

# Riding Emotions

The Motorcycle as a Vehicle of Political E/Motions in

Rachel Kushner's Novel *The Flamethrowers*

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NORA BERNING

From zero to two hundred, turn right to go right.  
From two hundred to three hundred, turn left to  
go right.  
Faster than three hundred, turn right to go right.  
R. KUSHNER, *THE FLAMETHROWERS*, 125.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: EMOTION, LITERATURE AND MOVEMENT

Originally denoting a public disturbance in the 16th century, the word ‘emotion’ (from French *émotion*, from *émouvoir* ‘excite’ based on Latin *emovere*) has, since the 1980s, celebrated its comeback in a wide range of academic disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, medicine, neuroscience, cognitive literary theory and the arts, to name but a few. Consequently, Thomas Anz (2006) speaks – in analogy to the turns mentioned in Doris Bachmann-Medick’s seminal work *Cultural Turns* (2016) – of an “emotional turn”, which has left any number of traces in literary theory in recent years.

Emotions are at the very heart of the production and reception of literature, as one of the main functions of literature is to evoke and impart emotions.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, literature in general and travel writing in particular is predicated on the intimate link between emotion and movement. For the purpose of this paper and with a focus on the processual side of writing, I will conceive of motorcycle

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1 Cf. Winko 2003.

literature, understood as a specific type of travel literature, not as a fictional thought experiment, nor as the depiction of a certain worldview or *Weltanschauung*, but rather, following Patrick Colm Hogan, “as a human activity”,<sup>2</sup> i.e. as “something people *do*”.<sup>3</sup>

Such a processual approach to (travel) literature has the advantage that the relationship between writing, emotion and movement is foregrounded. In order to clarify this relationship it is necessary to first of all disentangle the triad of writing, emotion and movement by defining each individual notion as well as its rapport with the other two. In *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds* (2014), Vera Nünning convincingly shows in which ways fictional stories serve as a “tool for feeling”.<sup>4</sup> The cognitive value of fiction, she argues, is that it “provides a second-order representation and interpretation of emotions”.<sup>5</sup> While the capacity of fiction to change people’s minds is a topic that Claudia Hillebrandt (2011) has explored in-depth in relation to works by Kafka, Perutz and Werfel, reader-oriented studies in reception theory or empirical studies in discourse processing only give us half the picture. Hogan’s story-oriented account provides a glimpse into the complexity of the topic at hand. His argument that stories “are structured and animated by emotions”<sup>6</sup> stresses the production side of literature.

The process of writing a story is anything but a neutral endeavour. Whereas John Hayes and Linda Flower in their 1980s model of the writing process have largely ignored the role of emotions, research on the cognitive processes in writing has more and more come to attend to the subjective aspects of language production: one of the results of Alice G. Brand’s research<sup>7</sup> is that the writing process is by and large motivated by emotions. She argues that writers have an affective long-term memory in which they store past writing experiences. Emotions can have, at the same time, a facilitating and an inhibiting influence on the cognitive selection processes. They shape the emplotment and the revision processes in writing. This seems intuitively right, especially when one considers that narrative is the main format in which human beings make sense of their emotions.

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2 Hogan 2003: 3.

