

*Political Tourism and its Texts*

Maureen Moynagh

288 pages, 2008, £35.00 (cloth)

Toronto, University of Toronto Press

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*Political Tourism and its Texts* offers a detailed account of the cultural phenomenon of twentieth-century literary travels, and travel writing, motivated by political commitment. In focusing on a diverse selection of travelling writers—Nancy Cunard, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, Agnes Smedley, Che Guevara, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Randall, Rebecca Gordon, and Adrienne Rich—Moynagh offers the reader a synoptic view of twentieth-century, left-leaning, literary-political preoccupations and imagined belongings. Historical texts by these authors are interwoven with, and elucidated through, a series of sophisticated theoretical readings, drawing on work by Judith Butler, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, and others.

Moynagh notes that her selection of texts embodies political concerns, and associated patterns of political engagement, that are historically and geographically specific. These texts, and their authors, are “bound to particular historical moments—early twentieth-century Pan-Africanism, the Sino-Japanese war, the Cuban revolution, [and] the Sandanista effort to transform Nicaraguan society during the course of the 1980s” (253). Inevitably, Moynagh’s chosen authors are equally bound to place: places both real and imaginary; sites of origin as much as sites of affiliation. She shows how political travel tends to be motivated by desiring individuals, who have constructed another society or culture, and its polity, as a utopian locus for political and personal transformation. For Moynagh’s political travellers, the “destination” of travel is both real and imagined, encompassing a specific geographical location, but also representing an imagined site for the development of personal, social, and political identities. In this way, her authors’ multifaceted constructions of the locus of travel create multiple *literary* sites of political identification and idealisation.

*Political Tourism and its Texts* is most compelling in the detailed analyses Moynagh performs of texts by her chosen subjects. Moynagh’s readings of the relationship between text and image in Auden and Isherwood’s *Journey to a War* (1939) and Agnes Smedley’s *Battle Hymn of China* (1943) are especially persuasive. These texts are taken as two contrasting examples of left-leaning, early twentieth-century, “Western” literary-political engagements with China. The chapter on Auden and Isherwood reads *Journey to a War* in terms of “revolutionary drag” (76), seeing correspondences and contrasts between Auden and Isherwood’s self-conscious, rhetorical performance of war journalism in wartime China, and their travelling identities as (closeted) Western sexual and cultural dissidents. The multiple ambivalences and uncertainties of Auden and Isherwood’s

literary and political performance as travellers and “war correspondents” are inscribed, Moynagh argues, through textual strategies such as irony, camp, and (limited) self-disclosure. Contrastingly, Smedley is interpreted as adopting, or appropriating, in her writing a specifically Chinese cultural rhetoric of “speaking bitterness” (120) as a deliberate, non-ironic strategy of testimony. There is a suggestive link made between recent critical writing on the “new cosmopolitanism” and Smedley’s writing of China, conceived as “a struggle with form, with subjectivity, and with modernity as a universalist project” (110).

One issue that arises throughout *Political Tourism and its Texts* is the degree to which travel writing can serve as an act of witnessing—particularly, the degree to which such literature can possibly serve as witness to war, violence, human suffering, and the desire for political change. The performative capacity of literature is in question throughout Moynagh’s work, and is significant in relation to all her writing subjects. The dual ethical motivation—one might say, compulsion—that fuels the writers discussed is the necessity to witness and to record historical events, but also, to justify their interest in, or ethical claim on, such events. Authorial persona is thus strategically and self-consciously foregrounded in the travel narratives produced by these authors. A sense of being in the right place at the right time, as history unfolds, informs many of these writerly testimonies, and is presented as a kind of subjective justification for the writer’s—often incongruous and risk-laden—intervention or presence in theatres of violence and socio-political conflict.

An insistent question raised by Moynagh’s approach, persuasive as it is, is the general usefulness of “political tourism” as a critical/theoretical category. Political tourism’s specific value for criticism would appear to be its ability to function as a socio-historical frame for critical research on twentieth-century modernism and modern subjectivity; this resource has scarcely been tapped. In this sense, the book has opened up a productive, and provocative, field of inquiry. What is less certain is the degree to which political tourism constitutes a critical category in its own right. Moynagh’s overall interpretation of the cultural phenomenon of Western travel, and its role in the development of modern literary (and political) sensibilities, appears consonant with the established critical view, pioneered by scholars including John Urry, Mary Louise Pratt, James Clifford, and James Buzard, among others. This view critiques the development of Western travel both as the privileged activity of an ethnocentric leisure class, and as a practice embodying Enlightenment-inspired conceptions and practices of the agentic self. Arguably, in comparison to these critics, Moynagh under-emphasises travel’s relation to questions of socio-economic status and race—to affluence, leisure, class, and consumption.

More puzzlingly, there exists an abundant and sophisticated literature on testimony and literary witness to suffering that is not referred to or engaged with here—most notably, in relation to the Holocaust (the word “Holocaust” does not appear in the book; the

word “genocide” appears only in the Epilogue, in relation to a young US woman’s experience in the Israel/Palestine conflict). Critical work on Latin American *testimonio* is discussed in relation to Margaret Randall’s “transnational feminist practice” (237) yet no link is drawn to the central role played by testimonial in Holocaust/genocide studies. This stands as a somewhat surprising omission, given the book’s central concern with what it meant, in the twentieth century, to be a politically committed Western writer, and what it meant to seek political solidarity with others in pursuit of causes that exceeded all kinds of boundaries: national, cultural, sexual, racial, and ethical. Equally, there is no reference to the recent development of “Dark Tourism” studies; a recent and significant innovation in the study of tourism and travel writing, which focuses on the phenomenon of travel to sites of historical conflict and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Moynagh writes beautifully, and the book is a pleasure to read. It has been well-produced by University of Toronto Press, with few editorial or proofreading glitches. The black and white illustrations are welcome, and offer evidence of Moynagh’s engagement with visual culture and with historical visual sources. This includes critical discussion of book design and layout, as well as detailed content analysis of specific photographs.

### Works Cited

- Auden, W. H., and Isherwood, Christopher. *Journey to a War*. London: Faber, 1939.
- Sharpley, Richard, and Phillip R. Stone, eds. *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*. Bristol: Channel View, 2009.
- Smedley, Agnes. *Battle Hymn of China*. London: Gollancz, 1944.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sharpley and Stone for an introduction to this approach.