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978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction: the global imaginary of contemporary travel writing

As literary representations of journeys across the globe, travelogues express political commitments that are barely visible beyond their received status as a minor literary genre. This book politicises travelogues by revealing their connection to the ‘serious’ business of world affairs, and their significance to the study and practice of global politics. It argues that the quasi-fictional genre of travel writing is at least as useful for understanding issues of international importance as the policy documents, government press releases, parliamentary debates and media stories that are usually privileged in this context. In fact, travelogues have a distinct advantage because they are read widely by a number of people, and thus provide valuable information about how artefacts of popular culture produce common assumptions about power relations at the international level. Historically, travel writing participated in the international realm by disseminating the goals of Empire: stories of ‘faraway lands’ were crucial in establishing the unequal, unjust and exploitative relations of colonial rule. While many post-colonial scholars have examined the role of travel writing during Empire, I am particularly interested in how contemporary travel writing is addressing its colonial legacy by engaging – or not engaging – with wider intellectual and cultural debates about global politics.¹

¹ In *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), Edward Said argued that the travel writing of famous authors such as Richard Burton and Gustave Flaubert was central to the apparatus of Orientalism. Many post-colonial scholars have pursued Said’s initial argument by illustrating the extent to which travel writing reinforced or transgressed colonial rule; see especially Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Steve Clark, ed., *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Quality Press, 1994).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

The contemporary travel writer's efforts to abandon his/her colonial heritage is understandable: it mimics the efforts of statesmen, diplomats, civil servants, journalists, researchers and scholars who are currently searching for more equal and just ways of arranging our post-colonial world. In other words, we are all dealing with the legacy of Empire, whether in popular stories of travel or in policy documents on Third World debt. For this reason, many critics have argued that it is 'virtually impossible to consider travel writing outside the frame of postcolonialism'.²

Why, then, are travelogues still being written in our supposedly 'enlightened' age? And why are they still so popular? If the Empire that sustained travel writing was dismantled with the various decolonisation movements of the twentieth century, why hasn't travel writing itself disappeared? To address those questions, this book examines popular travelogues written in English since 1975. This time period is significant not only because it encompasses the modern 'renaissance' of travel writing inaugurated by Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia*, but also because it reveals how travelogues are currently addressing their colonial past in a context of rapid globalisation.³ However one wants to interpret the vast debates over globalisation (e.g. as new or old, as good or bad, as killing the state or saving it), there is no doubt that the enormous changes in technology, economics, politics and culture in the last thirty years have been reflected in, and produced by, travel writing.⁴ This is not to say that the historical forces of globalisation have never made themselves felt in travel writing.

² Brian Musgrove, 'Travel and Unsettlement: Freud on Vacation', in Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 32. Musgrove goes on to say that 'the revival of critical interest in travel writing was co-incident with the rise of postcolonial theory'.

³ Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976). Critic Paul Fussell argues that *The Great Railway Bazaar* is one of the few good travelogues to emerge from our age of mass tourism: see *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 39–40. Introducing Fussell at the 1999 'Writing the Journey' conference at the University of Pennsylvania, David Epsey echoed these comments and signified *The Great Railway Bazaar* as the origin point for the renaissance of modern travel writing: for a transcript of his comments, see <http://www.english.upenn.edu/Ytravel99/Fussell.html>.

⁴ This literature is vast, but the best introduction to the debates on globalisation is David Held and Anthony McGrew, eds., *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); see also Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); John Beynon and David Dunkerley, eds., *Globalization: The Reader* (London: Athlone Press, 2000); Eleanore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, eds., *Globalization: Theory and Practice* (London: Pinter, 2001); Debbie Lisle, 'Globalization', in Iain McKenzie, ed., *Political Concepts: A Reader and a Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Jan Aarte Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (London: Palgrave, 2000).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

Indeed, as Ali Behdad argues in his excellent book *Belated Travelers*, travel writing was crucial to the late nineteenth-century dissolution of Empire and Orientalism. Rather, this book is concerned with how contemporary travel writing participates in, and responds to, the anxieties created by late twentieth-century globalisation. For example, how is travel writing coping with the embarrassment of its colonial past while also recognising that there are no undiscovered places left to explore? Given this precarious position, can travelogues tell us anything relevant, let alone provocative, about contemporary global life?