3 Ibid., emphasis N.B.

4 Nünning 2014: 109.

5 Ibid.: 117.

6 Hogan 2003: 5.

7 Brand 1987: 436-443.

In light of this, and taking Rachel Kushner's motorcycle narrative as an example, I argue that *The Flamethrowers* (TF)<sup>8</sup> is the result of a premediated process: The novel is premediated or prefigured in manifold ways by a number of paradigmatic scripts, scenarios and stories by which Kushner-the-author has come to learn, remember, process and share emotions. TF is thus formed by the author's emotions (or "emotion systems"<sup>9</sup>), which have informed her choice of specific narrative patterns. Emotions organize not only individual stories but even whole genres, as Birgit Neumann demonstrates in terms of the 18th-century sentimental travelogue.<sup>10</sup> For instance, considering the title of Laurence Sterne's 1768 travelogue, *A Sentimental Journey*, it is hardly surprising that it is primarily guided by affection. What is remarkable, however, is how closely linked the narrative portrayal of emotions is to the choice of the means of transportation. Sterne's travelogue is a particularly interesting case of "emotion work", as it powerfully associates emotions with movement. It illustrates that the ways in which stories of movement are structured depends on two things: our emotion systems and our means of motion. Sterne's work is, furthermore, evidence of the fact that emotions and means of motion are not only intimately bound up with one another but that the development of the means of transportation not only affects how people travel but also how they write about their journeys. Tim Youngs (2015) has sketched this interrelation between literature, emotion and movement in narratives of early motorcycle travel. Narrative portrayals of the experience of riding are often narratives of the self, where self-making implies emotion-making. As per Moritz Holfelder (2000), riding a motorcycle is essentially about emotion and movement.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the motorcycle is a perfect vehicle of e/motions, i.e. a driving force of intense feelings and also political themes, as I will demonstrate in this paper.

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8 All subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text with page numbers in parentheses.

9 Cf. Hogan 2011: 1.

10 Cf. Neumann 2011: 155-176.

11 Motorcycle lore is based to a large extent on how different types of engines elicit different emotional states. "[T]he assumption that different motorcycle engines produce vibration different enough to be at least potentially influential in creating an emotional state is itself subject to experimental analysis." Thompson 2008: 38.

## 2. “RIDING EMOTIONS”: THE MOTORCYCLE AS A “TOOL FOR FEELING”

Just as emotions have for a long time been “perceived as part of the animal, i.e. lower, side of human nature”,<sup>12</sup> the motorcycle has always had a bad press; particularly, the portrayal of so-called ‘outlaw’ motorcycle clubs (e.g. the Hells Angels) in mainstream media is, as William L. Dulaney (2005) has shown, highly biased and predicated on stereotypes. Hollywood filmmakers were quick to perpetuate the distorted image in movies like *Wild Angels* (1966) or *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967). In literature, too, the motorcycle serves as a metaphor for all sorts of e/motions and values: it stands simultaneously for subversion, discontent and freedom, for instance, in so-called ‘roadlogues’, i.e. “non-fiction road trip narratives”.<sup>13</sup>

What is striking in almost all examples of motorcycle literature is that “the emotional trip”<sup>14</sup> the rider makes and that is narrated in these texts is grounded in his or her emotional rapport with the machine, as the following example illustrates: Recounting how she was almost killed in an accident, Clare Sheridan, in *Across Europe with Satanella* (1925), writes: “I do not blame Satanella, she always seemed to me a *human thing*, full of temperament and tact.”<sup>15</sup> The anthropomorphism, i.e. the attribution of human traits, emotions and intentions to nonhuman entities, is characteristic of many motorcycle narratives. From the beginning, the genre of motorcycle literature was preoccupied with emotional selves – both human and nonhuman.

For example, the first motorcycle narrative, Victor Appleton’s *Tom Swift and His Motor-Cycle*, published in 1910, describes an emotional road trip to Albany, where Tom is supposed to deliver his father’s revolutionary turbine design plans. “Tom”, the narrator recounts, “had a natural love for machinery”, and when he saw how a man smashed his motorcycle, “it hurt him almost as much to see a piece of fine apparatus abused as it did to see an animal mistreated”.<sup>16</sup> The motorcycle, in this example, is not just a vehicle of e/motions and certain themes. Rather, it is a “tool for feeling”.<sup>17</sup> As the concept of the “semanticization of

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12 Schlaeger 1999: 9.

13 Jennings 2004: 98.

14 Potter 2013: 356.

15 Sheridan 1925: 215; emphasis N.B.

16 Appleton 2006: 16.

17 Nünning 2014: 109.

literary forms”<sup>18</sup> suggests, narrative means of representation serve as carriers of meaning and, in this context, of e/motions.

