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# Encountering Difference

**New Perspectives on Genre,  
Travel and Gender**

With a Foreword by Carl Thompson

Series in Literary Studies



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# Foreword: Encounters with Difference

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Despite some rumours to the contrary, encountering difference remains fundamental to travel, travel writing, and indeed travel writing studies. It is true that globalisation has in diverse ways shrunk and homogenised the world, diminishing many of the most conspicuous traditional contrasts between cultures and giving rise to proclamations of the 'death' of both travel and travel writing. Yet all communities, like all individuals, retain distinctive characteristics, even if these are often now more subtly modulated than in the past. Global patterns and practices are necessarily inflected according to local concerns, histories and environments: ours is an age of 'glocality', to use a clumsy but useful formulation. And all human activity necessarily takes place within nature and within a material realm that is at once intimately entwined with, foundational to and sometimes greatly affected by our existence, yet also in many regards profoundly separate from and indifferent to us. Faced with such complex, tangled webs of interconnection and interdependency—between cultures and between humanity and nature—many scholars have rightly stressed the inadequacy of traditional dualisms that postulate stark, binary oppositions along the lines of self/other, us/them, culture/nature. Important as it is, however, to develop more nuanced, variegated paradigms for perceiving and articulating the world, those paradigms must still recognise divergence, dissimilarity and illegibility as part of their overall dialectic. Undoubtedly we need now to avoid those older, more simplistic conceptions of difference that were born from and helped to promote hierarchical, subordinating relationships. Yet to assume, project and possibly impose identity, affinity and a sense of fundamental 'sameness' is potentially just as oppressive. The acknowledgement of alterity and plurality accordingly remains an epistemological and ethical imperative.

For this reason, travel can still be an important route to knowledge of both the wider world and ourselves, inviting us to ponder with almost every step and in myriad ways constant, ongoing interrelationships of familiarity and unfamiliarity, connection and disconnection. And travel writing retains its value as a mapping of this process and as a record of the knowledge thus garnered. Although always caught up in the inevitable limitations and double-

binds of any form of representation, the genre at its best negotiates these problems to produce accounts that may in diverse ways increase our understanding and enlarge our sympathies. Good travel writing can introduce us to peoples and places we had little previous knowledge of, or make us rethink what we thought we knew of more familiar regions and communities. Simultaneously—and especially perhaps in its most characteristic modern form—the genre introduces us to a variety of travellers, each with their own distinctive sensibility and voice. In this way, travel writing arguably heightens, or adds a new dimension to, the encounter with difference that is already fundamental to travel. As well as concerning itself with differences between peoples and places, the genre additionally foregrounds the plurality of perspectives that can be brought to bear on any and every place. It can teach us that others see the world very differently to ourselves; in the process, it may bring into focus the blind-spots and lacunae in our own gaze. Notice, however, the subjunctive mood of the last sentence (and several earlier ones): travel writing *may* bring useful knowledge of various kinds but it is of course perfectly possible to both write and read travel accounts in ways which simply confirm existing prejudices and stereotypes. Historically, perhaps, much travel writing has been produced and consumed in this limited and limiting fashion. Read carefully with contextualisation and critique, however, even clichéd or prejudicial travel accounts may yield useful insights—teaching us little, perhaps, about the region or community being described but amply illustrating the preoccupations and prevailing assumptions of the writer and his/her society.

We may read and study travel writing, then, to learn of different regions, cultures and communities, but we may equally read and study the form to learn about different types of traveller, the diverse projects they undertake or assist through their travelling, and the societies and cultures from which they hail. Turning the focus in this way from ‘travellee’ to traveller is again to encounter complex, tangled skeins of similarity and dissimilarity, identity and difference. Every traveller and travel writer is in one sense a unique individual, assembling their own distinctive account of a destination. Yet no-one encounters the world with entirely fresh, Adamic eyes; instead, we are all moulded to some degree by the languages, histories and cultural practices we inherit and inhabit. Wherever they may wander in the world, travellers necessarily carry with them a gaze formed by their upbringing and background, and by membership of diverse, intersecting communities and identities—of nationality, family, class, gender, sexuality and so forth. Some of these identities may be consciously repudiated by the traveller, others deliberately and willingly embraced; many are simply non-negotiable, forming a fundamental core of the traveller’s being and psyche. Any travel account is thus partially shaped by forces and institutions largely beyond the

traveller's control, possibly even beyond their ken. These forces and factors in turn create commonalities of outlook and expression, and over time generate a variety of distinctive—yet frequently interconnecting and overlapping—traditions and sub-genres within the larger, looser generic field of 'travel writing'.

