

Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations

Edited by Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund

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Travel writing is an interdisciplinary genre that, in recent times, has become an important area of study. Closely linked to issues of imperialism, diaspora, multiculturalism, nationalism, identity, gender, globalization, colonialism and postcolonialism, it brings into play ideas of transculturation, the idea of the centre and the margin, border crossings, hybridity, location and displacement. Travel entails a movement away from a familiar place and location to an unfamiliar one, a new place, one that is different from one's home. This difference may often pose threats to one's identity as it brings into purview ideas of the self and the other. Hence travel and travel writing raise important questions. How does postcolonial travel writing represent this idea of identity, self and otherness? Can travel be a means of finding out one's identity? The essays in *Postcolonial Travel Writing* provide a sharper focus on the postcolonial issues broached in two other books on the subject: *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory and Transit*, edited by Steve Clark, and *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, edited by Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose. Where Clark's volume includes texts belonging to both the colonial and postcolonial period and uses new historicism, travel theory and postcolonialism in its analysis, and where Blunt and Rose's examines the interface between race, gender and feminism, the volume under review concentrates on postcolonial texts.

Postcolonial Travel Writing, as the editors point out, is not just about "writing back." As the editors say in the introduction,

The word 'postcolonial' imparts potential for dislocation, disjuncture and even rupture when it is combined with a genre—travel writing—that has been critiqued within postcolonial circles. Thus, we seek to shake the reader's complacency through the unmapping of mapped critical areas and decentring dominant theoretical territories. (6)

The introduction locates travel writing within the gamut of postcolonial studies and sets out the themes and topics that travel writing entails. It includes a brief and useful discussion of Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*, a text that critiques the idea of a travel narrative and "subverts the colonial travel narrative" (4).

Postcolonial travel writing critiques Eurocentric travel writing. The essays in this volume challenge conventional notions that see travel writing as essentially colonial and deal with texts that articulate a sense of the decentering of Europe, North America, Empire and globalization. Written by scholars from all over the world, the essays in this collection offer a comprehensive study of postcolonial travel writing, ranging from literature and memoir to essays and travel histories. The essays deal with the complexities of the relationship between place and space, ideas of identity, nation, home and belonging.

The essays in the collection investigate the impact of globalization on travel and the necessity of distinguishing postcolonial travel writing from eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel writing. They stress the fact that postcolonial travel writing is a much more prolific and innovative textual form quite distinct from earlier travel narratives. The essays articulate the position of the traveling subject and reveal how travel writing presents a wide variety of ways of looking at the dialectics of place and self, concerns of great importance in postcolonial studies. Mary Louise Pratt's seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) is the starting point of the first two essays in the volume. C. Lindsay's "Beyond *Imperial Eyes*" is a revaluation of the reception of Pratt's work and its importance in discussions on modern travel writing. The second essay in the volume, "Disturbing Naipaul's Universal Civilization: Islam, Travel Narratives and the Limits of Westernization" by B. Roy takes as its point of departure Pratt's work and argues that it is not necessary to read Naipaul as presenting an affirmation of the hegemony of the West. R. Phillips' article "Decolonizing Travel: James/Jan Morris's Geographies" refers to the idea of ambivalence, an idea that can be used to counter terms like imperial, margin, colonial, centre, male, female, other, self, etcetera. By discussing a transsexual writer, the essay argues that the notion of ambivalence can lead into newer areas of interest in travel writing. Phillips argues that "Morris's travel writing foregrounds a preoccupation not only with geography but also with gender and imperialism" (88). To a travel writer, therefore, travel entails not just physical movement and change, but as in Morris's case, brings in the notion of a change from being a man to becoming a woman.

The texts analysed in the volume include Naipaul's *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1999), Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu: And Other reports from the Not-So-Far East* (1988) and *The Global Soul: Jetlag, Shopping Malls and the Search For Home* (2000), Caryl Phillip's *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), Denis Williams' *Other Leopards* (1963), Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988), *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas* (2005) and William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* (1993) and *White Mughals* (2002). The list of texts under analysis is comprehensive; however, a full-fledged chapter on Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*, which is briefly referred to in the introduction, might have added further weight to the collection.

The volume concludes with Tabish Khair's interview with William Dalrymple and Pankaj Mishra, two writers of the travel writing genre. Both writers speak of the limitations, possibilities and modalities of the genre from their practice focusing on many of the issues that the essays in the collection deal with.

Postcolonial Travel Writing offers a comprehensive analysis of the various concerns and issues at stake. As the subtitle attests, the essays in the volume add new perspectives to the area of postcolonial travel, opening up interesting ways of looking at the genre and adding to the broader field of postcolonial studies in general.

Works Cited

- Blunt, Alison and Gillian Rose, eds. *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. New York: Guilford P, 1994. Print.
- Clark, Steve, ed. *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory and Transit*. London: Zed, 1999. Print.