In travel literature in general and motorcycle narratives in particular, the social relations of travel and travel narrating in the 20th and 21st centuries are almost always mediated by nonhuman objects, i.e. technologies of motion (e.g. animal, plane, ship, automobile, train). Vehicles of motion

organize the entire sensorium differently and thus affect the conditions, the focalizing range, and the position of the perceiving subject, differently connecting and disconnecting her to and from the terrain of travel, differently organizing her ways of negotiating unfamiliar territory, and differently affecting systems of behavior.<sup>19</sup>

Following from this logic, the motorcycle is a mode of thought, feeling, perception and meaning: in a nutshell, it is a vehicle of e/motions, precisely because it shapes the affective dynamics of travel and storytelling. In motorcycle narratives, the affective dynamics of travel are in profound ways about the unmaking of the borders between the human (the motorcyclist) and the nonhuman (the machine) and about the silent undoing of the borders between corporeality and technology. Kris Lackey, the author of *RoadFrames* (1997), refers to the automobile as a prosthesis, i.e. an extension of the body, because it fulfils the individual drivers’ desires. The same could be said about the motorcycle, which, ever since Donna Haraway’s (1991) cyborg theory found its way into motorcycle literature studies,<sup>20</sup> has been said to obliterate the slippery boundaries between machine and organism.

In this context, the destabilization of gendered and sexualized patterns of mobility plays a central role as well as the opening up of a political space in which identities can be reorganized *ad infinitum*. Instead of conceiving of the machine and the organism as a cyborg and likening the newly emerging hybrid to a closed identity, the connection between the two has, as of late, been theorized by Esperanza Miyake (2015), drawing on the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as a “connective union”, i.e. “as the productive process leading up to the cyborg product”.<sup>21</sup> Following Miyake, it is not so much the merging of organism and machine that scholars of motorcycle literature should pay attention to, but rather the question of how different connections create different meanings in different contexts of production.

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18 Nünning 2001: 579-580.

19 Smith 2001: 23.

20 Cf., e.g. Malone 2013.

21 Miyake 2015.

Taking Steven L. Thompson's claim that what drives the social dimensions of the motorcycle is "the actual and perceived nature of the motorcycle in motion, and the bodies thus in motion on it"<sup>22</sup> as the starting point for a reflection on gender, genre and identity in motorcycle literature, it is immediately apparent that Kushner, with her novel *TF*, revises a very masculine genre by bringing a woman, who encroaches upon two domains of masculine territory – that of the motorcycle and that of motorcycle racing – straight into the core of the narrative. The female protagonist Reno is a subject in motion through male territory. As "nomadic subject",<sup>23</sup> she resists the masculinist logic of travel, calling for a new female aesthetics of the road and for understanding movement not as linear mobility, but as transgressive and disruptive. Moving her bike, "the woman traveller assumes a place in the history of that technology of motion, even if she remains oblivious to it".<sup>24</sup> The travel narrator in Kushner's novel entices us to reimagine woman's relationship to technology and to rethink the history of the motorcycle as 'herstory' and the motorcycle itself as a political vehicle of e/motions in that story.

### **3. THE FLAMETHROWERS, OR: THE MOTORCYCLE AS A VEHICLE OF POLITICAL E/MOTIONS**

An emotion-focused approach to motorcycle literature that starts from the assumption that the machine functions simultaneously as content and form is concerned with the construction of fictional emotions on different levels of narration. Thus, in order to provide at least a provisional answer to the question of how Kushner's narrative gives shape to the protagonist's emotional road trip, I will analyze the role of political e/motions in the conception of characters and demonstrate how affectivity is represented through events and political action. Since e/motions play a role not only on the story level but also on the discourse level, an analysis of the motorcycle as form is particularly fruitful: In *TF*, it is striking that questions of both political and gender identity are brought forth by Reno's road trip and the mode of travel, and that the discursive elements of the novel force a reflection on the close alliance between emotion, movement, politics and identity.

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22 Thompson 2008: 34.

23 Paes de Barros 2004.

24 Smith 2001: 27.

Kushner's motorcycle narrative revolves around three main characters: 'Reno' (named after a city in Nevada where she grew up), a young art school graduate who moves to New York City to become an artist, T.P. Valera, an Italian Fordist industrial magnate who founded the Valera Company, which is the premier Italian company selling motorcycles and tires, and Sandro Valera, his son. Valera is a past Italian futurist and fascist and a stand-in for Henry Ford. The fictional company can be thought of as a combination of Ducati motorcycles and Pirelli tires. When Reno moves to New York, the young working class motorcycle-riding-artist-narrator becomes infatuated with Sandro Valera, the wealthy grandson who decided to cut all ties with his family's business. Sandro is a prominent figure in New York's rising art scene of the 1970s who gives Reno access to networks of artists and galleries. He introduces her to his entourage of apolitical friends, who almost all make a living as post-minimalist artists in SoHo's empty factories.

