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Introduction: new worlds and old lands – the travel book and the construction of American identity

> [W]hat would happen, I began to ask, if travel were untethered, seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension.[1]
>
> James Clifford

Travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked. This connection undergirds commonplace descriptions of America as a nation of immigrants and a restless populace on the move. It lies at the heart of the politics of Manifest Destiny, in complex relationships between the technology, commerce, and aesthetics of the car culture, and in migration narratives from those of the Hopis and Zunis to those of the Beats. American travel writing both acknowledges this connection and deploys it to perform complex ideological and cultural work. It simultaneously exposes inter- and intra-cultural contradictions and contains them. It creates American "selves" and American landscapes through affirmation, exclusion, and negation of others, and interpellates readers into these selves and landscapes through specific rhetorical and genre conventions. Thus, after Clifford in the epigraph above, American travel writing, like travel itself, is constitutive, a tool of self- and national fashioning that constructs its object even as it describes it.

The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing brings together thirteen new essays that explore the ways in which travel writing has defined, reflected, or constructed American identity. Although the travel book has always attracted a wide readership and the talents of major authors, it has only recently won significant attention from scholars. Too often unjustly ignored or unfairly dismissed as unimaginative hackwork, the travel book is receiving the thoughtful consideration it deserves as a literary genre with its own conventions, principles, and values. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, demonstrated the vitality and importance of this body of writing, and provided invaluable

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surveys that establish the richness and diversity of the genre as well as the emergence of new ways of reading travel. In some respects, this *Companion* builds on the work of its predecessor and shares some of the same goals. Like Hulme and Youngs, we recognize the need to offer "a tentative map of a vast, little explored area."[2] Readers of American literature may be surprised to discover how much travel writing has been produced by Americans and how much has been written about various places and aspects of the United States. Many of the authors presented here have a firm place in the canon and in the classroom. Travel writing has consistently attracted the talents of major authors, many of whom produced travel books either as early apprenticeship works designed to launch a literary career, or as part of their later roles as public intellectuals. The essays in this volume place the work of these major figures into an important historical and intellectual context. In addition, this *Companion* also seeks to enlarge our concept of the American literary canon by introducing readers to a large number of writers who have been unjustly forgotten and neglected.

American travel writing raises particularly complex questions of definition. Michel de Certeau notes that every story is a travel story[3] and American literary and expository writings take this literally from their earliest beginnings. In chapter 1, Philip Gould states that "eighteenth-century British American travel writing was not really an identifiable literary genre. Rather, discourses of travel permeated all sorts of genres and writings that included a wide array of audiences and intentions" (p. 13). Travel writing became a capacious framework for harmonizing multiple interests, each in and of itself central to nation-building and management: commercial, spiritual, socio-political, scientific, and, of course, literary. Yet despite this consolidating function, American travel writing also exposes cultural and genre fault lines. It exists betwixt and between the factual report and the fictional account, personal memoir and ethnography, science and romance. The genre is itself in motion and, in the process, reveals much about the changing cultural desires and anxieties both of the traveler and the American reading public. The essays in this volume focus mostly on travel writing as a non-fiction genre based, at least in theory, on the real experiences of actual travelers rooted in the specific factual details of both history and geography. Nevertheless, these essays also recognize that the boundary between travel writing and fiction can be especially murky, and that there are particular novels, and even poems, that must be taken into account. This is not just a matter of genre allegiance. Fact and fiction also intermingle in individual works as well. In this respect, travel writing is much like autobiography, another non-fiction genre that we are only now learning how to read. Sometimes a travel book may, in fact, be part of an autobiographical project, part

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of a larger attempt to explain oneself to the world or at least to the reading public. On the other hand, many travel books take a completely different stance, subordinating the presentation of the self to a greater focus on the external details of nature and society in a specific location. These kinds of travel works often intrude into the territory occupied by other forms of non-fiction, including history, political analysis, art criticism, journalism, sociology, and scientific observation. The essays in this volume recognize the fluidity of travel writing, but also recognize that it emerges in unique ways in response to the historical, political, and aesthetic particulars of a given context.

