The Traveling and Writing Self

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Edited by

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CHAPTER ONE

UNRAVELING THE TRAVELING SELF

MARGUERITE HELMERS & TILAR MAZZEO

Why do people travel? What is the relationship between the experience and the writing of the journey? How much of the traveler's tale is truth, and how much is fiction? These questions lie at the heart of travel scholarship. The vast body of work constituting "travel literature" ranges from the time of Herodotus to the present. Its genres include tales of exploration, ships' logs, private journals and letters, magazine articles, and a sizeable body of fanciful tales produced by those whom Percy Adams called "travel liars." The motives for travel change, the writing styles differ, and the interpretation of the text can vary, but readers sense that, as travelers write about their experiences, they capture more than descriptions of place: they reveal something of their time, place, personality, circumstances, and prejudices.

This collection of essays on travel writing came together after the Fourth Biennial Conference on Travel Writing, held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2004 and hosted by the International Society for Travel Writing. The theme of the conference was "The Voyage Out," an allusion to the work of Virginia Woolf and a literal reference to a significant theme in the writing of travel. For, while much writing about travel has emphasized the arrival at the destination, the voyage itself was filled with interest, adventure, and peril. Travelers always set out from somewhere. That space is usually the familiar "home," to which the anticipated and often exotic "away" of the travels is contrasted. Voyaging outward is attended by a cumulative ideology that shapes the traveler's experience.

The essays in this collection indicate an emerging strain in the study of travel writing from the Romantic era to the present, focusing on the narrative structure of the text and the self-crafted persona of the traveler-protagonist. As its unifying principle, this book examines some of the relationships that can be discerned when travel writing, autobiography, and fiction are placed side by side for study. In this chapter, we highlight some of the ideas that are implicit in this collection: the desire of travelers to discover that which is "new"; the narrative

negotiation between an outward self and an inner self; the concept that the writer's self is a fiction; the notion that writers use perceptual templates to understand and describe places; the transitional, liminal experience of passage; the dialogic nature of vision, which holds that the observer is also observed; and the constructed nature of place when it is construed as a storyworld.

A rich discussion of authorial self has been initiated in the field of anthropology. The relationship of the writer's mediating perception to the objects of study has been at the root of questions about ethnography for several decades, giving rise to a subgenre of "auto-ethnography," in which the anthropologist consciously works to bring biases and perceptual difficulties to the forefront and does not seek to occlude his or her own sensibilities behind an authorial, authoritative voice. It is perhaps axiomatic that travel writers and anthropologists infuse their view of the new and the different with their own backgrounds and preoccupations. The discourses used to describe places that are remote from the writer's home and the people who inhabit these news lands; the awareness of an eventual readership (however fictionalized and constructed), composed of like-minded citizens of the homeland; and the inescapable points of view shaped by Western culture have all contributed to a long history of imperial literature. Critics who have written about travel and ethnography—Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, Chandra Mohanty, Gillian Rose, among others—have invoked terms such as "imaginative geography" and "imperial eyes" to describe the pervasive Western gaze and point of view that infuses the narratives of travelers. The discourse of travelers from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries was based upon differences, oppositions between those who have and have not: urban/rural, Christian/pagan, literate/illiterate, civilized/savage. At the same time, as Mary Louise Pratt notes, there was a certain redundancy to the accounts. The repetitive nature of the encounter with the "savage," for example, crossed centuries. Likewise, the search for differences was often tempered by a comparative rhetoric, in which the unique culture or language was translated in terms of familiar practices, objects, or texts. These important critical investigations remind scholars of the importance of point of view, narratorial construction, and codes of representation used to describe and imagine another culture and another set of experiences.

Voyage of Discovery

The primary works examined in this collection date from the eighteenth century to the present, an extended period in which the concept of the modern "self" was constructed and refined through philosophical and literary debate. The authors in this volume agree that, while the impetus to write the journey

varies, perception of place is mediated by social and literary ways of seeing, and no experience is either simply or transparently committed to the page. In fact, much modern travel was driven by the need to discover the unique or "new." European exploration literature by the beginning of the Romantic period was focused primarily on the articulation of a self that was increasingly bound up with the interests of commerce and science. The most unique and compelling voyages of the era described the competition to find the source of the Nile and the location of Timbuktu. Even Mary Wollstonecraft's intensely personal and reflective account of her travels in Scandinavia at the turn of the century—letters that contemporaries described as having the power to make men fall in love with the author—were written in the context of a business mission undertaken during war time. In her study *Solitary Travelers: Nineteenth-Century Women's Travel Narratives and the Scientific Vocation*, Lila Marz Harper analyzes the importance of scientific inquiry in exploration accounts from this period. Various critics have described the search for the new, constructed as part of the rhetoric of colonial expansion and the classification of the exoticized and unfamiliar other, beginning with the seminal work of Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt and continued in studies such as Inderpal Grewal's *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel.*

As Karen Lawrence has observed, the object of the travel writer—to describe an experience that is unique and that sees the world, known or unknown, in a new way—is complicated by an inevitable sense of belatedness. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Lawrence argues, we see an "almost desperate attempt in…travel writing to make it new, to find a new angle from which to cast a travel book [that] recognizes that it was getting harder and harder to be first" (24). By the turn of the nineteenth century, Lord Byron lamented that there was little point in his describing Constantinople because "you have read fifty descriptions by sundry travelers" (1: 274), and the route of the Grand Tourist was broadly familiar to British readers and writers by at least the middle of the preceding century. By the end of the nineteenth century, very few regions of the world remained unexplored, but the anxiety persisted.[1] Despite this reality, however, the search for the new and the novel remained the ideal of travel writers and their publishers, who continued to believe that readers would be attracted to accounts that offered, if not new locales, at least new insights and new ways of experiencing the familiar.