These larger shaping influences, and especially considerations of genre and sub-genre, are a key concern of the present volume. Almost every scholarly discussion of travel writing necessarily reflects at some point on the complex issue of genre in relation to the form; however, as the editors here rightly note, the great majority of prior discussion does not go beyond stressing travel writing's inherent diversity and heterogeneity, and its many 'fuzzy borders' with closely related forms such as memoir and the novel. This is undoubtedly an important point to grasp about travel writing. However, it has as its corollary the equally important project pursued in this collection of essays, that of looking closely at some of those diverse modes and types of travel writing, and mapping the distinctive constraints, affordances and effects of specific sub-genres and forms. Such (sub-)generic templates and their associated expectations of style, theme and structure, are part of what every traveller and travel writer inherits from their wider culture; they can also be understood as a sort of contract established (sometimes, as we shall see, under duress) between the writer on the one hand and his or her publishers and readers on the other. Some writers work happily within prevailing constellations and configurations of genre; others may seek to reinvent or transform the modes of travel writing they inherit (and arguably much of the most interesting and successful travel writing in recent years attempts such a transformative or hybridizing project). Yet it is very difficult – indeed, probably impossible – to ignore completely or wholly escape these wider matrices of genre and sub-genre: even departures from generic expectation necessarily have those expectations as a starting point and frame of reference.

Focusing in this way on questions of genre and sub-genre in travel writing is not simply an exercise in formalist criticism, as some might dismiss it. Genres/sub-genres arise and survive because they speak to, and of, specific social needs and desires. Collectively instigated, and born from a marriage of authorial inclination and readers' tastes, they are a foundational mechanism by which a culture segments and maps the reality it perceives. Generic framing and affiliation – or by the same token, dislocations and contraventions of genre – thus have at some level significant real-life or real-world implications, and can be imbued with complex, multiple valences. The present collection usefully demonstrates this by bringing genre/sub-genre into fruitful dialogue with another 'constant variable', as it were, almost always at play in any travel account yet potentially inflected in very different ways

and with differing degrees of prominence. This is the issue of the traveller's gender. This may seem superficially an unrelated concern or focus, yet in fact, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, questions of gender and genre are often far more intimately entwined. In any given culture or period, for example, some forms of writing may be strongly marked as masculine domains, others conventionally associated with women. Some authors accept these categorisations; others – both men and women – struggle against them. Sometimes these struggles are successful; however, this is also an area in which the larger cultural mechanisms which shape and circulate travel accounts frequently prevail over authorial endeavours and preferences. A woman traveller, for example, may wish to take up a supposedly more 'masculine' mode of travel writing, or indeed to eschew and elide considerations of gender altogether; but as Barbara Schaff and Tim Hannigan's chapters here suggest, editors, publishers, and reviewers may all push back against such disavowals of traditional gender/genre mapping, ensuring that a text is more conventionally marketed and received. Such pressures of gender and genre have perhaps historically weighed more heavily on women travel writers than their male counterparts; hence, the greater focus in this volume on women's travel writing in diverse forms and modes. Yet as Aude Haffe and Emily Teo's essays in the present collection usefully remind us, the gender/genre nexus may similarly confront male travel writers, whether their intention is to subvert or to conform to the masculinism traditionally associated with many modes of travel writing.

