Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies

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Travel writing and postcolonial studies are common bedfellows, the first (a ‘genre’) a staple source for the second (a scholarly enterprise, if not a bordered discipline). Their relationship has been soldered by historical circumstances. As Mary Baine Campbell points out,

The interest in travel writing – across a wide political spectrum – was part of the necessary reimagining of the world first occasioned by the post-World War Two resistance movements and wars of liberation in the former European colonies, as well as by the waves of immigration that followed.

(Campbell 2002: 261)

Developments in the publication, reception and study of travel writing and their accumulation into an academic field of enquiry can thus be seen as a successive consequence of those material processes of independence from colonial rule, in the aftermath of which postcolonial scholars scrutinized an array of writing about ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’ places in attempts to make sense of that rupture from imperial history. Travel writing not only had volume, popularity and reach during the colonial era, due to its capacity to generate curiosity, excitement and adventure, it was also instrumental in the economy and machinery of Empire: if the imperial centre depended on representations of its peripheries and others to know itself, and to provide a sense of ownership, entitlement and legitimacy, travel writing served up plenty of material for that purpose. The widespread collapse (though not complete erasure) of colonial orders and structures across the world thus re-ignited general and scholarly interest in travel writing as a discrete category, although in academe, as Steve Clark observes, it was regarded, initially at least, with a degree of stigma, ‘as a kind of love that dare not speak its name’ (Clark 1999: 3).

Postcolonial studies – and its theoretical branch in particular – prioritized travel as ‘a live and urgent issue’ (ibid.: 4), not only by identifying the articulation of a colonial epistemology in the accounts of pilgrims, soldiers and industrialists, among many others who travelled in service of Empire, but also by encouraging the identification and formulation of a post-imperial voice in this mode. In addition to their historical kinship, travel writing and postcolonial studies share a number of other striking features, more conceptual in nature. For example, a mutual preoccupation of both studies of travel narratives and enquiries into the condition of postcoloniality is the question of canon, along with a concern about the persistence of and resistance to orthodox forms and epistemologies. There is also the issue of ‘hybridity’, both a central tenet of postcolonial theory and a defining
characteristic of the 'literature of travel', whose putatively promiscuous relationship with a number of kinds of writing (ethnography, history, autobiography, fiction, to name just a few) problematizes claims of a bounded genre. In both instances, heterogeneity can be perceived as a strength: if travel writing's generic and stylistic volatility results in 'a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines' (Holland and Huggan 2000: 8), the insistence on multiplicity in postcolonial theory and the porosity of postcolonial scholarship constitute an invigorating and resistant strategy to hegemony in its variegated forms. Notwithstanding the debates that have emerged in and about postcolonial studies in recent decades (to which I refer below) and the resistance of some to the discipline's definitional 'fuzziness', its heterogeneity also ensures a seemingly endless capacity for renewal and reinvigoration of both epistemology and form. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to track the role of travel writing in and alongside developments in postcolonial studies and, in doing so, to illuminate the ways in which our understanding of each of these categories has, since that original moment of historical coalescence, become increasingly more complex and expansive.

Travel writing in early postcolonial studies

It was Edward Said's highly influential but controversial study Orientalism (1995 [1978]), one of the foundational works of postcolonial thought, which first explicitly identified the centrality of travel writing to the colonial project and cemented its place as a primary source in and for postcolonial studies. Influenced by the ideas of Michel Foucault, Said conceived of Orientalism as a complex cultural and ideological discourse, 'a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient' (for his purposes, this is the region of the Near Orient, comprising the Arab and Islamic countries, rather than the Far Orient of India, Japan and China) (Said 1995: 3). The role of travel narratives, which emerged from 'innumerable voyages of discovery' and prolonged contacts made through trade and war, was central to the Orientalist enterprise for obvious reasons, given that they were often the principal accounts of 'other' places and peoples to be circulated to an audience back home. That is not to say, however, that they were the only accounts: indeed, Said's own corpus includes 'works of literature, political tracts, journalistic texts, travel books, religious and philological studies' (ibid.: 23), its range speaking to Orientalism's indiscriminate reach, which achieved its apogee during the nineteenth century, when French and British imperial interests in the region advanced substantially. For Said, however, Orientalism is not only a question of representation: as a mechanism which articulates and accounts for imperial expansion, it has corresponding institutional support and is irrevocably tied to socio-economic and political structures. Based on a distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', which served to shore up the authority, superiority and strength of European identity at the expense of non-European peoples and cultures – which were seen 'as a sort of surrogate and even underground self' (ibid.: 3) against which the West has defined itself – Said claims that the persistence and pervasiveness of Orientalism was such that no one writing, thinking or acting on or about the region in the post-Enlightenment period could do so without taking it into account. As a result, there is a high degree of intertextuality involved in this discourse, so that the value of any written statement about the region scarcely depends on the place itself: thus, Orientalism is 'but a re-presence, or representation [. . .] a system for citing works and authors' (ibid.: 21, 23).
The evidence of Orientalism transpires in the very narrative voice adopted, and in structure, as well as the use of particular imagery, themes and motifs in any given text, although in essence it finds expression in a set of regularly circulated and consistently reiterated ideas, or ‘othering’ practices, which include associations of the region with ‘sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy’ (ibid.: 118) and notions of the Oriental as ‘irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different” and strange (ibid.: 40).