This book examines how travel writing is currently resuscitating itself in the face of globalisation by pursuing two simultaneous strategies. Firstly, travel writers alleviate the anxieties created by globalisation by recalling the assurances of Empire. As travel writer Robyn Davidson explains:

It's as if the genre has not caught up with the post-colonial reality from which it springs. One would think it should collapse under the weight of its paradoxes, but quite the opposite is happening. There is a passion for travel books harking back to a previous sensibility when home and abroad, occident and orient, centre and periphery were unproblematically defined. Perhaps they are popular for the very reason that they are so deceptive. They create the illusion that there is still an uncontaminated Elsewhere to discover, a place that no longer exists, located, indeed, somewhere between 'fiction and fact'.⁵

As Davidson suggests, it is easy to see how contemporary travel writing continues in the colonial tradition: it reproduces a dominant Western civilisation from which travel writers emerge to document other states, cultures and peoples. In this sense, travel writers continue to secure their privileged position by categorising, critiquing and passing judgement on less-civilised areas of the world. As Joanne P. Sharp argues, 'Western travellers have tended to adopt a colonialist style of writing which assumes the superiority of the traveller's cultural and moral values and which leads to this figure taking possession of what he [sic] sees in a voyeuristic gaze.'⁶ In short, travel writers maintain their relevance in a globalised world by mimicking their colonial forebears. This book argues that contemporary travel writing reproduces the logic of Empire through a *colonial vision*. This is not, however, an unreconstructed version of Orientalism. Rather, the post-colonial framework

⁵ Robyn Davidson, 'The Trip Trap', edited extract of her introduction to *The Picador Book of Journeys*, in the *Guardian*, 4 August, 2001, p. 2; reprinted as the introduction to Robyn Davidson, ed., *Journeys: An Anthology* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 6.

⁶ Joanne P. Sharp, 'Writing over the Map of Provence: The Touristic Therapy of *A Year in Provence*', in James Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds., *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 203.

Cambridge University Press

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Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

at work in this book does not condense cross-cultural encounters to 'simple relations of domination and subordination.'⁷ When I argue that a particular travel writer employs a colonial vision, I certainly mean to foreground the tropes of power, control and exclusion at work in the text. But I also mean to reveal the anxieties, insecurities and difficulties that arise when simple logics of dominance/subordination are reproduced in a context of late twentieth-century globalisation. In other words, 'colonial vision' is a contested term in this book: it reveals anachronistic forms of authority but also questions, disrupts and interrogates the foundations upon which that authority is grounded.

This brings us to the second strategy by which travel writing is currently resuscitating itself in the face of globalisation. Many travel writers make deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the genre's implication in Empire by embracing the emancipatory possibilities created by an interconnected 'global village.' Rather than 'harking back to a previous sensibility', these authors celebrate the interdependence and common aims of all cultures. In this sense, they 'lead from the front' by teaching us how to appreciate cultural difference and recognise the values common to all of humanity. Unlike their colonial predecessors, these writers frame encounters with others in positive ways – they reveal moments of empathy, recognitions of difference, realisations of equality and insights into shared values. To the extent that travel writers seek to jettison their colonial heritage by focusing on the harmonising effects of globalisation, they employ what I call a *cosmopolitan vision*. I think contemporary travel writing is at its most interesting when it confronts readers and writers with the problem of global community – of what values might cut through cultural difference and make it possible to develop a global order based on shared understandings, norms and sensibilities. Indeed, as Jim Philip argues, 'it may be possible, after all, to read these texts as a site of the emergence, however tentatively, of a new kind of international *society*'.⁸ This optimistic understanding of travel writing has its corollary in the arguments for cosmopolitan democracy articulated by, amongst others, David Held.⁹ This approach is very clear

⁷ Steve Clark, 'Introduction', in *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 3. Indeed, the post-colonial approach at work here draws explicitly from the Clark text, as well as from the work of Behdad, Mills and Pratt.

⁸ Jim Philip, 'Reading Travel Writing', in Jonathan White, ed., *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 251 (italics his).