Focusing in this way on the intersections of gender and genre manifest in differing types and modes of travel writing (embracing, for example, Victorian magazine articles, modern travel photography and Gothic fiction as a form of female travel writing) the present volume chiefly speaks to the second of the research agendas outlined above. That is to say, its principal concern is with how and to what ends different travellers shape their accounts from the cultural materials available to them, and equally how those accounts, and the travellers themselves, are partly shaped by larger forces at work in their own cultures. The volume thus helps to us to understand better the genealogy, influence and implications of differing forms of recent and historical travel writing. It also demonstrates, somewhat paradoxically, how innovative understandings of gender, genre and travel, and attempts to write differently about destinations and/or the travelling self, can sometimes effectively be suppressed by cultural institutions that see more profit in the repackaging of established tropes and familiar narrative patterns. All of this adds usefully to our knowledge and comprehension of how travel accounts are produced, and the diverse forms of cultural work they do in the societies that produce and consume them. And indirectly, this focus on questions of genre and gender, and on patterns of production and reception in travel writing, also assists the

first research agenda suggested above, that of using travel writing to reach a greater understanding of the wider world. Every instance and type of travel writing can be regarded as a lens that necessarily refracts and distorts the world so as to bring it into view. It is impossible to be wholly free of such inherent distorting effects in our representations of the world, yet we cannot simply abandon the task of acquiring and circulating knowledge of other people and places. Now more than ever, perhaps, we need a global vision that acknowledges the interdependency of everyone and everything on the planet. The best we can therefore do is develop as a detailed and nuanced understanding of the different sorts of refraction and distortion that occur, so as to factor these in and adjust for them as we seek to glean useful knowledge from travel writing. The present volume is a useful and original contribution to this necessary project, amply demonstrating how considerations of gender and genre can exercise a significant shaping influence on travel accounts.



# **Introduction: Gendered travel and the genre of travel writing**

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In recent decades travel writing has received much scholarly attention. Alongside globalisation and the increased movement of ideas, values and populations, both within and across national boundaries, scholars have turned to the genre of travel writing to theorize and analyse issues pertaining to mobility, both voluntary and enforced, as well as communication across cultures. As Carl Thompson notes, “all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity *and* identity, difference *and* similarity” (2011, 9, emphasis in original). As such, all travel is generally an encounter of the self with the other, as well as a form of contestation of such clear-cut divisions. It is therefore not surprising that with the emergence of Postcolonial Studies, travel writing became an important source in the study of imperialism and its history. Since the 1990s, which saw the publication of some of the first scholarly works on travel writing (e.g. Mills 1991, Pratt 1992, Youngs 1994), travel writing studies have become diversified in their dealing with questions concerning issues as diverse as gender and sexuality, authorship and authority, power geographies, history of science, and reception and readership, to name but a few.

Within this broad field of scholarly enquiry, this collection of essays asks crucial questions about the relationship between gender and genre in travel writing to consider how gender shapes formal and thematic approaches to the various generic forms employed to represent and recreate travel. While the question of the genre of travel writing has often been debated—is travel writing, for example, a genre of its own, a hybrid genre, a sub-genre of autobiography or of creative nonfiction?—and scholars have paid much-needed attention to travel writing and gender, these have only much more rarely been brought together. This book sheds light on how the gendered nature of writing and

reading about travel affect the genre-choices and strategies of writers, as well as the way in which travel writing is received. It reconsiders some traditional and frequently studied forms of travel writing, both European and non-European, while pursuing questions about the connections between travel writing and other genres, such as the novel and photography, and new sub-genres such as the 'new nature writing', and focusing in particular on the political ramifications of genre in travel writing.

### **The problem of travel writing's genre/s**

Travel writing draws upon and has influenced numerous other generic forms, from satirical commentary to scientific reports, meaning that travel writing is highly varied and diverse but "notoriously refractory to definition" (Holland & Huggan 2000, xi). Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan suggests that it is

a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines. Travel narratives run from picaresque adventures to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable, and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology, and social science, often demonstrating great erudition, but without seeing fit to respect the rules that govern conventional scholarship. (2000, 8–9)

The hybrid nature of travel writing lends it and its writers particular opportunities and forms of power. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries European travel writing was often a hybrid form between literary and scientific writing, and it therefore offered women writers and travellers an opportunity "not only to pursue scientific interests, but also to develop those interests and feed back to their own findings through close contact with major [scientific] figures" (Thompson 2017, 137). Today, travel writing often combines (apparently) objective and highly subjective accounts of travel—a hybrid form that is also frequently gendered, as discussed by Barbara Schaff and Tim Hannigan in their essays in this volume.