The influence of Said’s book on postcolonial studies and on the analysis of travel accounts (which are always representations of the cultural ‘other’) has been huge, notwithstanding the risks and pitfalls entailed in his avowedly ambitious endeavour. Said himself anticipates some of his critics’ complaints in the early pages of Orientalism, acknowledging that the heterogeneity of his primary corpus poses the risk of generalization, ‘distortion and inaccuracy’ (ibid.: 8), and admitting to the risk that his proposal potentially narrows the conception of Oriental cultures – insofar as they were seen to be ‘acted upon’ by this enduring and amoebic form of imperialism – as somehow ‘demeaned’ or ‘denigrated’. (Said does concede en passant that the constraints of Orientalism were not uniformly adverse but could potentially have an affirmative effect.) Said’s detractors have in turn characterized his work as ‘theoretically promiscuous’, deeming his use of Foucault to be at odds with his use of Antonio Gramsci. He has also been accused of being obfuscatory on a key question central to travel writing, namely: whether it is possible to attain a true knowledge of the Other. For example, historian Dane Kennedy argues that, ‘For Said to charge that the West’s representations of the Orient are distorted seems to suggest that he regards an undistorted representation as attainable’ (Kennedy 1996: 348). Yet this position is never articulated or apparently entertained by Said, and Kennedy fundamentally misreads the Palestinian author when he attributes to him a ‘post-structuralist insistence that the Orient is nothing more than a discursive phantasm’ (ibid.: 348): a misconception that will be obvious even from the brief account of Said’s work offered above. More persuasive perhaps are the charges of homogenizing and essentializing the West in no less a distorting fashion than the West’s tendency to do so of the Orient, with the effect that the colonized Other is always a completely undifferentiated and an unknowable category (Kennedy 1996). The absence of any consideration of how power is exercised in the colonial context is also a concern of critics. In his defence, however, Said alludes to ‘embarrassingly incomplete’ tasks beyond the scope of his 1978 study, which, he acknowledges, include a consideration of ‘alternatives to Orientalism’ (1995: 24), among them the question of how to study other peoples and cultures from a non-repressive perspective.

Said’s legacy can be traced in subsequent works of postcolonial scholarship on travel and its narratives, in studies such as Ali Behdad’s Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution (1994) and David Spurr’s The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration (1993) which continue the Foucauldian discourse analysis of their precursor, but address some of its perceived shortcomings. Ali Behdad underscores the enduring significance of Said’s ‘postcolonial antidisciplinarity’, which exposes how seemingly specialized discourses (ordinarily regarded and studied separately) are in fact associated in ways that allow for, and even enable, the complexities of Western hegemony (Behdad 1994: 5–6). Nevertheless, Behdad distances himself from the essentialism of his predecessor’s conception of Orientalism, which he, like others, considers as coextensive with the logic of colonialism. Behdad invokes the work of another postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, in his analysis of French and British late
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colonial travel writing on the Arab world, which he claims evinces a heterogeneity of textual strategies based on ‘principles of discontinuity’ (ibid.: 13), an approach that treats past events and discourses as contradictory internally as well as of one another. David Spurr’s methods are more taxonomical than Behdad’s, which on one level seems ironic given the ways in which the act of classification (especially in the natural sciences, a subject of one of his own chapters) was bound up in imperialist ideology (see also Pratt 2008: chapter 6). Nevertheless, Spurr draws on Derrida’s notion of the ‘violence of the letter’, and the popular but not unproblematic metaphorical equation between writer and colonizer, to frame his study of the processes by which one culture subordinates another in acts of naming, representation and interpretation – although this is an assumption which tends to disregard the potential instability of language itself as well as the basic democracy of the activity of travel writing, a genre in which, as Wendy Bracewell helpfully reminds us, ‘all that’s needed is to have gone somewhere and to be able to write’ (2009: xv).

