only knew how to pretend to know, which I guess is acting" (Shipstead 13). Similarly to Marian, it is difficult for her to find her place in the world, but contrary to the aviator, Hadley does not have a clear – a manifest – idea of what her destiny is. My use of the term "manifest" is not accidental, but is a reference to the US myth of manifest destiny that Hadley evokes also while describing her attempts at self-discovery:

> *Manifest*, my trainer said. *Manifest*. I was supposed to look in the mirror and manifest, in my mind, the body I wanted. … "Engage your core," my trainer said. … I had a shrink, briefly, who told me to imagine a glowing tiger every time I doubted myself, to imagine the tiger was my source of strength, my essence. (163, original emphasis)

The manifest is offered to Hadley as a "form of becoming," a means for turning her inner strength and power into an actual body. The strategy, however, proves to be elusive and ineffective, since Hadly concludes, "The tiger was preposterous. The tiger was me. The tiger was everything but me" (163). Despite her efforts, the person that exists underneath her fictional roles, or that she is destined to become, refuses to manifest – to herself and to others. This engenders in Hadley a constant conflict of feelings, knowledge, and truth, which also translates into a conflict between body and mind.

Flight offers an opportunity to articulate and overcome this friction, symbolized by Hadley's friend Hugo's belief that playing Marian will "*elevate* [her]" (Shipstead 168, original emphasis). Challenging the conventional dependence of knowledge on rationality and abstraction, the body is presented as key in this process. While trying on clothes

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for playing Marian, Hadley mentions: "I'd once heard a costume designer say the best actresses didn't even look in the mirror; they *felt* a costume" (253, original emphasis), suggesting that the ability to know something relies not – or not exclusively – on cognitive skills but on physical sensations, too. As a child, Marian curiously mentions clothes in a similar analogy to express her disbelief that, while she felt destined to become a pilot, "others did not see her for what she would become, that she did not wear the fact of her future like some eye-catching garment" (97). Listening to the body is also the mantra of Marian's first flight instructor, who tells her that to survive in the air you need to "train yourself not to follow your instincts but to build up new instincts instead" (155) and "fly by the seat of your pants" (173). By welcoming the sensorial as a means for knowing, these examples draw attention to the disparity between epistemological processes conventionally considered second-class and associated with femininity, and hegemonic (male) meaning-making paradigms.

On the one hand, flying requires theoretical knowledge as much as the ability to physically become one with the airplane. It therefore provides Marian and (through her performance) Hadley with a subversive activity that allows them to celebrate and even foreground bodily experience – and its impact on individual identity – in a technical, scientific, and ultimately masculine discipline. On the other hand, however, its soaring effect can also easily appear as a means for escaping the weight of existence and the social expectations/gender norms that oppress both Marian and Hadley. If inspired by fear, it thus becomes a movement that separates from the body. As Marian writes in her logbook:

> When you are truly afraid, you experience an urgent desire to split from your body. You want to remove yourself from the thing that will experience pain and horror, but you are that thing. You are aboard a sinking ship, and you are the ship itself. But, flying, fear can't be permitted. To inhabit yourself fully is your only hope and, beyond that, to make the airplane a part of yourself, also. (Shipstead 538)

Hadley initially thinks that by playing Marian she would "get to be someone who wasn't afraid" (488). One of the first lessons that she learns from impersonating the aviator, then, is that, in reality, to master the role of Marian as Marian mastered flying implies respecting and embracing fear, instead of treating it "like a god to be

appeased" (488). In this regard, it is emblematic that Hadley refuses to use a stunt for the scene in which Marian plunges her plane down toward the sea and insists on shooting it herself, as a means for finding closure for her parents' death.