Beyond noting the kaleidoscope of generic forms that are to be found in and that influence travel books, several works focus more critically on genre. Numerous essays in the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009) examine the connections between genre in travel writing and the emergence of US American national identity and national culture. For the editors, the hybrid form of travel writing "exposes ... genre fault lines" (Hamera & Bendixen 2009, 2) and thus questions simple and fixed differentiations between fact and fiction or subjective and objective accounts. The editors also argue that each experience of travel inevitably reshapes the genre of travel writing, like the encounters with difference thereby generated "give birth to new genre conventions and reinvigorate existing ones" (Hamera & Bendixen 2009, 7). *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and*

*Politics of Mobility* (Kuehn & Smethurst 2009) pays close attention to the literary forms of travel writing and the connections between genre and European travel writing's role in justifying and enabling imperialism. Thus not only did travel books introduce European readers to colonized or colonizable foreign places via their content, but "the *form (and genre)* of travel writing helped articulate the idea of empire for a European audience" (Smethurst 2009, 6, emphasis added). Debbie Lisle's *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* also analyses the political commitments and implications of travel writing's generic forms in detail, but with a focus on contemporary writing, concluding that "the genre encourages a particularly conservative political outlook that extends to its vision of global politics" (2006, xi). Lisle's analysis is closely linked to that of the essays in Kuehn and Smethurst's volume, as she argues that contemporary travel writing is "a genre that claims to have jettisoned its colonial past, but all the while is casually producing new forms of colonial power" (Lisle 2006, 15). A similar concern about the political ramifications of travel writing can be found in particular in Laura Shea's essay in this volume, in which she argues that Sally Mann's photographic pilgrimage—and thus photographic travelogue—is at best an ambiguously successful pilgrimage of 'racial atonement'. Other essays, however, are more optimistic about the potential to manipulate genre traditions. Martina Horáková and Aude Haffen both examine cases of travel writers engaging with colonialist practices—colonial mapping in Australia and the (neo)colonial masculine adventure respectively—and argue that the writers they examine are able to inhabit and modify genre and gender expectations to subvert colonial norms.

### Gendering travel

In many cultures, travel has historically been understood as a masculine activity and the public road a masculine space in contrast to feminine private and domestic spaces. Scholars have frequently pointed to Homer's *Odyssey* as an ur-text of European travel writing—and European cultural understandings of travel—in which wandering masculine heroes travel the world while Penelope waits at home for their return: "Penelope's destiny, it seems, is not to roam the world; she is instead the destination and safe haven which Odysseus and Telemachus are striving to reach" (Thompson 2011, 168; see also Roberson 2009). As a showcase of masculinity, travel writing may be similar to adventure fiction, often construed as a "rite of passage from boyhood to adulthood" with different forms of "heroic self-fashioning" (Thompson 2011, 174). Billie Melman points out that "the travel epic purports to be a masculine genre", with male writers celebrating "physical prowess" and "manliness" (2002, 117). In many cultures, travel was and is a gendered activity, with men

likely to have greater freedom and more opportunities to travel, however precisely this cultural gendering of travel as a masculine activity also operates to obscure women's mobility. As Thompson points out, "women have always travelled more extensively than the masculinist mythology ... would suggest" (2011, 169), whether together with male family members, in pilgrimage groups, as migrants or settlers, in the train of diplomatic missions or with the military in wartime, as tourists, or, sometimes, as scientists and researchers. Despite the restrictions on both women's travel and women's travel writing (including women's more limited access to education and therefore their ability to record their travels in writing), women have produced "a vast body" (Thompson 2011, 170) of travel writing. While the practice of science, for example, used to be an almost exclusively male domain, the genre of travel writing as semi-scientific gave women writers the opportunity to do science while not necessarily appearing to do science (Medeiros 2019; Thompson 2017; Guelke & Morin 2001). Travel writing produced by women, however, has often been—and to some extent continues to be—ignored or sidelined in histories of travel and travel writing and travel writing scholarship.