⁹ The cosmopolitan ideal informs all of Held's work, but the most succinct formations of it can be found in 'Democracy and the New International Order', in Daniele Archibugi and David Held, eds., *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 96–120 and 'Cosmopolitan Democracy and the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

about the kinds of values, norms and understandings upon which a global cosmopolitan democracy should be based. My point is that the cosmopolitan vision embedded in contemporary travel writing and espoused by many liberal thinkers is not as emancipatory as it claims to be; rather, it is underscored by the remnants of Orientalism, colonialism and Empire. In effect, travel writers currently articulating cosmopolitan visions of the world do not avoid the ‘embarrassing’ attitudes of their colonial predecessors – they actually produce new forms of power that mimic the ‘previous sensibility’ of Empire. I want to subject the certainty of this cosmopolitan vision to Jacques Derrida’s questions: ‘Where have we received the image of cosmopolitanism from? *And what is happening to it?*’¹⁰ By drawing on more critical understandings of cosmopolitanism, this book reveals how contemporary travel writing operates in a contested, antagonistic and uncertain political terrain that is haunted by the logic of Empire.¹¹

This book argues that contemporary travel writing engages most profoundly in the wider debates of global politics through its structuring tension between *colonial* and *cosmopolitan* visions. These two visions cannot be understood separately; it is not enough simply to chart how travel writing reproduces the categories of Empire in an effort to ward off the homogenising forces of globalisation, nor is it enough to argue that travel writing has successfully resolved its irrelevancy by championing the principles of global civil society and cosmopolitanism. Rather, these two visions exist in a complex relationship with one another – sometimes antagonistic, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes ambiguous. In examining this relationship, this book asks whether the cosmopolitan vision is merely a blander mutation of the colonial vision, or if it really

New International Order’, in David Held, ed., *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 267–86.

For a more nuanced and recent engagement with these questions, see Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), in which Held has an essay entitled ‘Culture and Political Community: National Global, and Cosmopolitan’, pp. 48–58.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 3.

¹¹ Along with Derrida’s work, critical approaches to cosmopolitanism are best articulated in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolis: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), especially Bruce Robbins, ‘Introduction, Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanisms’, pp. 1–19; as well as in Vertovec and Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, especially Craig Calhoun, ‘The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism’, pp. 86–109. From a more literary perspective, Timothy Brennan pursues these questions in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

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Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

does allow for difference, heterogeneity and contingency in the global realm. To what extent do the Western values of recognition, equality and tolerance embedded in the cosmopolitan vision carry traces of their colonial heritage? Is contemporary travel writing able to encourage a radically diverse global community unconstrained by Enlightenment notions of civilisation and progress? At the heart of these questions is the production of difference in the global realm. It is not that difficult to see how superior Western subjects employing a colonial vision construct inferior 'others' in order to justify the continuation of hierarchical global relations. Likewise, it is not that difficult to see how a self-proclaimed international community employing a cosmopolitan vision articulate universal standards of civilisation by which they judge all cultures. But what *is* difficult to see – and what this book seeks to illustrate – is the extent to which these competing productions of difference both fuse together and fall apart in contemporary travel writing.

**Double vision: the production of difference
in Paul Theroux and Bill Bryson**

In order to illustrate how colonial and cosmopolitan visions operate, it is useful to see how two masters of contemporary travel writing – Paul Theroux and Bill Bryson – utilise conventional geopolitical categories to produce difference in the global realm. In *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas* (the follow-up to *The Great Railway Bazaar*), Theroux makes an epic train journey from Boston to Patagonia and back again. Early on in the book, he crosses the border from Laredo, Texas into Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and makes the following observation:

the garlic seller was the personification of Latin America. He was weedy and wore a torn shirt and greasy hat; he was very dirty; he screamed the same words over and over. These attributes alone were unremarkable – he too had a counterpart in Cleveland. What distinguished him was the way he carried his merchandise. He had a garland of garlic cloves around his neck and another around his waist and ropes of them on his arms, and he shook them in his fists. He fought his way in and out of the crowd, the clusters of garlic bouncing on his body. Was there any better example of cultural difference than this man? At the Texas end of the bridge he would have been arrested for contravening some law of sanitation; here he was ignored. What was so strange about wearing bunches of garlic around your neck? Perhaps nothing, except that he would not have done it if he were not a Mexican, and I would not have noticed it if I hadn't been an American.¹²

¹² Paul Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1979), p. 51.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

