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Toward a Genealogy of Postcolonial
Travel Writing*An Introduction*

Bearing witness to encounters of people and cultures across historical, social, geographical, and ethnic divides, travel writing holds a special place in the literatures of the world. Scholars of literature, culture, and history find in travel writing a rich repository of material for understanding how individuals use their journeys near and far as events for understanding the world in which they live, of how it came to be, and the directions in which it appears to be headed. As well as appreciating its aesthetic and other qualities, readers of travel writing – academic and nonacademic – have been interested in the way travel writing has been influenced by the experience of European colonial and imperial enterprises since the Renaissance. Indeed, it has become almost axiomatic for some readers that travel writing has been deeply implicated in naturalizing and celebrating the ethos of European hegemony over the last 500 years. Yet, a close inspection of travel literature shows that there have always been critical and oppositional perspectives circulating within this field of writing. Moreover, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, socially and politically engaged travelers have used their accounts as vehicles to critique the persistence of colonialism and imperialism. Evident through a range of forms, this field of writing can be broadly termed postcolonial travel writing.

Neither a genre (a variety of writing) nor a sub-branch of the literary field (a “social space” of moral, political, and intellectual contest), postcolonial travel writing describes an eclectic and expansive corpus of journey literature, and a transnational collection of authors and readers attuned to the legacy and persistence of past forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the emergence of new modes of cultural, economic, and political dominance in the era of globalization. *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* offers readers an insight into the scope and range of perspectives that one encounters in this field of writing.

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Embarking: 1988, or Thereabouts

In the Chronology, I have chosen 1899 as a starting point for a time-line of postcolonial travel writing. That was the year of the initial publication, in serial form, of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; a text that has a very important place and influence within postcolonial travel writing. Choosing any year to commence a time-line is always a tricky proposition because of the inevitable omissions and biases that underlie such decisions. Chronologies are always provisional and open to revision. For the purposes of this Introduction, however, I want to select a much more recent year from which to commence a consideration of postcolonial travel writing specifically as a field of scholarly interest. The year 1988 was a good year for "postcolonial travel writing," even if the term had yet to be invented. In a humorous example of the "Empire writing back," Afghani author Idries Shah undertook a "study" of the "natives" of Britain. Meanwhile, Welsh writer Jan Morris courted imperialist nostalgia with her descriptions of the faded glories of a far-flung outpost of the British Empire. Pico Iyer, a young "hyphenated" cosmopolitan – "British subject, ... American resident and ... Indian citizen"¹ – explored the weird Asian fusions of West and East; Jamaican-born Ferdinand Dennis ventured behind the frontlines of the British African diaspora; New York-based Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid scandalized readers with fictionalized insights into the corruption of her island nation; and white expatriate South African Christopher Hope journeyed to his homeland after a decade's absence to confront the endurance of apartheid.² Different works and styles, addressing divergent journeys, places, peoples, histories, and contexts, these books speak to experiences and sensibilities broadly understood as postcolonial, through the most mercurial of literary forms, travel writing.

One could choose other years from which to orient a genealogy of postcolonial travel writing: 1988 certainly does not inaugurate this field of literature, as the Chronology indicates. Yet the publication record for this year does illustrate a number of things about this topic to be kept in mind when embarking on the kind of tour presented in this *Companion*. First, what is now termed "postcolonial travel writing" is in one sense an invention of the academy. By 1988 postcolonialism and travel writing were increasingly attracting the attention of academics in the humanities, especially those in literary studies. The intersection of these fields is exemplified in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978),³ one of the foundational texts of postcolonial studies, and a book deeply concerned with nineteenth-century travel literature's role in crafting European notions of cultural Otherness. Said's use of the methodologies of Michel Foucault as tools of literary/cultural

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analysis would influence Anglophone scholars throughout the 1980s and beyond. After the publication of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989, the field of postcolonial literary studies expanded rapidly.⁴ With their concern for marginalized authors and texts, as much as for the complicity of genre with power, humanities scholars were particularly challenged by travel literature's role in (post) colonial cultures. This intellectual project gained momentum in the early 1990s with the publication of a number of foundational texts including Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993), and Ali Behdad's *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (1994).⁵

