Engaging the political: contemporary travel writing and the ethics of difference

The Global Soul may see so many sides of every question that he never settles on a firm conviction; he may grow so used to giving back a different self according to his environment that he loses sight of who he is when nobody's around. Even the most basic questions have to be answered by him alone, and then, on the planes where he may make his home, the cabin attendant passes down the aisle with disembarkation forms, it may be difficult for him to fill in any of the boxes: 'Home Address', 'Citizenship', 'Purpose of Visit', even 'Marital Status'. I can answer almost any of these from a variety of perspectives... But though this can be a natural — and useful — enough impulse in response to the question 'Where do you come from?' it becomes more treacherous in answer to the question 'Where do you stand?'

Pico Iyer

Iyer's own experience of the relationship between authority and hybridity exemplifies one of the main political tensions of this book: on the one hand, there are sovereign structures of power that require loyalty, homogeneity and single-mindedness (e.g. the apparatus of Customs and Immigration), and on the other hand, there are cosmopolitan forms of identity and community that transcend these exclusionary structures (e.g. global souls, travel writers). For me, those opposing formations are best understood as either colonial visions that rely on the resuscitated power relations of Empire, or cosmopolitan visions that seek to transcend the legacy of Empire through multiculturalism, tolerance and respect for cultural difference. What distinguishes these two positions — and what constitutes the main focus of my argument — are the contrasting strategies by which they engage with difference. Think of it this way: travel writers must go somewhere else and meet strange people for their work to be considered 'travel writing' in the first place. The point of this book has been to show how contemporary travel writing reveals a particularly challenging formation of the struggle between colonial and cosmopolitan visions: all productions of difference in the genre — even the most cosmopolitan — cannot escape the regulating force of Empire. This deference is relatively easy to detect in a travel writer like Theroux who reifies difference according to a cultural hierarchy governed by Western values (i.e. a colonial vision) but is much more difficult to detect in a travel writer like Iyer who shows how 'Global Souls' eschew their cultural differences in favour of a collective commitment to a multicultural future (i.e. a cosmopolitan vision). My point is that while contemporary travel writing claims to have moved away from the authority of Empire — indeed, many authors 'try to act in keeping with the present age of a greater tolerance' — we are, in fact, witnessing the complex rearticulation of Western authority within the most liberal and cosmopolitan gestures.

I have examined how cultural difference is arranged in contemporary travel writing through particular hegemonic formations: a hierarchy of literary forms, a liberal masculine subjectivity, a modern geographical imagination and an evolutionary historical queue. With the help of Foucault, Derrida and others, I have further examined how those arrangements of difference — even the most exclusionary and violent — are never completely totalising. In this way, the deconstructive approach of this book pursues a double function: it identifies and traces the discursive locations of difference in contemporary travel writing but also shows how difference is contradictory, insecure and ambiguous. Moreover, travelogues are not understood as examples of difference that symbolise wider trends and events in global politics — this would suggest that travel writing is an innocent bystander in the reproduction of discursive hegemony. Rather, this book argues that travelogues play an active role in the reproduction of discursive hegemony and can therefore be held responsible in some measure for the political consequences of those forces. My primary concern is that too many travel writers remain unaware of how their work contributes to and encourages the prevailing discursive hegemonies at work in global politics. For the most part, this means that travel writing is a profoundly uncritical literary formation. It is, to use Lyotard's formulation, a genre that exists 'within the limit' — within the boundaries of possibility that common sense allows. While I have been keen to point out the main discursive boundaries that constrain travel writing, I have also revealed