From the very beginning of the story, the human bonds are relegated to the background, as most of the artists in Sandro's network are 'flat' characters anyway, whereas the triangular relationship, i.e. the special bond between Reno, Sandro and the Valera company, is mediated and propelled by a Fordist object – a 1977 Valera motorcycle. Reno, who has ridden motorcycles since she was fourteen and has brothers who also race and repair motorcycles, is extremely proud of her "brand-new 650 supersport" (12), which was a gift from her boyfriend. Back in those days, the model with the unmodified 650 cc twins had not yet been released and so no one in the United States but her was able to ride it. With her Moto Valera GT650, Reno heads to Bonneville Speed Week at the Salt Flats, where she was "the only woman on a motorcycle" (25). Having been interested in land speed records for a long time, Reno not only wants to set a new record, but she is also eager to capture the experience of speed.

Self-making in the narrative is implicated in an emotional road trip that has political overtones, as Reno is the only woman on the speedway. With her risk-ready attitude and her appropriation of a set of character traits and qualities traditionally viewed as masculine, Reno undermines the traditional motorcycle narrative of the "spermatic journey"<sup>25</sup> predicated upon the model of male mobility. It seems no coincidence that Kushner, like the protagonist, knows how to ride motorcycles at high speed. Writing about the experience of riding is thus also a form of writing the self; it is part of a process of self-making, in which both riding (a motorcycle) and writing (a novel about motorcycles) are politically charged in two ways: the act of "[w]riting the female body through motorcycles

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25 Leed 1991: 113.

is part of a political language”<sup>26</sup> in the same way that “writing the motorcycle through the female body is part of politicising the discourse of motorcycles”,<sup>27</sup> which is arguably the case in *TF*.

Kushner’s novel is thus best understood as a counter-narrative about a female motorcyclist written by a woman, dismantling “the long-standing belief that it [the motorcycle, N.B.] is a ‘man’s machine’”.<sup>28</sup> In *TF*, the “connective union”<sup>29</sup> between the human body and the motorcycle not only destabilizes “the normative matrix of the motorcycle as masculine and the gazed upon body as feminine”,<sup>30</sup> but it depicts moreover the process of becoming as an ongoing process in which the body and the machine constantly connect, disconnect and reconnect in an infinite series of momentary encounters, movements and frictions rather than a finished product (cyborg).

I moved through the gears and into fifth. The wind pushed against me, threatening to rip my helmet off, as though I were tilting my face into a waterfall. I hit 110 on my speedometer and went low. The salt did not feel like a road. I seemed to be moving around a lot, as if I were riding on ice, and yet I had traction, a slightly loose traction that had to be taken on faith. I was going 120. Then 125. I felt alert to every granule of time. Each granule *was* time, the single pertinent image, the other moment-images, before and after, lost, unconsidered. All I knew was my hand on the throttle grip, its tingling vibration in my gloved fingers: 130, 138. (29)

Riding a Valera motorcycle, which serves as the epitome of speed, clearly entails, as this quote shows, a transformative aspect that is linked to fun factors in motion at the biochemical level. Candace B. Pert has shown that “what we experience as an emotion or a feeling is also a mechanism for activating a particular neuronal circuit – *simultaneously throughout the brain and body* – which generates a behavior involving the whole creature, with all the necessary physiological changes that behavior would require”.<sup>31</sup> In that sense, the motorcycle is literally a vehicle of e/motion, for it makes Reno “*feel* the size of this place” (30, emphasis N.B.), and yet it is not Reno herself who feels it, “but the cycle, whose tires marked its size with each turn” and she “felt a tenderness for them” (30).

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26 Miyake 2015.

27 Ibid.

28 Koerner 2007: 2.

29 *Sensu* Miyake 2015.

30 Malone 2013: 5.

31 Pert 1997: 145.



Reno's crash at 140 miles an hour happens at a moment of almost fatal disconnection of body and mind.