What is remarkable about this passage is the way Theroux uses the category of modern statehood to produce, interpret and judge the difference he encounters. In other words, his observations about the garlic seller are made meaningful to the extent that they draw upon already established oppositions between Mexico and America. Theroux and the garlic seller are different because they come from different countries (e.g. ‘he would not have done it if he were not a Mexican, and I would not have noticed it if I hadn’t been an American’). Theroux’s colonial vision is quite explicit here: he uses the border between Mexico and America to invoke a series of cultural, political, economic and structural differences whereby Mexico is always inferior to America. As geographer Doreen Massey explains, Theroux ‘does not seem to doubt for a minute his right to pass the sweeping judgements he records’, and those judgements always reinforce a hierarchical relationship between Mexico and America.¹³ Theroux’s marking of difference through a colonial vision not only provides moral justification for the geopolitical border between Mexico and America, it also legitimates the wider cultural, political, economic and structural inequalities that exist between these two states. Theroux’s loaded description of the garlic seller is exemplary in this regard: the weedy, dirty, screaming Mexican could not be more opposed to the rational, observant American travel writer. Theroux’s judgement of the garlic seller resonates with readers because it calls upon many other shared interpretations of the unequal relationships between Mexico and America (e.g. developed and under-developed, civilised and primitive, First World and Third World). Suddenly, the heavy security presence at the US border begins to make sense to Theroux’s readers – America *needs* to be protected from those hordes of filthy characters symbolised by the garlic seller. By augmenting the Mexican-American border with descriptions of cultural difference inherited from a colonial past, Theroux invites his readers to sanction the structures of power that justify America’s most militarised and violent national border.

Conversely, Bill Bryson’s travelogue *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe* is an effort to celebrate diversity rather than judge it according to a colonial vision. Just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bryson sets forth from his home in England to see the major European cities between

¹³ Doreen Massey, ‘Imagining the World’, in John Allen and Doreen Massey, eds., *Geographical Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Open University, 1995), p. 40. Massey’s critical reading of Theroux is more compelling than the formal critique offered by Fussell in *Abroad*, p. 159, where he argues that *The Old Patagonian Express* is a ‘failure’ because of an ‘absence of sufficient resonance, and allusion and nuance’. In other words, it is *badly written*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Stockholm and Istanbul. What follows is an affectionate reaffirmation of the minute foibles and national stereotypes of Europe. But Bryson is keen to distance himself from the negative judgements that colonial travel writing encouraged, and therefore represents European stereotypes in positive and humorous ways. This allows him to celebrate the differences that make Europe unique, and counter the 'American habit of thinking of Europe as one place and Europeans as essentially one people'.¹⁴ Thus, the rudeness of French waiters is reassuring (and waning under pressure from the French Tourist Board), the crazy Italians are chaotic and wonderful (especially when they park their cars on top of each other) and German cities are admirable for their order and efficiency. Unlike Theroux, Bryson rejoices in the differences he encounters:

One of the small marvels of my first trip to Europe was the discovery that the world could be so full of variety, that there were so many different ways of doing essentially identical things, like eating and drinking and buying cinema tickets. It fascinated me that Europeans could at once be so alike – that they could be so universally bookish and cerebral, and drive small cars, and live in little houses in ancient towns, and love soccer, and be relatively unmaterialistic and law-abiding, and have chilly hotel rooms and cosy and inviting places to eat and drink – and yet be so endlessly, unpredictably different from each other as well. I loved the idea that you could never be sure of anything in Europe.¹⁵

The differences that Bryson documents in Europe are not threatening or damaging; rather, they are precisely what make the place worth visiting. What is interesting in this passage is how Bryson translates particular characteristics through a cosmopolitan vision; he assumes that everybody the world over eats, drinks and buys cinema tickets because these are universal habits. The challenge for him as a travel writer is to show how these universal activities are performed differently (and thus humorously) in each particular nation of Europe. Like Theroux, Bryson is keen to mark out difference – it's just that Bryson's cosmopolitan approach seems much more benign. While Theroux despises the 'poverty and degradation' of Mexico, Bryson thinks the states of Europe are 'nifty' discoveries. They are not better or worse than his English home – they are simply different. By focusing on the diversity of Europe – from their 'little houses' to their 'love of soccer' – Bryson articulates resistance to the visible signs of cultural homogenisation (e.g. the ubiquity of McDonalds, Starbucks and Gap).

¹⁴ Bill Bryson, *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe* (London: Black Swan, 1998), p. 86.