1 Iyer, The Global Soul, p. 25.


significant moments when travelogues push at these boundaries and write ‘at’ the limit rather than within it. By subjecting the discursive boundaries of travel writing to various contestations, this book has refused the claim that all travel writing reproduces difference in violent and unethical ways. Indeed, what makes these texts so politically interesting are those moments when they break out of their discursive limitations and create new possibilities for understanding encounters with difference. It is precisely because travel writing requires this encounter with difference that it reveals so much about the shifting authorities that divide us from them, here from there, and the present from the past. With these shifting productions of difference in mind, I want to conclude with the most difficult questions of all: how can we say that one travelogue is better or worse than another? How do we judge between competing representations of difference in travel writing? And by what criteria can we make these claims? To be sure, many readers, reviewers and critics argue that a particular travelogue is good because it is well written (i.e. it provides an evocative sense of place, rich characterisation, a developed plot and innovative comparisons with home). While the writing itself certainly matters — indeed it is one of the most obvious limitations of Josie Dew’s travelogues — this book has consistently argued that the formal aspects of travel writing cannot be divorced from its content. Politically, then, good or bad writing matters less than the manner in which a travelogue produces and engages with cultural difference. The first part of Foucault’s genealogical method does allow us to fuse form and content and arbitrate between different texts: a travelogue can be judged for whether it critically or uncritically reproduces prevailing formations of power and knowledge. But the deconstructive ethos of this book requires an engagement with all of Foucault’s method — which means also revealing the discontinuities, contradictions and ruptures in prevailing discursive formations. As Islam remarks, applying the first part of Foucault’s method to travel writing only gets us so far: ‘At first I thought what bothered me was the narcissism and the racist paranoia so effortlessly strewn across the pages of the books I was reading. Of course, these things bothered me. But I had a suspicion that they were a part of a larger phenomenon.’ Indeed, the larger phenomenon in question here is the problem of discrimination: how can we say that one text is better than another without setting up our own criteria, our own moral boundaries and our own guidelines for exclusion? Doesn’t the introduction of any criteria — critical or not — contradict the very purpose of a discursive method which deconstructs the ‘order of things’? How, then, are we supposed to evaluate and judge travel writing within a post-structural framework?

**Ethico-political interpretation: judging encounters with difference**

In posing the question of discrimination through a deconstructive framework, we are forced to address the most common critique of post-structuralism — that it sanctions ultimate relativity. Critics have argued that by deconstructing grand narratives, truth claims and transcendental criteria, post-structuralism maintains that all claims about the world — no matter how ‘true’ or ‘false’ — are equally valid. This suggests that post-structuralists cannot arbitrate between competing truth claims because they have done away with the universal standards of truth that tell us the way the world really is. Let me be clear: I think the accusation that post-structuralism leads to ultimate relativism is erroneous. As Simon Critchley argues in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, post-structuralism has always been anchored by ethical and political discriminations — the problem for critics is that post-structural thought collapses the distinction between the ethical and the political. In effect, there is no difference between what ‘is’ and what ‘ought’ to be the case — our ‘empirical’ understandings of the political are not divorced from our ‘normative’ understandings of the ethical. Helpful here is David Campbell’s argument that post-structural analysis employs an ‘ethos of political criticism’ in which scholars and practitioners recognise that it is impossible to stand outside of the world in order to judge it. For Campbell, we are always invested in the world both politically and ethically, and those investments are never neutral or objective. Thus, Campbell is right to critique those methodological approaches in which

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5 These critiques were most vocal in the early 1990s when post-structural ideas were being disseminated across the social sciences and humanities; see, for example, Moya Lloyd and Andrew Thacker, eds., *The Impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), and Tom Cohen, ed., *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For an analysis of these critiques in the specific area of International Relations and global politics, see the essays in the special issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1990, especially Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, ‘Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Relations’, pp. 347–416, and also Rob Walker, *Inside/Outside*, pp. 15–21.

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as the driving force of history and replaces it with the arbitrary choice of narrative style. In this way, it becomes possible to justify any type of history—even one that is wrong, untrue, violent or unethical—as long as it adheres to a conventional narrative form. But as Kansteiner suggests, White’s critique leads to a much more profound ontological problem: ‘How can we write history successfully, for example, effectively displace unwanted emphets of the past, without recourse to the concept of historical truth?’ Indeed, this question reveals the more general problem of how to judge contemporary travel writing: how can we say that one travelogue is better than another when we have no universal standards to help us arbitrate between competing truth claims? For me, collapsing the ethical and the political and employing an ‘ethos of political criticism’ allows a genuine engagement with that ontological conundrum that does not capitulate to either ultimate relativism or universal truth. Drawing on both Campbell and Critchley, I want to argue that a travelogue can be judged as ‘good’ to the extent that it acknowledges, addresses and engages with its ethical and political responsibility to the other.