When we arrived at the crash site, I saw that I'd broken through. What seemed like endless perfect white on white was only a very thin crust of salt. Where the crust had been broken by the force of the impact, mud seeped up. I photographed all this, a Rorschach of my crash. (114)

Reno wants to come to terms with speed, with "a thing not signifying *history*, but merely a physical thing connected to a network whose very contingency signals the mutable nature of such networks".<sup>32</sup> Despite or perhaps because of the fact that the motorcycle connotes the propensity to fail for Reno from the very beginning, it has the potential for disruption in that it works against teleological closure and (narrative) progress.

Whereas the motorcycle racing passages in the novel can be interpreted as an engendered example of a political process of self-making and as a remaking of the 'history' of the motorcycle, the historical passages in the novel can be seen as a negotiation of political identities with the Valera motorcycle as a foil, and set against the backdrop of two disparate cultural contexts and time periods. Kushner projects the political tensions in 1970s Italy onto the reunion of Reno and Sandro at his family's villa on Lake Como, which culminates in a sudden U-turn on the part of Reno, leading her down an entirely different road. Her overt enthusiasm for Valera motorcycles gradually fading away, Reno's affection for Sandro is also on the brink of extinction. She realizes that his whole lifestyle is a product of the Valera motorcycle and thus ultimately of the factory workers' slave labour. If the family's villa is a metonym for Fordism and the motorcycle a metaphor for the powerful association of emotion with mobility, it becomes clear by superimposing the two strands of the novel that as a catalyst of political e/motions the machine is a highly ambivalent means of transportation. As much as it can be the multiplier of success and upward mobility, it can also be a source of downright failure and downward mobility.

Mobility has thus more than one function in the motorcycle narrative, opening up personalized and political spaces in which movement refers not so much to the number of miles travelled, but rather to the feeling of being moved. Back in New York, a city that after the 1977 blackout had a Detroit-like feel to it, Reno keeps her distance from Sandro, whom she had caught in the act in front of the Valera factory when he cheated on her with his cousin Talia. Although her emotional 'heat map' is again that of an average New York artist displaying

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32 Strombeck 2015: 471; emphasis N.B.

indifference toward the end of Keynesian policies and the emergent cultural logic of post-Fordist capitalism, it would be wrong to conclude that Reno is the same person as before she had been tear-gassed and was in the march with Gianni. She has regained her strength, and a corollary of her political awakening is that she finally knows where she belongs: “I was a girl on a motorcycle” (344). Never before has Reno so decidedly called herself a motorcyclist as in the final chapters of the novel. Kushner presents an emotionally stable female protagonist who has mastered the chauvinist world of the novel she is part and parcel of. When she picks up the repaired Valera motorcycle from Sandro’s place and rides through the streets of New York City, she feels

separate, gliding, untouchable. A group of winos in front of a Bowery hotel gave me the thumbs-up. At a stoplight, a man in the backseat of a cab, a cigarette hanging from his lips, rolled down his window and complimented the bike. He wasn’t coming on to me. He was envious. He wanted what I had like a man might want something another man has. There was a performance in riding the Moto Valera through the streets of New York that felt pure. It made the city a stage, my stage, while I was simply getting from one place to the next. Ronnie said that certain women were best viewed from the window of a speeding car, the exaggeration of their makeup and their tight clothes. But maybe women were meant to speed past, just a blur. Like China girls. Flash, and then gone. It was only a motorcycle but it felt like a mode of being. (297)

In this quote, the Valera motorcycle is framed exclusively positively: not just as a mode of transportation, nor as a symbol for exploitation and slave labour. Reno literally owns it and there is nothing in her way that could potentially change that. In contrast to the earlier chapters where the motorcycle had shifting associations, the image that stays with the reader is that of the motorcycle as a driving force or vehicle of political e/motions in the sense of feminine empowerment and identity politics.