Of course, postcolonial travel writing is not simply a figment of the scholarly imagination. By the late 1980s, postcolonial writing – especially fiction – had become very popular with transnational readerships, and postcolonial travel writing was enjoying a privileged place for readers of travel writing.⁶ Travel books have been popular with readers since the days of Marco Polo. Colonial travel writing was a hugely popular enterprise from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Empires offer boundless opportunities for journeys of all kinds for those at the center of power; they provide an elsewhere to roam and explore. For those at the margins of power, and for those dominated by imperialism, empires provide very different, and often quite distressing, travel experiences. Though, as bell hooks writes, “[t]ravel is not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage [or] the Trail of Tears,”⁷ or for the hazardous sea voyages of recent asylum seekers, the records of such journeys demand attention. It is not surprising, then, that during the twentieth century books by metropolitan Europeans and North Americans chronicling journeys taken in former colonies would remain popular. Nor is it surprising that citizens of former colonies would produce travel narratives: of their “home” nations; of Europe; of other former colonies; sometimes relying on indigenous models of journey writing, at times imitating, appropriating, and subverting European conventions of travel discourse and hence their worldviews. While many such works of the former category notably express a sense of belatedness, nostalgia, and even melancholia, many of those of the latter draw attention to inequalities of development, and to disparities in race and class relations.

By the 1980s the tone, style, and content of mainstream travel writing was shifting. Encouraged by rapid developments in global transportation networks after the 1970s, new classes of travelers helped to usher in a boom

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time for travel publishing, reinvigorating a genre many had considered conservative, complacent, and moribund. Seasoned observers of travel literature like Colin Thubron sensed a more subjective and reflective attitude, along with an “awakened social consciousness,” defining the kind of travel discourse one found in the middlebrow “travel book.”⁸ Narratives of journeys into places actively struggling with the legacies of colonialism and imperialism were notable for the way such processes became a key theme of the journey itself. Although it was not recognized as “postcolonial travel writing,” it is clear that by the end of the 1980s – as the Chronology accompanying this *Companion* shows – a sizeable body of journey literature had emerged distinguished by the way it explored the nature of what may be simplistically called the “postcolonial condition,” and to – if at times ambivalently and problematically, and by no means exclusively – reflect on and critique the history of colonialism and its aftermaths. Such texts risked reiterating a banal form of global village ideology, celebrating the relative ease and safety with which Western bourgeois travelers could explore and appropriate the exotica of the postcolonial world. Alternatively, the critiques of imperialism that these texts engaged in were often brought into proximity with assessments of contemporary forms of economic, political, and military domination. Furthermore, despite its power to illustrate the inequities of contemporary social relations, this was a body of work that enjoyed a profitable position in an ever-expanding global cultural marketplace eager to exploit the vogue in cultural difference.

So 1988 – or thereabouts – provides a convenient departure point for an examination of postcolonial travel writing and of the body of scholarship that has engaged with it. How postcolonial travel writing has developed over the last three decades, as a field of academic inquiry and as a publishing commodity, explains the need for the present volume. Still a number of questions need to be asked: How should we define this seemingly disparate body of writing? How does it differ from other understandings of travel writing? How do attempts at definition intersect with the principal themes of “postcolonial” and “travel writing” studies, respectively? The following section addresses these questions.

Defining the Field

The books from 1988 mentioned above are in many respects conventional examples of travel literature. They fit a formal definition of travel writing as first-person nonfictional prose about a journey undertaken by an identifiable author-narrator.⁹ They are works that expect the reader to take the traveler on trust. They “[feature] human movement through culturally conceived

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space, normally undertaken with at least some expectation of an eventual return to the place of origin.”¹⁰ In this respect they accord with an understanding of the genre that Peter Hulme terms “exclusivist.”¹¹ I will suggest below that the study of postcolonial travel writing has led to more expansive and inclusive understandings of travel writing. That is because, in many respects, the exclusivist definition reflects the Eurocentric and colonialist values that postcolonial literature *sui generis* takes as a target of critique. For now I want to consider some attempts to define postcolonial travel writing along the lines suggested by the exclusivist definition because they reveal a set of tensions that continue to energize scholarship in this field.¹²

While it has been in use for over twenty years, the term “postcolonial travel writing” retains a sense of novelty and ambiguity. In 1994, Patrick Holland, among the first to provide an overview of the field, identified four key journey types worth considering for “the specific interests of postcoloniality”: “imperial travel . . . mainly written during the nineteenth century,” represented by works by British authors who traveled the Empire; “inter-commonwealth travel” involving “a traveller/writer from one country or region [who] visits and offers commentary upon another”; “return travel” in which a migrant journeys back to their “home”; and “within-the-country travel” in which travelers explore their own – specifically – national communities.¹³ It is important to note the perspectival quality of Holland’s approach: postcolonial travel writing encompasses those forms of the textualization of travel that are of “specific interests [to] postcoloniality.” This imperative remains and demands an expansive understanding of “travel writing” *per se*.