THE ILLUSION OF KNOWLEDGE

However, the fact that Hadley's and Marian's stories intersect and merge on a Hollywood set – the quintessential place where imitations of life are created – exposes the novel's key concern with the fraught relationship between narrative and truth. From this perspective, it is possible to consider *The Great Circle* a work of metafiction in Patricia Waugh's terms, that is, "fiction writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). As she researches Marian's life to support her performance, Hadley is increasingly uneasy about the way the movie *Peregrine* ignores or distorts the few certain facts that are known about it. Hadley describes this version of Marian as "a game of telephone" (Shipstead 491), because the movie is only the last in a series of narratives that progressively distance themselves from the real person that they profess to portray. The most reliable source of information on Marian is *The Sea, the Sky, the Birds Between: The Lost Logbook of Marian Graves*. The book was published by Matilda Pfeiffer, who also paid for Marian's flight, and is based on Marian's travel journal, unexpectedly recovered in Little America III in 1958. Matilda declares having left the manuscript unchanged, in order not to shape and prettify Marian's spontaneous thoughts (171). The logbook thus highlights a central preoccupation with travel literature: the extent to which it is explicitly written or edited for publication. As Clare Broome Saunders argues,

> Truth is at the heart of … generic distinctions [among different forms of travel writing]: the assumed authenticity and greater honesty of a personal diary or correspondence which records personal experiences, when in fact these forms can easily be manipulated with omissions and elisions to meet the agenda of the writer; the veil of untruth that covers the "fictional" literature of travel, which often reports actual facts and events, disguised as fiction to suit the author's purpose. (1)

While Marian accepts Matilda's invitation to keep a record of her journey, she also expresses ambivalence about turning it into a book, reinforced by the claim in the last entry of her logbook that "No one should ever

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read this. My life is my one possession" (Shipstead 8). Nevertheless, Marian eventually leaves the journal behind, which suggests that she might have wanted her story to survive.

The responsibility for any possible manipulation of her manuscript thus falls completely on the publisher (Matilda), whose disclaimer the reader is free to decide whether to believe or not. It is worth noticing that Matilda's interest in Marian's journal is not, or at least not completely, conventional for a commercial publisher: she tells Marian to write "what you see, what you think, what happens … The experience is the thing. You. Not some imaginary line on the globe" (Shipstead 511–12). Her advice to Marian is to focus on what flying a great circle means to her, and not on the conventional meaning that this imaginary line has as a symbol of human mastery on the world. Matilda continues, "Don't tie yourself in knots over it. Just write down what happens, and you can decide later what to do with it … You must do everything you can to remember. Not just what you see, but what it means. To *you*" (513, original emphasis). These words clearly frame Marian's journey as a quest for self-discovery and identity building, and travel literature as a genre in which life writing (here in the diary form) inevitably encounters and merges with the scientific approach of great geographical explorations.

However, *The Great Circle*'s fragmented structure and metafictional content frustrates the possibility for the reader – of Matilda's edited book as well as of Shipstead's novel – to access Marian's thoughts. Whereas passages from *The Sea, the Sky, the Birds Between* are signposted with bibliographical references, the source of the information presented in the other chapters about Marian's life is not explicitly mentioned. Consequently, readers are led to question their reliability, since it is impossible to establish who the omniscient extradiegetic narrator is. This aspect of the novel highlights another similarity between Marian and Hadley: the fact that both women are systematically objectified and appear to Shipstead's readers as public figures constructed by others. As far as Marian is concerned, the movie *Peregrine* adapts not the content of her logbook but the novel *Wings of Peregrine*, which is only loosely based on it. The author, Carol Feiffer, is the wife of a descendant of Matilda Feiffer. Carol declares that she felt inspired and liberated by Marian's story, which helped her survive her difficult marriage. In her attempt to regain control of her own life, it is evident that she made order in Marian's story, too, romanticizing, reinterpreting, or inventing some of its core aspects. Unsurprisingly, the novel's Hollywood adaptation partakes in the same attempt to make Marian more relatable while simultaneously turning her into a mythical figure,

an epic example, as Hadley puts it, of "plucky girl power or the tragedy of biting off more than you can chew" (Shipstead 364).