Spurr identifies twelve rhetorical modes of writing about non-Western peoples which originate and are repeated in the course of the establishment and maintenance of colonial authority: among them, discursive mechanisms of surveillance, appropriation, debasement, negation, eroticization and aestheticization. The risk of levelling that accompanies such generalizing projects, to which Said alluded (and, in his critics’ eyes, was himself guilty of), rears its head once again, insinuating a uniformity, even ‘grim predictability’ (Duffy 1996: 307), to those colonial tropes identified. Spurr does devote a final chapter of his study to considering alternatives to colonial discourse and their own challenges, drawing particular attention to the issues of literal and political translation which arise when seeking out the testimonies of those who have been excluded to date (Spurr 1993: 193). However, notwithstanding his final affirmation of difference (a position underpinned by concepts invoked from the work of Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva), Spurr himself sidesteps the issue of precisely why literal translation is a ‘barrier’ to hearing alternatives to colonial discourse, although his comments hint at the balance that needs to be struck between the dominance of English and attempts to disseminate texts in diverse languages otherwise available only to specialists. In doing so, Spurr effectively reiterates the very practice he critiques, a symptom of a broader, recursive dilemma in postcolonial studies, incipient in Said’s study. If postcolonial studies as a discipline depends on the impossibility of representing the Other or knowing the ‘reality’ of their lived experience, in doing so it in turn risks reinforcing the authority of the colonial archive: ‘Hence, postcolonial criticism suffers from the gesture by which the material ground to which it could appeal for its critical authority is cut off in advance’ (Duffy 1996: 304). Enda Duffy’s scepticism about Behdad’s and Spurr’s ‘polite postcolonialism’ rests on their failure to adequately historicize their critiques: for him, the term ‘colonial’ is effectively fetishized in arguments which ‘imply that different kinds or even degrees of colonial oppression can never be enunciated, which suggests that new mutations of discourse can never in the final instance be judged against the real conditions they actually purport to represent’ (ibid.: 314).

Postcolonial critiques of travel writing

Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992), which was written in the wake of Orientalism but is curiously devoid of reference to it, addresses
some of the perceived methodological contradictions of the work of Said and his disciples and has in turn taken its place in the canon of postcolonial studies on travel literature. Unlike Said, Pratt delimits her corpus exclusively to travel books and narratives, in this case about Spanish America, the Caribbean, and West and Central Africa from 1750 onwards. Fundamentally, where Pratt builds on Said’s work, is in her consideration of voices hitherto absent from the archive, the experience and works of those in whose lives Empire intervened (the ‘travellee’), such as Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Andean who wrote a revisionist account of the conquest documenting Spanish abuses. This example illustrates how those on the receiving end of imperialism ‘did their own knowing and interpreting, sometimes [. . .] using the European’s own tools’ (Pratt 2008: 7). Pratt’s study has become significant not only for its more expansive methodological model but also on account of its singular theoretical vocabulary, which has since become common currency in this and other fields of study. Among the key terms devised or utilized by Pratt in Imperial Eyes are ‘contact zone’ to describe the site of colonial encounter, a space and time where subjects ‘previously separated by geography and history are co-present [. . .] often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’ (ibid.: 8), and the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ scene, which is self-explanatory. Other expressions which have passed into the postcolonial lexicon include ‘anti-conquest’, an epistemological strategy of avowed innocence in the very enunciation of European superiority (usually made by a category of traveller Pratt pejoratively calls the ‘seeing-man’); ‘autoethnography’, to denominate works in which colonized subjects, such as Poma de Ayala, represent themselves in ways which engage with and appropriate the terms of the colonizer; and ‘transculturation’, ‘a phenomenon of the contact zone’, to depict ‘how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture’ (ibid.: 7).

Pratt’s study, which considers not only the experience and production of the colonized subject but also of questions of gender, redresses some key exclusions in earlier postcolonial studies of travel writing. Indeed, attention to such issues coincides with a wider critique of postcolonial theory and a broader questioning of the focus, scope and status of postcolonial studies as an endeavour, which have taken place over the last two decades. At stake in this ‘disciplinary’ enquiry, as Wilson et al. describe, are:

The dangers of homogenisation, of a sedimentation of concerns [. . .] of replicating the exclusions and hegemony of the European canon in the guise of metropolitan writers and critics, of foregrounding mobility (geographical and intellectual) and of privileging cosmopolitan models of postcoloniality.