Political reflexivity and critical thinking: the future of travel writing

As this book has made clear, I am concerned with the absence of both political reflexivity and critical thought in contemporary travel writing. It seems to me that these texts display a worrying ignorance of how the genre has always been implicated in the political logic of Empire. As a result, contemporary travel writing makes problematic claims about its own literary heritage, the foundations of modern subjectivity, bifurcated global cartography and a teleological historical queue. By ignoring, repressing and displacing the legacy of Empire, travel writers believe it is possible to stand outside of the political and ethical worlds they inhabit. This is why contemporary travelogues are ultimately depoliticising: they cover over the inherited power relations of Empire by telling supposedly neutral and objective stories about encounters with difference. In the hope that future travel writing might become more politically and ethically engaged, I want to make some observations that go some way to foregrounding questions of reflexivity and critical thinking in the

7 Particularly relevant here is Campbell’s critique of scholars who discuss the ethics of global politics in terms of an outsider’s responsibility, as if ‘outsiders’ were not always already implicated in political conflicts such as Bosnia: see Campbell, National Deconstruction, pp. 11–12.
8 Campbell, National Deconstruction, p. 176.
9 Campbell, National Deconstruction, p. 191. While Campbell shares Critchley’s basic premise about reclaiming post-structuralism as an ethical and political approach, he disagrees with Critchley’s assessment of the political. While Critchley thinks it is necessary to supplement Derrida with Lévinasian ethics, Campbell calls for a further step—that Lévinas must be resupplemented with a Derridean notion of the political; see National Deconstruction, pp. 181–5.
11 Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Hayden White’s Critique of the Writing of History’, History and Theory, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1993, p. 274. He goes on to say that White’s work has ‘struck a widely held, sensitive consensus about the political and social functions of historical writing: the task to render justice and to provide political orientation on the grounds of facticity’ (p. 288).
genre. I am aware that the ethos of deconstruction at work in this book does not readily lend itself to constructing ‘general criteria’ by which we can judge travel writing. With this in mind, the following observations are not intended to construct a final ideal for the genre, or a ‘recipe’ for judging these texts. Rather, they are suggestions meant to provoke further debate, argumentation and discussion about the ethico-political orientation of travel writing. In this sense, my comments are offered in the spirit of Michael Kowalewski’s warning: ‘the criticism that seeks to appraise the modern literature of travel must be both judicious and intellectually generous, it must be socially responsible without becoming solemn and prohibitive’.12

Generic positions

Travel writer Bettina Selby argues, ‘I think if you are writing travel books as such, and that’s the genre, you should set out to write the truth. I mean the truth in its essential sense. I think to fictionalise something just for the sake of making a better story, to my mind, lacks responsibility.’13 To be sure, Selby reproduces a rather narrow conception of travel writing as a genre that privileges non-fiction authority (i.e. truth) over imaginative endeavour (i.e. the art of fictionalising). But it is her point about responsibility that must be challenged, for it implies that to be responsible is to tell the truth. My question, of course, is which truth, or more appropriately, whose truth. While travel writers are happy to engage simultaneously in fact and fiction, they rarely reflect on the historical conditions under which this conjunction has been established within the genre. While many contemporary travel writers pay homage to their forebears, especially for the ‘vivid’ or ‘dynamic’ manner in which writers like Flaubert, Nerval and Burton made a foreign place come alive, this reverence is politically suspect because it does not reveal how the genre itself was – and continues to be – complicit in the reproduction of colonial power relations. To put it another way, how can a liberal and cosmopolitan travel writer like Bill Bryson continue to publish his travelogues without commenting on the history of the very genre within which he is working? How can he fail to ask, or even address the basic question: ‘What kind of book am I writing here?’ To be sure, some travel writers have creatively nudged the formal constraints of the genre by altering its narrative structure – I’m thinking specifically of Chatwin’s The Songlines here. But formal shifts are not necessarily matched by shifts in content and subject matter – which means that even ‘cutting edge’ travelogues like The Songlines fail to acknowledge how generic, literary and formal constraints have wider political effects. What is missing in contemporary travel writing is a meta-conversation about why these texts continue to be so popular in a context of globalisation, media saturation and mass travel, and what they tell us about the ontological condition of mobility. Think of how contemporary novelists like Paul Auster, Jorge Luis Borges and John Fowles deliberately encourage such a meta-conversation with regards to fiction: they call attention to the formal properties of the novel, pass comment on the mechanics of storytelling, make judgements about contemporary political issues and develop innovations in both form and content.14 The question, of course, is why hasn’t the equivalent transformation happened in travel writing?