The progressive shortening of the titles of all these texts about Marian is emblematic of a process of compression that, while inevitable and common to all forms of storytelling, the movie *Peregrine* brings to an unnecessary extent. Hadley describes the process as "tak[ing] Marian's life and dropp[ing] it from a great height onto something hard, and every day we picked up different pieces and pressed them into place" (Shipstead 488). The artificiality of the movie script is a perfect example of "the veil of untruth that covers the 'fictional' literature of travel" (1) mentioned by Saunders, introduced in this case not by the author/traveler but by third parties. As Hadley observes, "[i]t's impossible to ever fully explain yourself while you're alive, and then once you're dead, forget about it – you're at the mercy of the living" (Shipstead 500). Eventually, the constructedness of *Peregrine*'s Marian is fully unmasked when Hadley secretly receives a box of letters and objects that Marian bequeathed to her brother's daughter, Adelaide. While sieving though them, Hadley wonders whether she is just "trying to insert [herself] into an inscrutable, long-concluded drama" or if the past has something to tell her in particular (544). From the letters complex relationships emerge that confirm Carol's account of Marian's love life as a pure conjecture. For example, in the novel (and the movie), Marian is in a romantic relationship with her navigator, Eddie, whom at some point she betrays with her childhood friend Caleb. The letters reveal that Eddie was gay and the paper husband of Ruth, Marian's lover during WWII. Hadley is grateful to receive this information when the movie is practically done, because "now the truth about Marian seemed too big, too amorphous for me to gather" (566). To disguise it to her audience, she would have had to act on too many levels.

The fact that romantic relationships are the most distorted aspect of Marian's life aligns with the function that sexuality has historically played in women's oppression and objectification. Significantly, Marian is not the only victim of this process. The revelations brought about by her letters mirror the dynamics and implications of Hadley's sex scandal: by cheating on her real-life partner, who is also the actor who plays Hadley's lead character's lover in the *Archangel* movies, Hadley has "punctured the romantic illusion" (Shipstead 62–63) and exposed the person underneath her character. This worries the movie studio because fans want to believe in the merging of fiction with reality. As a Hollywood star, therefore, Hadley is as objectified and "constructed" by others as Marian: she cannot enjoy any privacy and her person(ality) is constantly (re)invented by journalists, paparazzi, and fanfiction

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fantasies inspired by her cinematographic roles. On the red carpet, she feels dissolved by the flashes of the cameras around her and wishes that she could leave her body and vanish in that light – a desire that she shares with Marian and to which I return later.

The social dynamics that subject both Marian and Hadley to oppression and objectification resonate with Roberson's observation that sexuality is an area where men's and women's travel experiences and narratives strongly differ. If, on the one hand, the traveling woman is at sexual risk compared to a man (that is, at risk of sexual abuse), on the other hand, she is also viewed as "a threat to patriarchy and social order" (223) for exercising a freedom of movement that social norms, depending on the specific historical and cultural context, either limit or completely foreclose. Moreover, as Thompson observes, particularly with reference to pre-1800 US literature,

> [i]f the female traveller contravenes the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres by quitting her home and venturing out into the world, the female travel writer, or at least, the woman who *publishes* a travel account, contravenes that ideology twice over. Not only does she travel, she then positions herself a second time in the public sphere, as an author. (180, original emphasis)

While Thompson provides a further explanation to the widespread use of the epistolary or diary form by women travel writers as a means "to suggest that their observations were never originally intended for publication" (180), his argument also draws attention to the importance of sexuality and the transgression of gender roles in Marian's story. As an adolescent, Marian used to disguise as a boy to find jobs and save money for her flying lessons. This is how she meets Barclay Macqueen, who uses flight as a bargaining chip to trap her into marriage: while he initially pays for her lessons and employs her as a bush pilot for his smuggling business, giving her the illusion of independence and freedom, after the wedding he forbids Marian from flying and (unsuccessfully) attempts to relegate her to the roles of wife and mother. Marian escapes in her airplane and settles in Alaska, where she supports herself, initially under false name, thanks to her piloting skills. A similar situation allows Hadley to unveil the mystery of Marian's disappearance: when Adelaide encourages her to visit the man that Caleb adopted in the 1970s, Hadley discovers a newspaper article with a picture of Marian, disguised as a shepherd man. The picture is evidence that Marian did not die. Her plane crashed but she survived and decided to temporarily change identity to start a new life.