(2010: 9)

The term ‘post-colonial’ itself, for example, began to be questioned for a perceived insufficiency and imprecision in geographical and historical terms as well as for its teleological implications, which disguise the fact that the historical dismantling of institutions of colonial power (which operated in discrete forms in different parts of the world) has not always been regionally or chronologically synchronous nor resulted in a clean break from colonialism itself. Indeed, independence from colonial rule was achieved at different junctures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not just after the Second World War, and in
diverse cultures and places located in both the so-called Third and First Worlds. In this regard, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan suggest that, ‘postcolonial criticism founders on [. . .] definitional inconsistencies and on the totalizing, ironically dehistoricized vocabulary it often deploys in order to talk about irreconcilably different cultures’ (Holland and Huggan 2000: 48).

In consequence, the category and identity of the ‘colonial’ have come under scrutiny. On the one hand, this has resulted in the revaluation of assumed ‘agents of imperialism’, from the Spanish conquistadors to figures such as Alexander von Humboldt or Roger Casement, all of whom travelled to the New World, although not necessarily exclusively in the service of Empire. On the other hand, in a range of different transnational feminist projects, scholars such as Inderpal Grewal (1996), Indira Ghose (1998), Shirley Foster and Sara Mills (the latter also deploying a Foucauldian discourse analysis) have illuminated the ways in which questions of gender complicate the paradigmatic colonial experience and narrative of travel. For Foster and Mills, the journey accounts of colonial women pivot on a paradox which has to do with prevailing discursive constraints on them (the very activity of travelling, for instance, being deemed ‘unfeminine’, or ‘disreputable’), as well as an ambivalence towards discourses of imperialism and femininity, to neither of which many of their subjects appear able to wholeheartedly subscribe. Rather than sustain a specious equivalence between opposition to patriarchy at home and opposition to imperialism abroad, however, Pratt, Grewal, and others underscore the essential complexity of the locations and writings of Western women who participated in, but also might criticize and/or recalibrate, colonial discourses. Critical to Grewal’s project, for example, which builds on Pratt’s work but reconfigures her terms, is the notion that both ‘home’ and ‘away’ (‘harem’) are articulated at different sites through gendered bodies (of men and women) and that ‘“contact zones” exist not just in the so-called peripheries, but in the colonial metropolis itself’ (Grewal 1996: 4).

Nevertheless, the tendency of much postcolonial criticism of travel writing to focus on pre-twentieth-century and largely ‘metropolitan’ works has continued to focus attention largely on production in and at imperial ‘centres’. In many ways such endeavours simply bolster hegemonic conceptions of Empire, rather than shed light on corresponding sources in the modern period or in the former colonies themselves. In this respect, the potential anachronism and inexpediency of the term ‘post-colonial’ has been debated especially in the contemporary context, where it seems to fall short of capturing the singularities of the experience of neoliberal globalization or of recent adjustments in geopolitical organization and/or economic power. Corresponding efforts have been made to rethink or re-describe post-colonial geography, therefore. These have involved taking into account transcontinental and transoceanic routes which steer away from a prevailing Eurocentrism that no longer provides a dominant axis for understanding recent historical processes, but also considering the complexities of the make-up of Europe itself. Notwithstanding the equivalences often drawn between it and the West, Bracewell, for example, points out in her work on Eastern Europe that insofar as ‘Europe’ itself cannot be neatly divided between East and West, its much cited (and undifferentiated) opposition against ‘the rest of the world’ seems increasingly untenable (Bracewell 2009: xiv). Meanwhile, thinkers in and about the Global South, such as Walter Mignolo, have advanced ideas such as ‘colonial difference’ and ‘transmodernity’ as more appropriate idioms than ‘post-colonial’ for understanding the modern-world system as a spatial articulation of power, rather than as a linear succession
of events. Yet, the valence of the ‘postcolonial’ (as a term and as an approach) is arguably ensured in a world in which ‘people are still influenced by Empire to travel, people still migrate because of Empire and people are still hampered in their travels by Empire’ (Edwards and Graulund 2011: 9). If Empire ‘is still in place, literally as well as figuratively’, its freight is also still associated with the possibility of a ‘practical, resistant, “concrete” hoping’ in a world from where colonialism has not been eradicated’ (Patrick Williams in Wilson et al. 2010: 94). One especially productive outcome of the disciplinary interrogations tracked above, therefore, has been the broadening of the field of study of travel writing in at least two further respects: beyond the limited focus on the colonial period to a consideration of ancient and particularly contemporary travel texts; and, as we shall see presently, to articulations of this category of writing in cultures and languages outside the English-speaking world.