As all generic boundaries become blurred, we are seeing some texts beginning to resist the generic codes of travel writing and re-imagine its position between fact and fiction. Ghosh’s In an Antique Land, I think, comes closest to a generic hybrid that actively and self-consciously borrows from anthropology, history, memoir, sociology, geography and autobiography. John Russell argues that the most appropriate label for a travelogue that negotiates between generic and disciplinary authorities is the ‘nonfiction novel’.15 Russell suggests that the multiplicity of generic influences in non-fiction novels turns over the reality principle: when fiction invades the bedrock of fact, neither readers nor writers can be sure which authority to believe. The critical text here is Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family which exemplifies this new literary form by simultaneously blending and disrupting the narrative structure of novels, memoirs and travelogues.16 Ondaatje is an interesting figure here: not only have his ‘unclassifiable’ texts foregrounded the theme of travel and the journey metaphor in a variety of literary genres, they have also enjoyed both critical and popular success. A more obvious indication of this ‘generic infection’ is novels that focus specifically on issues of travel and dislocation. To be sure, migration is a central theme

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13 Travel writer Bettina Selby, interviewed by Santiago Henríquez Jiménez, in Going the Distance, p. 46.
14 For a discussion of these meta-conversations in contemporary fiction, see Linda Hutcheon, The Poetics of Postmodernism (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).
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Paul Theroux, Peter Matthiessen, Jan Morris, Tom Wolfe keep them aesthetically out of the running, as far as any claim to the novel form goes. Unlike travel writing, fiction has a long tradition of unreliable narrators, especially in the Modernist literary tradition. For example, Marlow in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Caraway in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby disrupt the tradition of ‘authorian sureness’ and prompt the reader to ask awkward questions about truth and perspective. My point is that the travel writer is unable to release his/her ‘authorian sureness’ because the genre relies so heavily on the logic of identity/difference. If the confidence of the travel writer is questioned, it ushers in the difficult problem of subjectivity — of how the self is constructed in the face of difference, and how others are produced as markers of security for the self. Indeed, the reproduction of ‘authorian sureness’ in travel writing is a deliberate strategy to avoid asking difficult questions about both the role of the travel writer (e.g. Why am I here? What am I doing here?) and the production of others (e.g. What right have I to speak for others?).

Given that travelogues are supposedly based on the theme of mobility, there is a spectacular lack of reflection on the relationship between subjectivity and travel. To be sure, Bill Bryson marvels at the improbability of aeroplanes, Paul Theroux ponders the comforting motion of train travel and Gavin Bell admires the longstanding tradition of canoeing in the Pacific, but none of these authors ask the more difficult question of why they are there in the first place. What purpose does a travelogue have? Whose agenda is it serving? What good will it do? What could they, as travel writers, possibly add to a destination that has already been scripted and re-scripted by countless cultural reproductions? Aside from reluctantly admitting that it is a good way to make a living, travel writers fail to engage in a meta-conversation about how their own subjectivities are shaped by the competing forces of travel and writing. While Bruce Chatwin got close to asking these difficult questions in his last book What Am I Doing Here?, even he fails to interrogate sufficiently how his own subjectivity is constructed in opposition to a whole host of others (e.g. Bedouin, Patagonian, Aboriginal). On the whole, the lack of self-reflexivity in the genre is startling: what exactly is Michael Palin doing in the Sahara? What, indeed, is the point of yet another journey in which he arbitrarily carves

for post-colonial writers like Salman Rushdie who use hybrid narrators to disrupt prevailing notions of home, self and belonging. However, the most challenging conjunction of fiction, travel and politics is found in Michel Houellebecq’s recent novels Platform and Lanzarote which expose how middle-class tourists — the main readers of contemporary travelogues — perpetuate the same structures of power that lead to child prostitution, environmental destruction and terrorism. It is significant that this ‘generic infection’ is not limited to the literary landscape — the conventions of travel writing have also been used in academic work to interrogate the theoretical implications of mobility, speed and globalisation. Texts such as Umberto Eco’s Travels in Hyperreality and Jean Baudrillard’s America are often called post-modern travelogues because they use the journey metaphor to popularise their critiques of modernity. As the theme of travel becomes central to fictional and academic debates about the global character of modern life, one is drawn to ask whether and how the genre of travel writing is responding. Kowalewski explains this challenge in the following way: ‘Word, we might say, needs to get out: not only as a testament to the rich diversity of voices and vantages this writing offers but because an informed sense of the full range of this genre will alter and complicate the kinds of questions we ask of it.’ My point is that by embracing the dissolution of sanctified literary boundaries and by encouraging the dissemination of the journey metaphor into other cultural forms, the travelogue can become a more meaningful site for current debates about mobility, location and belonging.