Holland’s definition situates postcolonial travel writing as a branch of postcolonial literature. In doing so, the definition betrays ambivalence about the meanings of the terms “postcolonial” and “travel writing.” Holland’s take on the postcolonial, for example, reflects a number of familiar tensions, the first being in relation to the sense of history implied by the concept. As writers like Neil Lazarus and Ato Quayson note the word “post(-)colonial” appeared in print a number of times before the 1980s. When it did, the word was used in a temporal sense: “To describe a literary work or a writer as ‘postcolonial’ was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics.”¹⁴ By the early 1980s, however, scholars began to use the term primarily in a nontemporal sense. As postcolonial literary studies grew so too did its field of vision. Considering postcolonial literature in 2009, Quayson describes a broad academic consensus when he writes:

as the sign of a critical orientation towards colonialism and its legacies, postcolonial literature [. . .] designates the representation of experiences of various

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kinds including those of slavery, migration, oppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, space and place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe. It is conventionally assumed that postcolonial literature is as much a reflection on conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as about conditions coming after the historical end of empires.¹⁵

The spirit of Quayson's formulation is evident in Holland's early definition of postcolonial travel writing. Yet, Holland's overview reflects a persistent bias toward Anglophone writing evident in much criticism on travel literature.¹⁶ This bias tends to exclude, or at least fails to acknowledge, the large corpus of works on trans-imperial travel, or travel writings from non-British cultures (Francophone, Hispanic, Lusophone, indigenous), or those narratives that speak to "internal" colonialisms. Moreover, while for the most part Holland's definition presumes the "exclusivist" definition of the genre, the limitations of that definition from a postcolonial perspective are reflected in Holland's references to fictional and "fictionalized" texts by authors like Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, V. S. Naipaul, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and Bruce Chatwin. On the one hand, this is indicative of the gray area between "fiction" and "non-fiction" that has perennially concerned scholars of travel literature.¹⁷ On the other hand, it suggests that examining travel writing from the perspective of the postcolonial invites a broader purview, and that a postcolonial approach toward travel writing can potentially decolonize the genre. For Holland, postcolonial travel writing carries the potential to unsettle readers' expectations of the postcolonial condition as much as the conventions of travel literature: that "travel literature can help to modify the massively Eurocentric structures of travel and coloniality by insisting on specificity (of history, setting, motivation)."¹⁸

While Holland's definition was adopted by later writers, such as Barbara Korte,¹⁹ it would be expanded in Holland's collaboration with Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriter* (1998), in ways that not only address some of the issues noted above, but which also introduce further complications. Holland and Huggan, while primarily focused on Anglophone writing, are attune to the different qualities of ambivalence – of ambivalence as a trope – evident in postcolonial travel narrative. For example, of a writer like V. S. Naipaul they observe "[his] travel writings straddle the gap between an unwanted colonial inheritance and an ambiguous postcolonial present that is neither fully accepted nor understood."²⁰ Naipaul's melancholic journeys evoke a sense of placelessness that threaten a crisis of identity in the narrator who cannot belong anywhere. This melancholic sense of an identity stuck between "a past he [Naipaul] cannot accept and a future he cannot countenance" (42–43) contrasts with the sensibility of a writer like

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Pico Iyer who enjoys the freedom that postcoloniality and globalization apparently afford to shift across borders and identities. Yet, as in Naipaul's writing, Holland and Huggan detect a deep ambivalence in Iyer's work that qualifies and potentially undercuts an otherwise explicit critique of imperialism.