Marian's disappearance, therefore, does not coincide, as it often occurs, with her literal death, but is a fissure in the circle of her story that leads to a new beginning and, ultimately, to open-endedness. Her incomplete flight is a "broken" great circle that in its opening contains all the possibilities and all the truth about Marian that any attempt at reconstructing her story will always inevitably fail to encompass. This opening represents a difference between reality and fiction comparable to the inevitable difference "between where [you] are going and where [you] mean to go" (Shipstead 525) when you fly. Marian describes it as the "wedge of discrepancy" where life is (525). Her flight was supposed not only to trace a complete circle, but also to help her achieve a sense of self-determination and independence. Instead, in the last entry of her logbook, she writes,

> Circles are wondrous because they are endless. Anything endless is wondrous. But endlessness is torture, too. I knew the horizon could never be caught but still chased it. … It isn't how I thought it would be, now that the circle is almost closed, the beginning and end held apart by one last fearsome piece of water. I thought I would believe I'd seen the world, but there is too much of the world and too little of life. I thought I would believe I'd completed something, but now I doubt anything can be completed. I thought I would not be afraid. I thought I would become more than I am, but instead I know I am less than I thought. (11)

By then, Marian has finally made peace with the impossibility of knowing, or completing, anything.

The implications of her "broken circle" can be fully appreciated only if contrasted with the conventional symbolical association of circles with wholeness. According to Donald Wood Winnicott,

> [t]he diagram of the healthiest conceivable human being could be thought of as a sphere or more simply as a circle, and immediately it will be necessary to put a line down the centre. The individual with this degree of health is capable of containing all the conflicts that arise from within and without, and although there must always be war or potential war along the line in the centre, on either side of the line there become organized (by the integrative forces that belong to human development) groupings of benign and persecutory elements. (222–23)

Marian's journey – geographical and metaphorical – is an attempt at closing the circle of her personal fulfillment, while flight is the means through which she tries to manage and contain the conflicts generated by (the clash between) internal and external forces. These include her solitary childhood, the difficulty

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of understanding her sexuality, her marriage with and separation from Barclay, the way women pilots were treated in the US army during WWII (relegated to inferior roles despite their skills and experience and considered a logistic problem – a temptation to men – in camps and bases) and, afterward, their difficulty to be hired by commercial airlines that wanted them only as models of American womanhood, always perfectly dressed, coiffed, and made up, at home and on the workplace. By embracing the impossibility of fitting in the roles that society prescribes for her and leaving her circular journey incomplete, Marian embodies an alternative approach to epistemological quests that shows disillusionment with the ambition for total knowledge emblematized by the encyclopedia's circle of knowledge.

Furthermore, by unexpectedly deciding to level her plane and parachute out instead of crashing into the ocean, Marian also overcomes another imperative that has accompanied her throughout her life: her attraction for disappearance and dissolution or, in other word, her death drive. Similarly to Hadley, who feels dissolved by the spotlights of success, Marian is lured by the promise of freedom that accompanies annihilation, which in Shipstead's novel primarily takes the form of a fear of/pull toward great depths. Several times Marian reminisces about the dark crevasse over which her airplane stalled in one of her earliest solo flights – and toward which she felt attracted in her mourning for her recently passed flight instructor. The memory occurs firstly when Caleb warns her that, if she let him, Barclay will swallow her up in his attempt to control her and Marian replies "It's not the end of the world, being swallowed up," while conjuring up the mental image of the crevasse (Shipstead 299). Secondly, when her brother dies and "[t]he only impulse she could identify was to be drowned in the ocean. … The water was what she sought, the expanse and oblivion. … She was over the crevasse again" (481–82). Thirdly, in Antarctica, where her plane lands on the brink of a cliff – "A few feet of vertical ice glow blue in the crevasse; below that is a familiar darkness" (552), and finally when, guilty for surviving her plane crash, "[s]he catches herself remembering Eddie falling into a crevasse, though it had not happened. Or perhaps it had, later" (586).