Insecure subjects

By maintaining the anchor of ‘non-fiction’, travel writers are able to absent themselves from the text and foster the notion that their observations are objective, authentic and truthful. For John Russell, it is precisely these non-fiction strategies that protect travel writers from the kind of upheavals and revolutions that novelists have recently engaged with. As he argues, the characteristics of the ‘non-fiction novel’ ‘are lacking in those travel books whose authors seem manifestly in control of things. The authorian sureness of travelogues like those of

21 For further explanation on the relationship between travel, subjectivity and writing, see Michael Butor’s famous essay ‘Travel and Writing’, Mosaic, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1974, pp.1–16.
up the world? Is there any place left that hasn’t been subjected to his smug and patronising appreciation of cultural difference?

The unwillingness of travel writers to address the difficulties of representing others reveals the genre’s reproduction of power most explicitly. To put it bluntly — and to echo Islam’s earlier comments — many travel writers are content to construct a flimsy veneer of civility over the patronising and racist stereotypes that populate their narratives. This smacks of laziness, as travel writers rarely bother to examine the history or reproduction of those stereotypes (e.g. why are the Japanese so efficient, and have they always been this way?) or present counter-examples (e.g. like most young adults, Japanese teenagers are inefficient, disgruntled and rebellious). This lack of curiosity is also present in cosmopolitan travel writing: simply celebrating cultural difference in the vein of Bill Bryson (e.g. Japanese efficiency is wonderful!) does not avoid the genre’s reliance on the identity/difference logic. The point is simple: if this logic continues unchecked and unexamined in the genre, travelogues will continue to reproduce subject positions that are governed by resuscitated colonial power relations. Moreover, travel writers cannot and will not address the ethico-political problems of encounter if they are unwilling to question the authority of their own subject positions. Indeed, what right do travel writers have to speak for and represent others? Aren’t they in the same ethico-political conundrum as contemporary anthropologists, who, as Clifford Geertz rightly argues, can only ever represent others in the language of established power? We know from the ‘critical turn’ in anthropology that supposedly ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ ethnographies actually do violence to others by shaping and representing them according to prevailing grids of power and knowledge. To the extent that travelogues can be considered popular forms of ethnography, surely the time is right for a ‘critical turn’ in travel writing?

Perhaps satirical travelogues have begun this shift by unhinging the sacrosanct position of the confident travel writer. For example, the drunken, adolescent and unreconstructed P. J. O’Rourke, or the scared, meek and bored-stiff Mark Lawson do not exhibit the ‘authorian sureness’ of most travel writers — O’Rourke’s confidence is too exaggerated, and Lawson’s is too docile. To be sure, satire does not negate the power relations at work in the discourse of liberal subjectivity, but it is one strategy that questions the automatic hierarchy of power between author and other. Travel writers like Younge, Diski and Ghosh exhibit another strategy: because they willingly become vulnerable in the face of otherness, they illustrate how difference resides within the self just as much as it does within the other. The problem, here, is that while satire and vulnerability destabilise the genre’s ‘authorian sureness’, these strategies do not go far enough in questioning the privileged coordinates of liberal subjectivity. Indeed, one is drawn to ask whether the monologic voice of the Western metropolitan author can ever engage with cultural difference outside of the legacy of Empire. Certainly, it is not that difficult to see how formal changes could further deconstruct the authorial function — ‘heteroglossic’ anthologies with both local and foreign writers, multi-vocal narratives or even co-authored texts go some way in this direction. While certainly welcomed, these structural changes do not dismiss the fact that most contemporary travelogues are written by Western metropolitan authors who do not acknowledge the difficulties of representing people and places from other cultures. This convention seems even more anachronistic when we realise that all subjects — including travel writers and those they write about — are constituted in a context of mobility. Indeed, Jacques Rancière asks whether our representations of otherness would be better if authors took account of the unrelenting mobility of modern life. He argues that it is only by foregrounding the foreignness of the author that a mobile ‘subject-in-formation’ can be articulated:

The foreigner — the naïf, it will be said, he who is not yet informed — persists in the curiosity of his gaze, displaces his angle of vision, reworks the first way of putting together words and images, undoes the certainties of place, and thereby reawakens the power present in each of us to become a foreigner on the map of places and paths generally known as reality. Thus the foreigner loosens what he had bound together.

For Rancière, the condition of being foreign, of being on a voyage, is the ‘core political experience of our generation’. My point is that travel writing is the perfect genre within which to explore this condition of mobility — not through ‘authorian sureness’, but rather, through reflexive subjects-in-formation who recognise the foreignness in themselves just as much as they recognise it in others.