Politics and Genre

It has often been remarked that travel writing receives short shrift from postcolonial critics. Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagemage's *Self and Colonial Desire: Travel Writings of V.S. Naipaul* (1993) is an early case in point. Drawing upon the insights into nineteenth-century colonial travel discourse that were emerging at the time from scholars like Mary Louise Pratt, Dissanayake and Wickramagemage's book positions late twentieth-century Anglophone travel writing as conservative and reactionary.²¹ Such arguments were reasonably easy to apply in relation to British and North American authors such as Bruce Chatwin, Jan Morris, and Paul Theroux—white, middle-class, professional writers – as well as *émigrés* like Naipaul, whose journeys frequently took them into territories marked by imperialist intrusions past and present.²² Their work became targets for postcolonial critics sensitive to renascent forms of imperialism. And they became emblematic of a style of travel writing that was championed by journals such as *National Geographic* magazine, the literary journal *Granta*, and annual series such as *Best American Travel Writing*.²³ While some critics were celebrating and even embracing the nomadic potentials of such travel discourse,²⁴ others were becoming increasingly concerned about the European concept of “travel” as inherently phallogocentric, Eurocentric, and colonizing.²⁵

Arguments about the conservatism of travel writing and travel *per se* became problematic as more writers from the margins of imperium gained prominence. If it is fair to say that writers like Theroux, Morris, and Chatwin came to emblemize a dominant Eurocentric form of travel writing that frequently took postcolonial – that is, non-European – people and places as their subjects, then it is also fair to say that for a time figures like Naipaul and Iyer, along with Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Salman Rushdie were positioned as representative “postcolonial travel writers” who took as their subjects those people and spaces of the South as much as the North. In practice, both groups are of interest from the perspective of postcolonial studies and the emerging field of postcolonial travel writing. Moreover, the actual distinctions between such groups in terms of class and cultural backgrounds are by no means clear cut.

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Nevertheless, one of the assumptions held about the second set of writers is that the critique of imperialism is a signal feature of their travel writing.

Holland and Huggan argue, however, that while this may be so, such critique is always ambivalent, and tells us much of the instability of the term “postcolonial.” They characterize postcolonial travel narratives by authors like Naipaul, Iyer, and Philips as variously “antiracist,” “resistant,” “counter-Orientalist,” and “anti-imperialist.”²⁶ They label them as *counternarratives* in so far as they “pit themselves against the various forms of Western cultural imperialism still dominant within the genre [of travel writing],” while nevertheless “seeking alternatives to European models, different ways of seeing the world that combat centuries of European prejudice” (64, 65). At the same time these books reflect the “reality” of these writers: “a diasporic world . . . of global differences and disjunctures” (64). Yet Holland and Huggan caution that such narratives are symptomatic of a globalized culture that readily commodifies cultural difference in its myriad forms under the sign of the exotic (65). This leaves postcolonial travel writers in an “embattled” state, “struggle[ing] to match their political views with a genre that is in many ways antithetical to them – a genre that manufactures ‘otherness’ even as it claims to demystify it, and that is reliant . . . on the most familiar of Western myths” (65) even as it estranges them.

The question of the authenticity and effectivity of the anti-imperialism that is attributed to postcolonial travel writing remains unresolved. For example, Maria Lourdes Lopez Roperero and Debbie Lisle both adopt a functionalist approach to their treatments of travel writing, insofar as they are primarily concerned with the roles that travel writing plays in articulating cultural differences in a globalizing/transnational world. Yet they arrive at different conclusions about the political functions of the genre. For Roperero, writing on Caryl Phillips, the postcolonial “travelogue” reflects an explicitly ethical and political sensibility: “No longer an instrument of imperial expansion, travel writing has become a powerful vehicle of cultural critique, particularly in the hands of special-interest groups such as ‘postcolonial’ authors.”²⁷

For those like Roperero, postcolonial travel writing is an example of “engaged literature”²⁸: explicitly anti-colonial and anti-imperial. For Lisle, however, contemporary travel writing is a reactionary genre and “embedded in the cosmopolitan vision of many travel writers [postcolonial or otherwise] is a reconstructed framework of colonialism and patriarchy.”²⁹ Lisle is particularly concerned with “the tropes of power, control and exclusion at work in the [postcolonial travel] text” (4) and how they correspond with hegemonic discourses and social structures. For Lisle travel writing *per se* exemplifies how, “[a]cts of writing and speaking are given meaning through prevailing discourses and actually *do violence* to the world because they are

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an imposition of ordered meaning on an otherwise ambiguous reality” (12). Travel writing “organises the world through a number of prevailing discourses, and sediments that world into a seemingly incontrovertible reality. Travelogues are politically interesting texts because they mask that process of discursive ordering and offer their observations as neutral documentations of a stable, single and ordered reality” (13). Arguments like those presented by Ropero and Lisle raise fundamental questions about the agency of texts as much of travelers that go beyond the present discussion but that the reading of postcolonial travel writing constantly provokes. They articulate critical perspectives to which contributions in this *Companion* return.