The complex, fluid, multiple-layered nature of travel writing generally, and American travel writing in particular, presents considerable editorial and organizational challenges. No simple survey of specific texts and/or authors is sufficient to address the rich complexity of American travel writing. Furthermore, it is not possible to examine all forms of this writing in a single volume. With these challenges in mind, we have chosen a thematic organization for this *Companion*, with essays focusing on central issues and sites as these emerge in key texts. For the purposes of this *Companion*, "American travel writing" refers both to accounts of travel by "Americans," itself a category in flux across these essays, and to travel about what is now the United States by those writing in English. Space limitations prevent us from including the vast number of important and often fascinating works written in French, Spanish, German, Russian, and other languages. The essays are grouped into three broad categories: I Confronting the American landscape; II Americans abroad; and III Social scenes and American sites. The shifts in location and time described in these essays are particularly important, because the ways Americans viewed their own physical and cultural landscapes were, and remain, intimately linked to their real and imagined engagements with other places and times, with "elsewhere." Thus, as many of the essays in the volume explain, the American "here and now" exists in dialogic tension with various "theres and thens."

An attention to diverse constructions of "Americanness," combined with examinations of the rhetorical work of specific genre conventions, binds these essays together. These two concerns are interrelated because American travel writing simultaneously constructs the traveler, the nation, and specific publics and readerships. These essays examine how crucial works of travel writing appeal to their readerships through conventions that ultimately define and redefine the genre. For instance, these texts construct race, gender, and class norms in their portrayals of travelers' personae (e.g., "the manly explorer," "the Gentleman abroad," "the adventuress"), impose standards for judging veracity (e.g., the rigors and romance of exploration

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and participant observation), and engage in the fundamentally political act of representing cross-cultural exchange.

It is important to note that the three sections of this volume are not autonomous, hermetically sealed units. On the contrary, just as boundaries blur and borders shift throughout the American national project, individuals, issues, texts, and sites appear and reappear in multiple essays across all three sections. Thus, the issues of landscape introduced in Part I recur in Deborah Paes de Barros' final essay on the road, tying the volume together. Race, gender, and class cross all three sections, often illuminating these distinctly American dilemmas. Landscapes are inherently social scenes, and natural wonders "over here" are read against real and imagined intersections of nature and culture "over there." Nevertheless, the three thematic parts provide a framework for understanding the genre's development and complexity.

It seems natural to begin a book on American travel writing with a section entitled, "Confronting the American landscape." James Houston writes, "The world's landscapes are but the screen on which the past, present, and anticipated cosmic vanity of mankind is written. Land is the palimpsest of human needs, desires, meaning, greed, and fears."[4] As the essays in Part I indicate, connections between landscape, writing, and this psychosocial palimpsest are especially acute in New World accounts; contacts with America's "natural wonders" generate and expose crucial dilemmas. The first such dilemma is both the simplest and the most complex: is this landscape empty or is it full? In "Property in the horizon," William Stowe observes that the fictional "'Daniel Boon' . . . sees the landscape as happily empty," a useful precondition for positing himself, and the flesh and blood settlers who come later, as "rightful inheritor[s]" (p. 27). This putative emptiness was rhetorically productive, a stimulus for others to fill it and, in literary terms, a generative blank slate for genre reinvention, as in Richard Lewis' pastoral adventure "A Journey from Palapsco to Annapolis, April 4, 1730" (Gould).

Genre considerations blur into those of nation-building in other accounts by those who found the landscape "full"; taxonomies of flora and fauna, rubes and rustics, and ethnographic accounts of Native peoples produce "Americanness" as an effect of cataloguing the former and excluding the latter. Indeed, the presence of Native Americans exposes the paradoxical view of the American landscape as both full and empty of others who were here first but are simultaneously "inevitably" disappearing: "the waste lands of the wandering tribes will be divided and sold by the acre, instead of the league. The dozing Mexican will be jostled on the elbow, and will wake from his long trance to find himself in the way" (Susan Wallace in Padget, p. 88).

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Empty, full, or both, the American landscape provides multiple kinds of cultural patrimony. Fecund emptiness was a commercial invitation and an opportunity for scientific investigation. It provided a kind of providential capital that could be deployed against the presumed cultural superiority and relative geological modesty of Europe. The sublime beauty of the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls could speak back to European works of art, even as they attested to a more muscular American geography: "Either Nature has wrought with a bolder hand in America, or the effect of long continued cultivation on scenery, as exemplified in Europe, is greater than is usually supposed" (Nathaniel Parker Willis in Mulvey, p. 51).