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Spatial contamination

I have argued that contemporary travel writing spatialises the identity/difference logic in such a way that simple distinctions between here and there are underscored by more problematic arrangements of West/Rest, safety/danger, and civilised/uncivilised. Indeed, these distinctions make it possible for contemporary travel writers to decide beforehand which places count as destinations (and thus extraordinary and exotic) and which places count as homes (and thus secure and stable). Given their unreflective approach to both the genre’s history and its identity/difference logic, it is no surprise that travel writers are equally unreflective about its spatial assumptions. It is not just that travel writers fail to ask ‘what am I doing here?’, they also fail to ask ‘what am I doing here?’ Why did I have to travel halfway around the world to visit a place I am already familiar with? Addressing the genre’s spatial assumptions is a two-step process: firstly, it means identifying the formations of power that make distinctions between here and there seem natural and working out who those formations of power actually serve; and secondly, it means making sense of those asymmetrical power relations in a context of globalisation. In this sense, the spatial analysis at work in Said’s Orientalism was crucial because it revealed the geographies of Empire — and it is not that difficult to see how the racist overtones of many contemporary travelogues continue to draw from an Orientalist logic. But as Foucauldian discourse analysis suggests, binaries like Orient/Occident are not immutable — they are articulated in specific contexts, maintained for a period of time and then disseminated out again only to be rearticulated elsewhere. To be sure, these continual articulations, disseminations and rearticulations of power are difficult to track. But travel writing cannot comment on or shape these circulations until it stops conceiving of the world in terms of the static geographies of Empire. Post-colonial travel writers like Pico Iyer have made a start in this direction, and while he might promote a version of cosmopolitanism saturated with privilege, he does confront the dynamics of globalisation and mobility that the genre has so far been ignoring. In this way, Iyer’s travelogues must be distinguished from texts like Kaplan’s The Ends of the Earth which claim to confront globalisation (and solve its problems) by resuscitating outdated tropes of Empire and colonialism.

For me, the most compelling re-imagination of the spatial assumptions of travel writing comes from Mary Louise Pratt who argues that encounters between authors and others take place in the contact zone — a site where space is both mediated and deterritorialised. The contact zone is a contingent and contradictory location in which spatial formations do not necessarily take on the binary formations bequeathed by Empire. In other words, space is understood to be discursively constituted rather than ontologically prior. Pratt argues that subjects in the contact zone do not make sense of their spatial location with reference to some transcendental ‘reality’, but rather, with reference to antecedent representations and prevailing discursive hegemonies. That contemporary travel writers fail to address the mediated nature of their destinations is not surprising — for the most part, travel writers are driven by the idea that it is still possible to access the ‘reality’ of foreign space. In order for travel writers to accept the discursive construction of their destinations, they would have to engage in another metaconversation — this time about the fundamental spatial categories underscoring the genre of travel writing as a whole. Only then can the automatic placement of authors in the modern West and others in exotic destinations be disrupted, and we can begin to see that the meeting of selves and others in any destination is always an encounter between subjects-in-formation. Pratt’s argument suggests that the most provocative travelogues are those that ask what happens when sameness and difference crash into one another in heterogeneous sites like the city. In this respect, Stefan Hertmans’ Intercities combines philosophy, geography, literature and travel writing in order to examine the changing space of ‘territoryless’ urban landscapes. As he explains:

There are enough descriptions of exotic-looking cities, and anyone wanting to go to Punta Arenas, Dakkar, Baku or Anchorage will, if necessary, see surprising variants of a social culture that has become almost cosmopolitan, with all the attendant advantages and disadvantages. Mexico City, Paris and Singapore are struggling with variants of the same problem.26

Hertmans’ point is that there are no differences between the world’s cities in terms of their spatial characteristics. Because all cities are nodal points for the dissemination of power, they always produce spaces of exclusion (e.g. sequestering people in ghettos) as well as spaces of freedom (e.g. anonymous public space). Drawing on Derrida’s recent work, Hertmans constructs a journey through various ‘cities of refuge’ that express a ‘more open, more democratic morality’. While Intercities is not intended as popular travel literature, it does exemplify the kind of text that disrupts our inherited geographies of Empire and reconfigures the space of the journey along more deterritorialised lines.