A similar pull is exercised by the ocean in Marian's last flight, when she promises herself "My last descent won't be the tumbling helpless kind but a sharp gannet plunge – a dive with intent, aimed at something deep in the sea" (Shipstead 7). These inscrutable depths symbolize what the ancient Greek called the primordial Void, or Chaos,

"a dark emptiness, where nothing is visible. A realm of falling, of vertigo and confusion – endless, bottomless" from which all life originally arose (Vernant 3). As Donald Campbell argues,

> [t]he suicide fantasy represents a solution to the conflict which results from the wish to merge with mother, on the one hand, and the consequent primitive anxieties about annihilation of the self, on the other. By projecting the hated, engulfing or abandoning primal mother on to the body and then killing it, the surviving self is free to fuse with the split-off idealised, desexualised, omnipotently gratifying mother represented by states of oceanic bliss, dreamless eternal sleep, a permanent sense of peace, becoming one with the universe or achieving a state of nothingness. (77)

Unsurprisingly, Marian wonders whether she has inherited her death drive from her mother (who suffered from severe depression), or it is the call of the abyss that should have shallowed her and her brother when they were just a few months old, on board of the sinking *Josephina Eterna* (which their mother refused to leave, thus committing suicide). By surviving the breaking of her great circle, Marian eventually learns to distinguish between the freedom offered to her by solitude and flight and the desire to die, and accepts the impossibility of achieving any state of totality – through knowledge or otherwise.

Similarly, even if stunting Marian's "dive with intent" on set was supposed to transform her into a confident person by revealing to her some essential truth about her parents' death, once she learns that Marian survived, Hadley understands that the metaphorical inner journey on which she embarked by performing Marian will never bring her to the expected destination either. Concluding that closure, like the *Peregrine* movie, is just another illusion (Shipstead 13) and that "[n]o story is ever whole" (577), Hadley reorganizes her existential quest as a broken/open circle in which endlessness (intended as eternal repetition) is replaced by a form of continuity that involves a certain degree of change. In this system, the interruption/opening of a circle thus becomes the premise for the beginning of a new, interconnected one. This strategy for coping with the impossibility of closure merges with Hadley's fantasies of dissolution and manifests especially in the attempts to process her parents' death. While watching a documentary on the boat-like objects that Adelaide let sink along the Californian coast and that became "[g]radually … obscured by coral and sponges, encrusted with tiny creatures" (484), Hadley wonders "Were my parents bones? Or were their bones gone? Was their plane encrusted with tiny mussels, furred with algae?" (484). The landscape where their Cessna crashed evokes a similar image

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in a younger Hadley, who ponders that mountains once as big or bigger than the Himalayas have been "eroded away to nothing, time kicking down that particular sandcastle, glaciers scraping the rock bare and then disappearing, too" (70). Finally, remarking the fact that Hadley is the only one who knows about Marian's survival, physical decay and environmental cycles are also used in the closing chapter of Shipstead's novel to imagine Marian's real death, fifty-six years after her disappearance, while leaving it endlessly open, too:

> She's in the ocean now, as she was always meant to be. Most of her has come to rest, scattered, on the cold southern seafloor, but some of her smallest, lightest fragments, floating dust, are still being carried along by the currents. Fish ate a few tiny motes of her, and a penguin ate one of those fish and regurgitated it to his chick, and some infinitesimal speck of her was back on Antarctica for a while, as guano on a nest of pebbles, until a storm washed her back out to sea. (581)

Hadley's attempt to contend with death by conceiving of it not as finality but as metamorphosis leads her to embrace a vision of life and death as an endless series of circles that, instead of closing back on themselves, always merge with or generate other circles. By involving the whole of creation, this mechanism allows her to imagine ways in which, from a certain perspective, people never completely disappear, and individual limits and imperfections are always lost to and redressed in the grand scheme of things.