#### **4. CONCLUSION: MOTORCYCLE “LITERATURE ON THE MOVE”**

As my reading of Kushner’s novel *The Flamethrowers* (2013) has shown, there are at least three good reasons why motorcycle literature is a promising object of research for coming to terms with the complex interfaces of writing, emotion and movement. Firstly, emotions play a key role both in the production of motorcycle literature and in the narrative itself. In *TF*, the Valera motorcycle serves as “a

tool for feeling”<sup>33</sup> and, more concretely, as a vehicle of political e/motions, because it mediates political movements and shapes identities. Secondly, motorcycle literature stresses the processual side of writing, because it foregrounds such concepts as writing the self, emplotment and genre. Last but certainly not least, in highlighting the bond between the human (organism) and the nonhuman (machine), motorcycle narratives open up new vistas for emotion-focused approaches to literature that go beyond the analysis of characters, intrapersonal feelings and interaffectivity, i.e. emotions emerging from social interaction.

In *TF*, affectivity is depicted as a result of the second nervous system that links mind and body, organism and machine. Reno ‘feels’ with the Valera motorcycle. It affects the pace at which she drifts, and it also “affects the repertoire of identities available to her”.<sup>34</sup> These identities, as I have demonstrated, are “mobile identities”<sup>35</sup> that subvert the “spermatic journey”,<sup>36</sup> i.e. the masculinist logic of travel. In addition to identities, the motorcycle affects the emotional economy of the characters. The emotional make-up of the narrator shapes, for instance, what Reno knows and how she comes to know. Reno’s consciousness is a site of political and epistemological resistance. She resists the fourfold structure of parting, climax, arrival, and return. The moment that Reno gets on the motorcycle, she begins to negotiate the affective dynamics of travel and interrogates the cultural construction of femininity and her relationship to technology.

The motorcycle, furthermore, shapes Reno’s itinerary and her perception of spatiality and temporal coordinates. Ette (2003) distinguishes between five spatial figures of travel movement. These figures of the journey as a movement of understanding include the circular, the discontinuous-jumping, and the star- and pendulum-like readings. In *TF*, the spatial movement of understanding echoes the discontinuous-jumping figure. Reno’s itinerary has neither a definite starting point nor a destination. She drifts rather than travels across Italy. Digressions and transgressions are an integral element of her “emotional trip”.<sup>37</sup> One could infer a radical openness towards the future and life in general from this, which is reflected in the ending: “The answer is not coming. I have to find an arbitrary point inside the spell of waiting, the open absence, and tear myself away. Leave, with no answer. Move on to the next question” (383). These sentences imply that Reno’s meandering and drifting will continue and that there is no point of arrival, rest or closure. The hermeneutic movement of the jump, where “the linear

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33 Nünning 2014: 109.

34 Smith 2001: 26.

35 Ibid.: 27.

36 Leed 1991: 113.

37 Potter 2013: 356.

mobility of the conventional road”<sup>38</sup> is disrupted, calls the narrative’s legibility into question and implies a reading that is also non-linear but not necessarily undirected.

In light of this, Kushner’s motorcycle narrative is a pertinent example of “literature on the move”. I have argued that with their reference to emotion and movement, motorcycle narratives can expand our knowledge about writing- and reading-specific aspects of motorcycle literature. The latter (i.e. reading-specific aspects), though, are beyond the scope of this paper. The nexus between the narrative construction of emotions and movement in motorcycle literature is in dire need of further research. Ette’s (2003) spatial figures of travel movement (circle, pendulum, linear journey, star, jump) are a good starting point for future research on the links between motorcycle literature, emotion and movement.

Motorcycle literature is, as the incredible rise in narratives over the last three decades has shown, a flourishing genre: whereas thirteen motorcycle narratives were published before 1974, most of which were written by men (with few exceptions such as Lady Warren’s *Through Algeria and Tunisia on a Motor-Bicycle*, (2009) [1922], Clare Sheridan’s *Across Europe with Satanella*, 1925, and Peggy Iris Thomas’ *A Ride in the Sun, or: Gasoline Gypsy*, (2012) [1954], with the release of Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values* in 1974, the number of motorcycle narratives that have been published has exploded, with 115 works coming out between 1990 and 2015. Judging from these figures, motorcycle narratives are a lively form of expression that draws its fascination from the ways in which it moves its readers – emotionally, politically or otherwise – “with real velocity” (297).

“Like China girls. Flash, and then gone” (297).

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38 Paes de Barros 2004: 7.

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