Postcolonial modes of travel writing

Notwithstanding the resistance of some writers and critics to the limitations of the label ‘postcolonial’, there have been efforts to distinguish this as a category of sorts in travel writing. María Lourdes López Ropero, for example, contends that the postcolonial travelogue constitutes a distinct sub-genre of travel writing, the developments in which (in particular, in works by so-called ‘countertravellers’, including postcolonial, women and gay authors) have breathed new life into the genre. In this instance, the postcolonial does not refer to a particular kind of writing or poetics but rather to the subject position of the authors themselves, for as Elleke Boehmer observes, the difficulties in identifying a postcolonial aesthetic rest on the fact that the term derives from the world rather than the work (in Wilson et al. 2010: 176). In consequence, the characteristics of the ‘postcolonial traveller’ – a classification which includes both those from formerly colonized regions, in whose lives Empire has directly intervened, and Western descendants of formerly colonized peoples – have a material basis. Certain continuities, however, can be observed in the works of such travellers, although not all their journeys are based on routes to or from the imperial ‘centre’. In those travelogues by writers from former British colonies analysed by Barbara Korte, for example, she identifies a tendency to reverse the colonizer’s direction of travel (from imperial centre to periphery), the return journey being ‘an important variety of the home tour’ (Korte 2000: 172). An engagement with colonial heritage and issues of belonging as well as ‘new’ iterations of de-territorialization or ‘extra-territoriality’ also characterize the corpus. A cluster of Anglophone writers of works in this vein – including but not limited to V.S. Naipaul (The Enigma of Arrival, 1987), Caryl Phillips (The European Tribe, 1987; The Atlantic Sound, 2000), Jamaica Kincaid (A Small Place, 1988; Among Flowers: a Walk in the Himalaya 2005), and Pico Iyer (Video Night in Kathmandu, 1988; The Global Soul, 2000) – have come to form a ‘canon’ of sorts, central to which are the travellers’ efforts to underscore historical power relations forged through travel and to contest and protest their endurance.

US-based Kincaid and Phillips, for example, have deployed the travel narrative as a denunciatory critique of the colonial past and, above all, of persistent forms of racism, with their narratives distinguished by the invectives’ particular direction against their Euro-American readers, making them become the (uncomfortable) object of the travel writer’s gaze. Thus Phillips, returning to Europe, decries the continent’s failure to understand ‘the
high price of her churches, art galleries and architecture’ (1999: 128), while Kincaid, back in Antigua after a twenty-year absence, launches a coruscating attack on tourism:

A tourist is an ugly human being. You are not an ugly person all the time [. . . ] you make a leap from being that nice blob just sitting like a boob in your amniotic sac of the modern experience to being a person visiting heaps of death and ruin and feeling alive and inspired at the sight of it.

(1988: 14, 16)

In contrast to such trenchant but often also complex reversals of route, narrative and generic conventions, other contemporary travellers articulate a form of cosmopolitanism which celebrates ‘out-of-placeness’ not as temporary, traumatic or anxious, but rather as a permanent, voluntary and affirmative condition. ‘Global soul’ Pico Iyer is perhaps the most frequently cited example of this ilk, his works depicting a particular – and, unsurprisingly, rather privileged – post-colonial identity which divides critical opinion: either he ‘sits’ rather too comfortably next to the frequent flyer (Smethurst 2004: 181) or the merit of his books rests not on ‘writing back or countering’ but rather ‘re-focusing’ [. . . and] writing with’ (Edwards and Graulund 2011: 67). There are indeed problematic issues at stake in this kind of contemporary cosmopolitanism, not least that such travellers sustain and reinforce long-standing privileges of mobility and representation which stem directly from Empire and which continue to be associated predominantly with the West. In this respect, Holland and Huggan identify a category they call the ‘eccentric gentleman traveller’, a present-day re-iteration of Pratt’s Victorian ‘seeing-man’, which ‘springs from the ironic awareness that Empire has collapsed, but that the traveller is free – or better, can pretend to be free – to act as if it never had’ (Holland and Huggan 2000: 46). It is perhaps no surprise that modern cosmopolitans also continue to deploy exoticizing tropes and practices which may take a different guise to those of their colonial counterparts, yet are fundamentally still elitist and exploitative (see Dunn 2004). Moreover, if oppositional voices from the former colonies such as Kincaid’s run the risk of commodification in a climate ‘within which such strategically “othered” products circulate within the global market [and] in which “otherness” is assimilated, reproduced, and consumed’ (Holland and Huggan 2000: 48), much recent travel writing of this cosmopolitan strain is invested in the same processes.