¹⁵ Bryson, *Neither Here Nor There*, p. 40.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Bryson's cosmopolitan vision of the world does *not* mean homogenisation; rather, it means encouraging, celebrating and securing cultural differences. This makes the travelogue the perfect vehicle for Bryson's message, and *Neither Here Nor There* inaugurates his bumbling efforts to learn about, appreciate and celebrate difference rather than judge it negatively.

What is significant in these passages is that while Theroux and Bryson articulate competing global visions – one colonial and the other cosmopolitan – both rely on stable geopolitical boundaries to locate difference and secure identity. Both narratives assume that there are 'natural' boundaries separating different cultures – it's just that in Theroux's narrative those boundaries are necessary to protect privileged identities from uncivilised others, and in Bryson's narrative those boundaries simply indicate diverse cultural traditions. Neither author thinks about, let alone interrogates, the givenness of these categories, and both assume that boundaries operate as simple markers of difference rather than complex and contingent formations of power. While Bryson's cosmopolitan vision may offer a more palatable approach for these 'enlightened' times, he relies on the same logics of differentiation and demarcation embedded in Theroux's colonial vision. The problem here is that while travel writers spend much of their time crossing cultural and national borders, they fail to address the intricate and ambiguous power relations at work in these sites. In Theroux's narrative, his judgemental production of difference ignores the everyday transgressions that occur along the Mexican-American border – the physical struggles between illegal Mexican immigrants and American law enforcers, the transfer of capital between international banks and multinational corporations, the interactions between female workers, union activists and wealthy entrepreneurs in Maquilladora factories, and the constant installation and maintenance of American surveillance technology. Similarly, Bryson's more optimistic production of difference ignores the contingency of Europe as a political entity – the mobility of Europe's eastern border during the different phases of enlargement, the continuing antagonisms in Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Bosnia, and EU decisions that consolidate elite power and exclude disempowered groups across the continent (e.g. migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees). So while Theroux's colonial vision depicts the Mexican-American border as an effective mechanism for protecting the 'civilised' Americans from the 'uncivilised' Mexicans, and Bryson's cosmopolitan vision depicts the borders of Europe as essentially benign containers of quirky cultural differences, neither writer questions how his simple depiction of crossing a border hides a number of problematic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86780-1 - The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

Debbie Lisle

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

assumptions about power, culture and difference. To enter into this kind of epistemological interrogation would place the position of the travel writer in doubt: how could Theroux produce and judge difference if the boundary securing his home and his identity were to be questioned? How could Bryson celebrate the differences of Europe if he began to doubt the very boundaries he cherishes?

If the colonial and cosmopolitan visions of Theroux and Bryson are similar in their uncritical reproduction of geopolitical boundaries, they differ in their political urgency. Because Theroux's colonial vision allows him to make negative judgements about the places he visits, it is easy to see how his texts reproduce the prevailing ideologies of his time. Indeed, many of my engagements with Theroux's texts are efforts to reveal his conservative outlook and privileged position within the status quo. But it is the travel writers who enact a cosmopolitan vision who are most alarming, for they smuggle in equally judgemental accounts of otherness *under the guise* of equality, tolerance and respect for difference. While cosmopolitan travel writers might be part of a larger cultural effort to critique colonial power relations, I want to argue that they simultaneously rearticulate the logic of Empire through new networks, structures and boundaries. Travel writers like Bryson might refrain from making the negative judgements that characterise Theroux's writing, but his playful celebration of difference can be picked up and mobilised in the construction of new global hegemonies. For example, cosmopolitan travel writers fail to recognise the privileged conception of global mobility embedded in the genre. Much of this writing would have us believe that the increase in mobility brought about by globalisation results in the equal movement of people, goods and ideas around the world. But there is an enormous difference between a wealthy Western travel writer like Bryson bumbling his way across Europe funded by a healthy advance from his publisher and, say, a teenager from Macedonia forced through the organised prostitution networks of Rome, Paris and London in order to 'work off' her debt and buy back her freedom. The idea that 'everybody moves freely' in a globalised world is a fallacy: only those who can afford to move, or those who are willing to take the risks associated with migration, are able to cross established geopolitical borders with ease. While travel writers might be aware of these global inequalities, they are often unaware of how the act of writing about travel *itself* engenders contemporary power formations that are as unequal, unjust and exploitative as those forged during Empire. While Bryson's efforts to reveal the funny side of difference might seem like a step in the right direction, I want to argue that even