Personal spiritual capital could be read into the landscape as well, particularly in the exotic, mysterious Southwest, the majestic Niagara Falls, and the arterial Mississippi; as Thomas Ruys Smith notes, the navigation of the Mississippi, and specifically "the ritualistic element of river travel" (p. 74), functioned as a uniquely American psychospiritual pilgrimage. As the case of the Mississippi makes clear, the "Americanness" asserted, discovered, or constructed in response to landscape was often ambivalent. The Mississippi is "laden with the burdens of a nation" (Eddy Harris in Smith, p. 74), with overlapping and interanimating images of frontier optimism and/as "Emerson's 'antidote' for the 'passion for Europe'" (p. 67), the horrors of the slave trade, and grinding rural poverty. The Southwest is simultaneously a timeless repository of American authenticity and a series of simulacra – representations of representations of places. Perhaps, given this palimpsest of burdens and opportunities written onto and read from the landscape, it is no surprise that American self-assertion is more vigorous on foreign soil, the subject of the essays gathered in Part II, "Americans abroad."

The essays in this section deal with important books about Europe, the Holy Land, Latin America, and the Pacific, and embody a variety of approaches, but they share an underlying concern with the ways in which American identity is defined by contact with other people and other places. In *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates: Essays in Estrangement*, Frances Bartkowski writes:

> The demands placed upon the subject in situations of unfamiliarity and dislocation produce a scene in which the struggle for identity comes more clearly into view as both necessary and also mistaken . . . The subject, no matter how decentered, cannot *not* be a subject or it lapses into aphasia. We must speak, and once we do so we enact an enabling fiction of identity that makes social life possible.[5]

American accounts of travel abroad simultaneously presume and construct the United States as an imagined community. Furthermore, an enabling

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fiction of "Americanness" frequently works synecdochally with the portrayal of the traveler: the traveler's persona stands in for Americanness. As Hilton Obenzinger observes, Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim's Progress* is a paradigm case. Describing Twain's mock eulogy at the Tomb of Adam in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Obenzinger notes that Twain not only asserts his own persona as an American, but also repackages the site itself as an American product: "[B]y bringing Twain's book – and his irreverence – he [General U.S. Grant] also participated in what had become a uniquely American tourist practice: Grant visited the Tomb of Adam because it was the place where Mark Twain had wept. Twain had given an American meaning to the place, and he inscribed his own persona upon the shrine through burlesque" (p. 154).

Other personae that produced "Americanness" through assertion or negation include the "expat"; the tourist – depending upon the period either "the overawed students of an old and sophisticated civilization" or the representatives of a superpower flushed with "heroic self-regard" (Decker, p. 136); the pious pilgrim (Obenzinger); the good-natured American gentleman (Bendixen); the sailor who goes native only to flee to literally save his skin, thus both negating and affirming "civilization" at the same time (McBride); and the adventurer (Caesar). Personae exist in dialogic tension with the others they meet and describe. Thus, Christopher McBride examines the ways in which nineteenth-century travelers to Hawaii and Cuba fashioned the islands as proxies for negotiating issues of race, and assertions of racial superiority, at home. In a similar vein, Terry Caesar notes that South America served as a surrogate frontier for travelers with implicit or explicit neo-colonial, neo-imperial agendas. Travels to Palestine, as Hilton Obenzinger demonstrates, "posed ultimate questions" even as its material conditions often disappointed or, in some cases, inspired "infidel counter texts" (p. 151). Alfred Bendixen explores the way in which pre-Civil War American travelers in Europe fashioned conventions that reflected and responded to their own cultural anxieties.

As the idea of counter-texts suggests, writings by Americans about travel abroad demonstrate that genre conventions are often functions of personae, not the other way around. Thus, when Irving adopts the role of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., or other writers identify their books as "written by an American," the selection of the persona ultimately shapes both the choice of subjects and the nature of the response. Where one privileged Euro-American traveler might construct travel to Europe or the Middle East in terms of various "origin myths," as return visits to lands that are part of one's historical or cultural ancestry, African American travelers pointedly problematize these myths by naming complicity with slavery and white amnesic nostalgia

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as their core, if unacknowledged, components. Theodore Roosevelt's "zoo-geographic reconnaissance," in *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, is shaped by his performative production of himself as "a man of action as well as observation," and not simply an "ordinary traveler" (Caesar, p. 187).

The essays in Part III, "Social scenes and American sites," reexamine and synthesize these same themes and conventions. Here, contacts with the landscape and confrontation with irreducible difference give birth to new genre conventions and reinvigorate existing ones. "Americanness" is again in flux in the texts discussed here: discovered, asserted, resisted, disavowed, but generally never simply unproblematically given. Readers are cast as co-conspirators, as empowered witnesses, as passive consumers. In the texts discussed in this section, travel itself becomes a trope, a stand-in for a range of unfinished projects, from personal and national identity to modernity itself.