The time of travel

Not surprisingly, a lack of reflection as to the *what, why, who* and *where* of travel writing is matched by an equal lack of reflection on the *when* of travel writing. By placing themselves at the front of the historical queue, travel writers believe themselves able to provide valuable cultural commentary on the past, and innovative predictions for the future. These pronouncements, of course, can only be made if travel writers assume that history — and the role of travel writing in the formation of that history — is neutral, objective and teleological. In other words, it must seem *natural* that travel writers are more evolved than their chosen destinations (which are stuck in the past) and the others they encounter (who are less civilised). But in positioning themselves as modern subjects at the forefront of the historical queue, travel writers must cover over the very power relations that put them there in the first place. In other words, they must ignore the collusion between travel writing and Empire. Given the possibilities suggested by a re-imagination of genre, subjectivity and space, can travel writers construct narratives in which they do not necessarily occupy the most privileged position in the historical queue? Can they do justice to the genre’s complex heritage without reproducing a teleological account of history or resuscitating asymmetrical colonial power relations? When foreign destinations display cultural markers of enlightenment and sophistication, it becomes impossible for travel writers to position them farther back in the historical queue. Indeed, if the end point of the historical queue can no longer be spatially located and protected in the ‘evolved’ West, there is no necessary direction for travel writing to take — which means that despite Fukuyama’s claims, the West is not necessarily the ideal end point for every culture or society. Post-colonial travel writers are at the forefront of the temporal re-imagination of the genre because their participation in the ‘modern’ act of travel writing necessarily problematises the historical queue: what are ‘they’ doing here, in the present tense, joining ‘us’ in depicting ‘them’ as historically underdeveloped? Shouldn’t ‘they’ be ‘back in time’, ‘over there’ with their own people? My concern is that the Orientalist logic embedded in much contemporary travel writing cannot be resisted unless the genre’s much more entrenched teleological understanding of history is exposed and critiqued. This is why I am ambivalent about the cosmopolitan shift in the genre: are post-colonial travel writers *really* accepted as members of a heterogeneous and multicultural genre? Or is it the case — as it is with women authors — that ‘even they can write travel books’?

Engaging the political

To further illustrate the tentative observations I have set out here, I want to examine how two contrasting travelogues have tried to disrupt both the form and content of the genre. Alain de Botton’s *The Art of Travel* (2002) was a bestseller that purported to re-imagine our experiences of travel through insights from philosophy, art and culture. While de Botton’s text — and his accompanying television series — offers general comments about travel, I want to argue that *The Art of Travel* is a profoundly apolitical text that actually precludes any critical argumentation. Certainly, de Botton is able to convey the feeling of being overwhelmed by foreignness (e.g. he is lethargic and intimidated in Madrid), but at no point does he question the power relations, structures and forces that allow him to (a) travel freely to a variety of foreign destinations in the first place, (b) peddle ‘philosophy-lite’ to the middle classes and (c) make authoritative claims about other cultures. For example, his metaphysical blathering during a holiday in Barbados precludes a more engaged political discussion of the tourist industry and his own complicity in those exploitative power relations. Because he is more interested in how the ‘universal’ experience of travel binds us all together, he fails to see that not everyone — and certainly not the tourist workers in Barbados — can afford to travel for leisure, pleasure and escape. More banal observations abound when De Botton enthuses about Alexander von Humboldt’s colonial journey to South America — completely ignoring the less savoury and more damaging elements of that voyage that Mary Louise Pratt has so carefully documented. More generally, De Botton’s myopia derives from a narrow-minded understanding of what counts as philosophy: he is only interested in what the Western canon of philosophers, artists and writers — mostly dead, white males — can tell him about travel. It is clear that De Botton is not interested in the political insights of contemporary thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, post-colonial thinkers like Fanon, Said and Spivak, or even radical theorists of travel like Deleuze, Guattari and Van Den Abeele. Indeed, as a commentary on modern travel, De Botton’s book is deeply conservative and elitist because it fails to do what Steve Clark suggests *all* critical writing about travel must do: ‘acknowledge not only its complicity, but also its power of reconfiguration and aspiration towards a more benign ethics of alterity’.

While travel writers like Young, Diski and Ghosh begin to address the wider structures of power within which they operate, even their