If the market threatens to distort the postcolonial literature of travel in this regard, in others its prevailing monolingualism, like that of its corresponding scholarly activity, poses equivalent risks of homogenization and exclusion. While I began this chapter noting similarities, and the common ground shared by travel writing and postcolonial studies, I conclude it with a necessary emphasis on difference, for as Nirmala Menon suggests in terms that are resonant for both subjects of interest here, one exit strategy from the stagnation in postcolonial critical perspectives is to ‘reroute the discipline into a multilingual field’ (in Wilson et al. 2010: 218). Indeed, in the wake of Harish Trivedi’s assertion that ‘the postcolonial has only ears for English’ (quoted in Forsdick and Murphy 2003: 7), the limitations of ‘postcolonial’ and ‘travel’ paradigms have led some scholars of travel writing to suggest that, until recently, contrary to sight (the sense with which the journey is most typically associated), in fact blindness or deafness are more synonymous with travel and its study (Khair 2006: 4). As Tabish Khair notes, ‘the travels of entire peoples (mostly outside Eurocentric spaces) have been erased [. . .] it would appear as if Africans and Asians simply stayed at home discoursing
about karma or Allah, shorn of curiosity or enterprise’ (ibid.: 6). Reconsiderations of the specificities and implications of the ‘post-colonial’ experience and its theories in Francophone, Latin American and other countries, have been instructive in testing and reaching beyond these conceptual and linguistic borders. Khair’s efforts, showing the world mapped by Asian and African travellers, have been corroborated by scholars of travel and its articulations in non- metropolitan, non-Anglophone cultures, including French- and Spanish-speaking former colonies (see, for example, Forsdick 2005; Lindsay 2010; Bracewell 2009). Writing about journeys by non-Europeans in languages other than English raises fundamental questions about the generic expression and very modalities of travel, practices that take on different meanings in different cultures. Insofar as mobility is often predominantly viewed as the exclusive purview of the European, and in light of its longstanding imperial ‘taint’, such endeavours require and often insist on the recalibration of existing precepts, while remaining receptive to cross-cultural influences (impossible as it is, for example, to discuss non-European travel writing without its European counterpart).

An insistence on specificity and difference is not necessarily a demand for exceptionalism, however. As Charles Forsdick suggests, ‘interculturality [ought to have] a paradigmatic rather than merely thematic status’ in the study of travel writing (Forsdick 2005: xix), for to reduce its discussion to one discipline is counterintuitive in respect of such a fluid, transnational category. Mindful, as Said also famously averred, that theories themselves can travel and that cultural frontiers are perhaps more porous than ever in our increasingly globalized world, these recent developments suggest that travel writing and postcolonial studies will continue to be mutually invested in linguistic, thematic and epistemological terms. Moreover, the growing proliferation of diaspora and digital networks in our contemporary world poses questions about location and travel in ways that challenge fixed notions of those ideas, as well as of nationhood, and which ramify, of course, our understanding of what it is to write about (dis)placement. On the other hand, there already exists a growing body of (literary and journey) narratives that articulate varying degrees of postcolonial ‘ecocriticism’ or environmental engagement, the travelogue offering a seemingly natural vehicle for addressing another pressing current concern. In these respects, travel writing and postcolonial studies today, notwithstanding (or perhaps even precisely because of) the circumstances of their historical alliance, have tremendous potential for social commitment and even for the articulation of what Mignolo calls ‘diversality’, ‘a project that is an alternative to universality and offers the possibilities of a network of planetary confrontations with globalization in the name of justice, equity, human rights, and epistemic diversality’ (Mignolo 2008: 257).

Note

1 Here, I adhere to the use of the hyphenated form ‘post-colonial’ to refer to that which comes chronologically after colonialism, and ‘postcolonial’ to refer to ‘a contemporary assessment of the culture and history of empire from the moment of conquest’ (see Forsdick and Murphy 2003: 5).

Select bibliography