In *Moving Lives: 20th-Century Women's Travel Writing*, Sidonie Smith posits, "If the mode of moving a body through space affects the traveler who moves through space as that body, then the mode of motion informs the meaning that the traveler sends back home in narration."[6] While Smith's observation resonates across all the essays in this volume, it is especially pertinent to Part III. In the three essays that comprise this section, modes of travel and their attendant means for organizing bodies signal profound differences in the impetus for travel from enslavement to tourism. Further, these modes of travel prospectively and retrospectively frame "home" in complex and contradictory ways, and shape the resulting narratives as resistance, as nostalgia, as collective response, or intrapsychic monologue. As all three essays demonstrate, "America" is produced as an effect of these sometimes exuberant, sometimes deeply fraught experiences of both mobility and home.

Mobility and corporeality are intimately linked. Perhaps it is no surprise that those relegated by white patriarchal elites to the status of wholly "body," as opposed to "mind," specifically here African Americans and women, address this interrelationship with special clarity in their travel writing. Virginia Whatley Smith notes that a palpable sense of corporeality is central to African American contributions to the form. She explores the slave narrative as a discursive vehicle for "shocked bodies and fractured psyches," one that would speak back to the holds of the slave ships, to confinement, beatings, and the multiple unrelenting physical and psychic assaults of slavery (p. 198). Gender and/as embodiment also emerges, sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, in travel writing by women. As Susan Roberson attests, "In addition to other risks and dangers of the road, women were subject to sexual risk, to themselves being the territory that is explored and conquered by others" (p. 223). In a dramatically different key, and from

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a dramatically different social position, "New Journalists" Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson represent intersections of corporeality and mobility by focusing on the sensory and the intrapsychic. In their attempts to fuse narrative and experience on the road and on the page, "[s]ensation, atmosphere, emotion, and consciousness define experience, and the mundane gesture becomes as essential to history as culturally celebrated moments" (Paes de Barros, p. 233).

Mobility implies "to" and "from" somewhere and, as these essays suggest, that "somewhere" is often "home." "Home" in the context of American travel writing is rarely simple, and may sometimes even be dystopian, whether as the terminus of the slave ship's voyage and beginnings of bondage in the slave narrative or the infinitely more comfortable bourgeois domesticity that conjured prospects of psychic and aesthetic bondage for the Beats. Home was, or was not, Africa or Paris for some African American travel writers; it both was and was not the road itself for John Steinbeck and William Least Heat-Moon. "Making a home out of the wild or the foreign seems to be an occupation with women travel writers," according to Roberson (p. 219). Further, the construction or negation of these various concepts of home stood in for that of America itself, whether as intractably racist or as a psychedelic frontier.

Genre innovations are often introduced even as America is produced in the accounts discussed here, though others actively resist such formal or thematic risk-taking. For example, Roberson writes, "[t]here is a conservative quality in much of women's non-fiction travel writing despite whatever other freedoms or adventures their tales may relate" (p. 225). On the other hand, Smith notes that African Americans actively refashion the conventional leisure-class tourist account by explicitly addressing aspects of sociopolitical context, including race, that are often absent in white texts. Finally, Deborah Paes de Barros notes that contemporary travel writers, beginning with the Beats, recast the genre entirely from the social to the explicitly psychobiographical, wherein travel becomes both literal movement and a tool for examining inner as well as outer landscapes.

All the essays in this volume speak to social scenes and/as American sites by explicitly or implicitly raising questions of who gets to choose to travel and who does not, and of the American landscape as "out there," "in here," as resource, backdrop, impediment, or monument. All examine what counts as an "American" or an "un-American" site, and how frequently one definition is asserted through the negation of another. Directly or indirectly, all reckon with the possibilities and limits of travel as metaphor for the American national project itself. All take up the issue of alterity and its representations "at home" and abroad, an issue that lies at the very core of the American

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social imaginary. In so doing, these essays demonstrate the ideological and rhetorical, as well as the aesthetic work of travel writing, and the centrality of this work to ongoing processes of national self-fashioning in an always already global context.

Notes

1. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3 (emphasis in original).
2. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.
3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 115.
4. Quoted in Mark Neumann, *On the Rim: Looking for the Grand Canyon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 5–6.
5. Frances Bartkowski, *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates: Essays in Estrangement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. xix–x.
6. Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20th-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. xii.

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CONFRONTING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE