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

Debbie Lisle

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The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing

To what extent do bestselling travel books, such as those by Paul Theroux, Bill Bryson, Bruce Chatwin and Michael Palin, tell us as much about world politics as newspaper articles, policy documents and press releases? Debbie Lisle argues that the formulations of genre, identity, geopolitics and history at work in contemporary travel writing are increasingly at odds with a cosmopolitan and multicultural world in which 'everybody travels'. Despite the forces of globalisation, common stereotypes about 'foreignness' continue to shape the experience of modern travel. *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* is concerned with the way contemporary travelogues engage with, and try to resolve, familiar struggles in global politics such as the protection of human rights, the promotion of democracy, the management of equality within multiculturalism and the reduction of inequality. This is a thoroughly interdisciplinary book that draws from international relations, literary theory, political theory, geography, anthropology and history.

Debbie Lisle is Lecturer in Politics and Director of Cultural and Media Studies in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy at Queen's University Belfast. She received the BISA Best Thesis Prize for her PhD in International Relations at Keele University.

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For my Mom and Dad

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Epigraph

Those who believe in the resistance of the real and continue to be surprised that men can live and die for words have little to teach us about the bitter knowledge of travel.

Jacques Rancière

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Preface

I remember the exact moment this book began. I was sitting in a café in Saigon (sounds glamorous – it wasn't). It was April 1993 and I was chatting with other like-minded backpackers from Canada, Australia and Germany. We were revelling in our self-importance and congratulating ourselves that we got to Vietnam before the *other* travellers spoiled it. Embarrassingly, I think we honestly felt that we were the first Westerners in Saigon since the war ended. In any case, I wanted to trade a novel I had finished – Milan Kundera's *The Joke* – and an American fellow offered me Paul Theroux's *The Happy Isles of Oceania* in return. I had never read a travelogue before, but I eagerly exchanged books. I thought Theroux would inspire me on my impending solo journey through Asia and Africa. It was, and I stick to this judgement, one of the worst books I have ever read – boring, nasty and offensive in equal measure. The problem was that I didn't have a critical language to express my distaste. Intuitively, I knew this wasn't just a bad book; there was something *wrong* with this book and something *wrong* with travel writing in general. Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that there was also something *wrong* with my own rite of passage as a smug Western backpacker. Over a decade later, this is the result. Although the arguments presented here are a little more developed (and hopefully a little more complex), I think there is a lot to be said for my initial judgement of Theroux's book specifically, and travel writing more generally. There may be good travelogues and bad travelogues, but as a whole, the genre encourages a particularly conservative political outlook that extends to its vision of global politics. This is frustrating because travel writing has the potential to re-imagine the world in ways that do not simply regurgitate the status quo or repeat a nostalgic longing for Empire. To be sure, a small part of me remains hopeful that travel writing might take hold of its transformative potential, but I have to admit that it is a very small part indeed.

Many people have provided intellectual support for this project over the years, and I would like to offer them my heartfelt thanks. Initially, it

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was Rob Walker's encouragement that led me to pursue the idea that travelogues are political texts that are significant for the study and practice of International Relations. I hope I have managed to balance the interdisciplinary framework he introduced me to with a simultaneous foregrounding of the political. More significantly, I want to thank him for offering words of encouragement while I got more and more tangled in the knot of travel, power, difference, culture and representation. As a PhD student pursuing these questions, I benefited greatly from the support of two people in particular: firstly, my supervisor Andrew Linklater, who was both intellectually challenging and fantastically patient; and secondly, my colleague and friend Martin Coward, who was theoretically inspiring, critically generous and unfailingly loyal. For their helpful suggestions on transforming a halting PhD thesis into a less halting manuscript, I would like to thank Alex Danchev and Cindy Weber. For their excellent critical insights and positive suggestions for the manuscript, I would like to thank John Haslam at Cambridge and three anonymous readers. For granting a sabbatical in 2003 to complete the manuscript, I would like to thank the School of Politics and International Studies at Queen's University. Along the way, I have presented my work at numerous conferences, workshops and seminars, and I have had informal discussions about my work with several peers and colleagues. For their comments, suggestions and support on these occasions, I would like to thank Simon Bainbridge, Tarak Barkawi, David Campbell, James Der Derian, Mick Dillon, David Dwan, Jenny Edkins, Vince Geoghegan, Larry George, Eamonn Hughes, Richard Kirkland, Warren Magnusson, Peter Mandaville, Kate Manzo, John McMillan, Claire Moon, David Mutimer, Peter Nyers, Louisa Odysseos, Jan Jindy Pettman, Michael Shapiro, Kara Shaw, Steve Smith, Adrian Streete, Hidemi Suganami, Caroline Sumpter and Maja Zehfuss.

Among the wider community of people who have supported me while writing this book, I would like to thank a variety of football players at the universities of Keele and Queen's who have allowed me the privilege of kicking them in the shins twice a week without fail. I can't begin to express how therapeutic it has been. To friends who have put up with my ambivalent passion for travel writing over the years, and to my family who are too far away, I would like to say thank you for unconditionally supporting my intellectual adventures. Without a doubt, this book is dedicated to them. Finally, I would like to thank Andrew – passionate sceptic, creative interlocutor, hopeful Luton supporter and ardent mischief-maker – who helped this book on its way by nurturing my intellectual curiosity and making me laugh every day.

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Travelogue

I always take a book along,
raising it between my eyes and
whatever landscape I've come
so far to see – blue mountains,
or vineyards with their musky
purpling grapes; often a bay
or ocean unfolding just as far
as the horizon of the book
whose pages turn like surf
beneath my fingertips.

Perhaps I could simply stay at home
and have some cardboard scenery
shuffled at intervals. The story
I inhabit would be the same: a mystery
or poem, the memoir of some other
traveller in some other
more indelible century.
But sometimes in early morning,
or at scented dusk, what I see
and read converge

into a kind of symmetry,
a blending of sight and syllable,
a language as new to me
as the most tropical landscape.
So that when night finally falls
and I lie in the strange dark,
the rustling I think I hear could be
leaves, or wings, or pages turning,
and on the winding road to sleep
I could be anywhere.

Linda Pastan