Shipstead's novel reinforces this revised symbolism of the circle by mirroring it in its macro-structure. Marian's phrase "a dive with intent," which clearly evokes Muriel Spark's *Loitering with intent* (1981) and its metafictional exploration of female writing and authorship, appears right on the first page, thus drawing attention to the fact that *The Great Circle* itself is a series of interlooping narratives with different relationships with reality. After opening with the last page of Marian's logbook and a brief account of Hadley's last day on set, the novel moves back and forth between fragments of Marian's story in the third person, from her birth to her last flight, and of Hadley's first-person narration of the months of the shooting, constellated with flashbacks. Instead of concluding by returning to its opening point (Marian's alleged death and Hadley's shooting of the corresponding scene), the novel continues by reporting what happened after Marian and her plane disappeared in the Southern Ocean. This short final chapter, too, has a circular structure: it begins with the image of Marian's ashes dissolving into the sea quoted earlier, jumps back to her plane crash, and finally leads to Marian's second, actual death in a farm in New Zealand. The reader can accept it as truth offered by the anonymous

omniscient narrator or consider it either another unreliable conjecture on the end of Marian's life or a hopeful reconstruction of it.

Through Hadley's and Marian's interconnected, open-ended journeys of self-discovery, *The Great Circle* thus argues that incompleteness and imperfection are inherent qualities of any quest for knowledge and presents women's travel writing as a spatial and metaphorical practice of mapping the world and the self characterized by these same qualities. This epistemological framework is summarized by Shipstead's map of Marian's flight, on which an imperfect, incomplete circle around the world illustrates the aviator's final observations about her journey: "I wish the line [that we traveled] were a smooth meridian, a perfect, taut hoop, but our course was distorted by necessity: the indifferent distribution of islands and airfields, the plane's need for fuel" (Shipstead 7), "[i]Inevitably we will omit almost everything . . .nly cover one track as wide as our wings, glimpse only one set of horizons" (530). The map, like Shipstead's novel, not only subverts the significance of the cartographic great circle and the interrelated symbology of the circle in general. By offering a representation of the world in which the Americas do not appear (except for the easternmost part of Alaska), it also draws attention to women's exclusion from or marginalization in processes – and narratives – of national identity construction. By foregrounding untold or skewed stories of travel and self-discovery, *The Great Circle* emphasizes the importance of retrieving women's experiences and ways of knowing and offers their travel writing as a powerful site for the exploration and understanding of gender discrimination in US society.

Abstract: This article presents travel as the nexus between the two protagonists of Maggie Shipstead's *The Great Circle* (2021): aviator Marian Graves, whose passion for flight and physical travels double as, and intensify, an inner journey of self-discovery, and Hadley Baxter, a contemporary Hollywood actress who interprets Marian in a biopic and, through this experience, identifies with her, expanding her consciousness and constructing herself as woman. Marian and Hadley have similar, tragic family histories and, despite living a century apart, are both subject to the violence and constraints of a patriarchal society that deprives women of agency and condemns the transgression of gender roles. Consequently, the novel deploys multiple forms of travel and travel writing to ask what it means to be a woman in the United States and explore the contribution of physical and metaphorical journey to the discovery of the self, other people and the world. While close in scope to canonical male travel narratives, I argue that *The Great Circle* juxtaposes different stories (Marian's logbook, a novel and a biography based on it, and Hadley's movie) and, therefore, different accounts of Marian's life, to raise questions about the very possibility of knowing anything or anybody. The novel simultaneously denounces women's objectification by presenting both Marian and Hadley as public fig-

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ures constructed by others: Marian's logbook is fictionalized and published without her consent, while Hadley exists only in the characters that she plays and the image that the tabloids project of her. Shipstead's ambiguous use of the symbolism of the circle further complicates the novel's epistemological inquiry by betraying expectations about continuity and closure. All circles and journeys in the novel remain open-ended and merge with one another, connecting people and experiences across space and time.

Keywords: travel in American fiction, *The Great Circle*, travel as self-discovery, women and travel writing

Bio: Elisa Pesce (she/her) is completing her PhD in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. Her project investigates the reasons underlying the omission of women from maximalist models by assessing the scope and implications of this narrative mode in the framework of contemporary cultural production in the United States. She is therefore interested in the interrelation between standards of genre formation and literary merit and questions of power. Elisa is Early Career Fellow of the International American Studies Association. She has presented her research outputs at various international conferences and published in international journals such as *JAm It!* (Journal of American Studies in Italy) and the *European Journal of American Studies*. In addition to academic research, she also works as an independent translator and EFL teacher.

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