28 Clark, ‘Introduction’, *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 4.
narratives do not disrupt the seemingly ironclad conjunction of a second-rate literary genre, a ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ authorial position, a home-away-home structure and a teleological historical queue. One text that does manage to push at this conjunction is Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop’s *The Autonauts of the Global Highway: An Atemporal Journey from Paris to Marseilles* (1983).\(^\text{29}\) The most obvious disruptive element of the book is its style: Cortázar and Dunlop are writing in 1982, but they use an eighteenth-century style made popular by early accounts of travel to colonial outposts (e.g. they document the minutiae of the journey as if it were a scientific expedition and address the book directly to a wealthy benefactor). Keen to mimic the rigorous observation of such an expedition, the authors bring out a typewriter at every rest stop along the way. Consequently, the length of the trip — the ‘normal’ time it takes to get from Paris to Marseilles — is eclipsed by the expanded time it takes to record everything in sight. For Brennan, Cortázar and Dunlop’s travelogue is significant because it executes a ‘politics of the prank’ — it both exposes and sends up ‘the literary devices that have eased the task of domination’.\(^\text{30}\) For me, *The Autonauts* functions as a comprehensive critique of the discursive structures of contemporary travel writing: its eighteenth-century style foregrounds the impossibility of ‘accurate’ representations; its dual-authorship unsettles the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ position of the travel writer; its commonplace journey from Paris to Marseilles refuses the exotic tropes that usually frame travelogue destinations; and its slow pace of recording and documenting punctures the linear timeline. Indeed, it is the lesser-known *Autonauts of the Global Highway*, rather than the bestselling *Art of Travel*, that provides a model for how travel writing might be transformed in a context of globalisation, mobility and deterritorialisation. My point is that if travel writers can draw significance from the genre’s precarious positions — between fact and fiction, identity and difference, local and global, and past and present — *without* re-installing hegemonic discourses of difference, it can be resuscitated as a crucial site for political debate and resistance.

**Are we there yet? Travel writing as global politics**

As a journey in its own right through discourse analysis, literary theory, identity politics, critical geography and historiography, this book must come full circle and ask what effect these interdisciplinary wanderings might have on the study and practice of global politics. The simplest answer is to say that travel writing is a form of global politics because it reproduces the same discourses of difference that hold our prevailing understandings of the world in place. Moreover, travelogues can help us understand the discursive terrain of global politics because they are an important part of the cultural struggle over how we describe and represent the ‘realities’ of global life. For example, this book has shown that the hegemonic discourses of difference that arose during colonial rule continue to anchor contemporary narratives about travel — even those that claim a cosmopolitan ethos. But these struggles between colonial and cosmopolitan visions — struggles that touch on different issues such as tolerance, equality, justice and multiculturalism — are exactly the same struggles shaping the study and practice of global politics. To be sure, the alignment between travel writing and global politics is expressed most clearly in their shared discourses of difference, but as this book has demonstrated, it is the power relations within that alignment that must be interrogated. My point is that the ‘serious’ nature of global politics (e.g. conflict, famine, violence) is not derived from unfettered access to a transcendental reality — it is derived from the compelling stories we construct about truth, authenticity and power. By examining the textual character of our claims about global life — their narrative structures, beginnings, middles and ends, grammatical rules, heroes and villains — the strident pronouncements and predictions of global politics are emptied of any final claim to ‘the truth’. What results from this inversion is discursive equivalence: travel writing tells us *just as much* about our understandings of the world as the ‘serious’ claims of global politics. In other words, both ‘academic’ and ‘leisure’ texts are engaged in the same negotiations with difference, the same hegemonic articulations and the same normative concerns about the character and direction of global life.

Because this book understands on-going discursive productions of difference as the primary characteristic of the political, it resists any conclusive or transcendental understanding of politics that claims a final triumph over antagonism. To the extent that discourse analysis helps us interrogate our continuing struggles with difference, it continually resists those political understandings that veer towards resolution and narrative closure. With this in mind, the travelogue is an excellent illustration of how discursive power is always characterised by an antagonism between the articulation of hegemony and the inclusion of difference. As this book has demonstrated, that antagonism can be revealed in the relationships between truth claims and falsehoods, selves and others,


homes and destinations, and present and past events. But the normative claims of this book go further than that: maintaining the antagonistic character of the political is what prevents excessive violence towards difference and otherness. It seems, then, that travel writing is faced with a profound opportunity: to successfully refute the charge that they are only 'superficial' texts that peddle the acceptable face of a continuing colonial mindset, travelogues must acknowledge, address and engage more explicitly with debates over cultural difference. This is not to say that the creative and aesthetic aspects of the genre should be jettisoned in favour of committed political diatribes. Indeed, one of the things travel writing can teach us is that successful resistance often begins at the level of myth, imagination and storytelling. By politicising the alignment between travel writing and global politics, it is possible to see how the 'real' cultural differences that lead to war, intervention and genocide are constructed from the same discursive terrain as the 'superficial' cultural differences expressed in contemporary travel writing. Moreover, by engaging directly with the difficult issues of cultural difference, travel writing has the opportunity to comment on, shape and intervene in the 'serious' events of global politics.

Bibliography