A key task of feminist travel writing scholarship has therefore been the recovery—and republishing—of women's travel and travel writing beginning in the 1970s (Bassnett 2002). This 'rediscovery' of women travel writers, however, has sometimes tended to reinforce their marginalization by treating them as a comic novelty. In this way, women travellers become "categorised as doubly different" (Bassnett 2002, 226): different from male travellers, but also different from more socially orthodox women. By implication, therefore, the 'normal' woman is still one who does not travel, and Bassnett thus warns that the "theory of the exceptional woman has been one of the classic ways of marginalising women's achievements" (2002, 228). While scholarship on women's travel writing continues to flourish, women travel writers often continue to be confined to the category of—or chapter on—'women's travel writing'. One of many examples of this tendency can be found in the *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002): it contains Bassnett's chapter, quoted above, on 'travel writing and gender', but of the many travel writers named in the editors' introduction to the volume (Hulme & Youngs 2002), only two are women: Mary Kingsley, described as an emblematic figure for research on women's travel writing, and Edith Wharton, who is generally more likely to be classified as a novelist than a travel writer.

The recovery of women's travel writing and of the history of women travellers is important, but it carries the risk of essentialism (Bird 2015): that is, that all women travellers will be assumed to share certain characteristics due to their gender, and that they will be assumed to be somehow fundamentally different to male travellers. This debate can be clearly seen in

the scholarship on women travel writers and imperialism. European colonialism provided European women with numerous new opportunities for travel. Early approaches to gender and travel often considered female travellers inherently prone to oppose imperialism, and their travelogues read as challenging imperial claims of racial and cultural superiority and inferiority (e.g. Blake 1992). More recent scholarship, however, has understood this to be a “rather utopian hope” located “in the first wave of feminist recovery” (Thompson 2017, 131). Other scholars have wrestled with more complex dynamics of gender and imperialism (see, e.g. Morgen 1996; Blunt 1994). Sara Mills, in her enormously influential and still frequently cited book *Discourses of Difference*, argues that women travel writers in the nineteenth century “struggle[d] with the discourses of imperialism and femininity, neither of which they could wholeheartedly adopt, and which pulled them in different textual directions” (1991, 3). To study women’s writing is therefore not simply a question of adding the ‘gender factor’ but rather of “thoroughly reformulating the model of textuality which is employed in critical colonial discourse analysis” (Mills 1991, 47). In the colonial era, “women travellers had ... to write about their experiences from within a tradition that denied them a role, for if the image of the coloniser is sexualised as a man bent on raping virgin lands, then a woman from the colonising culture is effectively erased” (Bassnett 2002, 231). This absence of a tradition or role for women travellers did not prevent some of them from actively supporting European imperialism, such as Isabella Bird’s possible cover for a British military cartographic mission in Persia (Harper 2001). More generally, travelling European women sometimes enjoyed the power and authority over colonized populations which imperialism granted them (Bassnett 2002; see also McClintock 1995), even as colonial discourse also reinforced the dominant image of the traveller as a hyper-masculine figure. The assumptions that female traveller should develop a sense of solidarity with the colonized populations have thus been disproved by scholars who have pointed out the “complex relations of complicity and negotiation many women travellers developed with imperial ideology and administration” (Bird 2015, 36).

Both the recovery of women’s travel writing and the debates over gender and imperialism have often only considered *European* women’s travel writing. A much more limited number of works considers the travel and travel writing of non-European women (e.g. Lewis 2004; Grewal 1996; Burton 1998; Snaith 2014), although precisely such scholarship expands understandings of the historical forms and meanings of mobility, offers an understanding of historically and culturally specific gender identities and norms, and may also

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