Between the “utopianism” of Ropero and the “dystopianism” of Lisle, other scholars seek a middle way in their approach to postcolonial travel writing. Gareth Griffiths, for example, acknowledges the liberationist potential of postcolonial travel writing, but is anxious that the essential conservatism of travel writing confounds such potential. He cautions that “travel writing itself may now have become so deeply imbricated with the idea of the colonial that even the most oppositional texts [remain] deeply problematic.”³⁰ Griffiths advises a cautious approach to the politics of the genre. Yet in his analyses, and those of Lisle and Ropero, and Holland and Huggan, and more recently Claire Lindsay,³¹ we are brought back again to questions of the nature of the postcolonial and of travel writing.

Emerging Trends

Much has taken place since Patrick Holland’s 1994 overview of postcolonial travel writing. Individually, the fields of postcolonial studies and travel writing studies have consolidated institutional status for themselves within the Anglophone academy. While the latter worked toward the development of theories and could now be said to enjoy a fertile eclecticism, the former has been the stage for almost constant debate. Those debates have frequently been characterized by tensions between, on the one hand, theories and criticism that adopt an “essentially textualist account of culture” – represented by the work of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – and, on the other, a materialist perspective that emphasizes “historically grounded directions and [attention to the] material impulses to colonialism, its appropriation of physical resources, exploitation of human labour and institutional repression.”³² Those debates are perhaps subsiding, as Lazarus suggests, although postcolonial studies seems to be a field within the humanities that is fixated on “rerouting,” “transiting,” “reconstructing,” and “moving beyond” itself if reference to recent scholarly titles is anything to go by.³³

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Nevertheless, it is clear that despite repeated reference to the redundancy, inadequacy, and futility of the term “postcolonial,” postcolonial studies remains strong insofar as it is understood as “[a] certain kind of interdisciplinary political, theoretical and historical academic work that sets out to serve as a transnational forum for studies grounded in the historical context of colonialism, as well as in the political context of contemporary problems of globalization.”³⁴ Part of that strength has to do with the way postcolonial studies has intersected fruitfully with travel writing studies. Indeed, travel writing – and more broadly speaking studies of traveling cultures – has provided a productive space for the exploration of ideas and processes that have become synonymous with postcolonial studies: hybridity and syncretism, transculturalism and transnationalism, counter-hegemony/discourse/narrative, alterity, and subalternity.

For Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund the critical aspect of postcolonial travel writing is not simply the manner in which it presents counter-narratives and enacts oppositionality toward imperialism past and present, but rather its potential to explore experiences, ontologies, and “frames of reference that exist outside the boundaries of European knowledge production.”³⁵ Postcolonial travel writing, they assert, is infused with self-reflexivity: the text cannot escape being implicated in colonialist rhetoric, but nevertheless “deploys travel discourse in a manner that subverts both colonial claims to truth making, as well as the nexus between travel and domination” (3). For them, postcolonial travel writing promises “to merge the ideas of Empire with the material conditions of the places in which the writer travels [to effect] a convergence – and interlocking – of the conceptual and the material” (8). Acknowledging the complicity of the genre with colonialism, they champion the potential in what they call “innovative” travel writing to enable transformative possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding: “Postcolonial travel texts ... foreground new ways of encountering the world, thus bypassing exploitative and hierarchical relations by seeking out new stylistics, new grammars, fresh vocabularies and innovative narrative structures for experiencing and writing travel.”³⁶

Edwards and Graulund argue for a broadening of the “exclusivist” definition of travel writing to encompass “new” forms of travel discourse. Others argue that an examination of travel writing from a postcolonial perspective demands looking at the way travel narrative appears in writing by subaltern subjects in forms that we don’t immediately recognize as travel writing from a Eurocentric perspective. Writing of Francophone African travel narrative, Aedín Ní Loingsigh states that “our recognition that we live in a world of generalized travel has not led ... to a sufficiently radical reassessment of twentieth-century developments in the representation of travel.”³⁷