In early American travel writing, this effort to describe both exploration and national identity in ways that were new and distinct from the European Old World can be seen in the works of Henry David Thoreau, whose descriptions of the Maine woods or Walden Pond set out to re-imagine the colonial landscape of early America in ways that reflected the putative novelty and "exceptionalism" of the American national character in the first half-century of

the republic. If Thoreau's work testifies to how important this impulse toward the new is in the travel writing, so too do those more familiar travel texts that described the western frontiers of the North-American continent in the nineteenth century. The American idea of the West represents a reiteration of the European effort to describe and to circumscribe imaginatively the New World, and it functions in these works as a *terra incognita* that offers the possibility of exotic indigenous peoples, strange flora and fauna, unimagined commercial potential and natural resources, and the opportunity to write the self in the process of describing what has not been thought before. With the frontier, the effort for the imperialist traveler is relatively uncomplicated. Thoreau's travel texts suggest that this same desire persists in travel writing long after the scenes being described cease to be unfamiliar. Tourists visiting Walden Pond in the present will quickly discover that there is nothing mysterious or isolated about the place. It was not so very different in Thoreau's time. Walden Pond, like the rivers and towns of New England that Thoreau described in his other travel works, were not the empty spaces of the frontier, willing and waiting to receive the inscription of the colonial gaze or the nationalized settler. Yet, Thoreau's impulse as a travel writer was to see the familiar in new ways and as part of new networks of relationships (to philosophy, to nationalism, to spirituality) that made it seem new again. Casey Blanton argues, thinking of Thoreau particularly, that "travel became a metaphor for the way he wanted to live. In this way, perhaps paradoxically but in a peculiarly American fashion, staying at home became a form of travel" (18).

The fashion is not, of course, peculiarly American at all. A generation before Thoreau, Romantic poets such as Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth turned their domestic lives in rural England into forms of travel. Homes such as Dove Cottage in Grasmere remain the tourist attractions that, in some respects, they always were intended to be, and travelers continue to descend upon the Lake District in order to see the same sites that Wordsworth described in his *Guide to the English Lakes* (1810). However, the impulse to make the familiar unfamiliar and to describe the unfamiliar as marvelous is one of the central narrative features of travel writing as a trans-historical genre.

Perhaps contemporary travel accounts turn to extreme sports and wilderness survival stories in part precisely because so few landscapes remain to be visited or described for the first time. Tourists, professionally outfitted in gear named after places that were once among the world's most inaccessible (Patagonia, The North Face), are now regularly to be found at Everest base camp, in the backwoods of Alaska, and even at the North Face of the Eiger. The only novelty these experiences can produce is the novelty of catastrophe—instances where everything goes wrong and the traveler is again traversing territory that is *terra incognita.*

The novelty of catastrophe undoubtedly accounts for the transformation of Ground Zero into one of New York City's most popular tourist attractions in the years following the events of September 11, 2001. A recent news report announces how "Travel guides, including *Frommer's* and *Fodor's*, list Ground Zero among the places to see during a Manhattan visit" (Spadora A101). While relatives of those killed at the site find it "a ghoulish form of tourism" ("Outrage at Ground Zero"), tourism to the Lower Manhattan site has numbered in the millions and may even reach nine million visitors once the redevelopment efforts are completed ("Ground Zero Renewal"). Like Thoreau's reinvention of Walden, Americans in the post 9-11 era have come—and have come *en masse*—to see the familiar urban façade of New York City in new ways. The transformation of tragedy into an object of tourism did not begin with Ground Zero, of course. As Chris Rojek argues, these "Black Spots constitute a significant tourist attraction" (62) at sites ranging from "the Auschwitz death camp, the killing fields of Cambodia [to] Kurt Cobain's suicide site in Seattle" (62). Rojek's thesis is that these places of tragedy—what he calls Black Spots—attract tourists precisely because of their power to startle us with the possibility of the disintegration of the familiar. What is new and unexpected seems real: "Crashes, natural disasters, assassinations, and bombings […] vividly express the collapse of routine and the triumph of the unexpected or the unpredictable" (65). Just as Thoreau's transformation of home into a site of travel was not peculiarly American, the production of this reality effect through catastrophe is also not peculiarly postmodern. Nineteenth-century travelers toured Pompeii and witnessed Italian villages more recently devastated by eruption and earthquakes as part of their tourist itineraries for motivations that seem remarkably similar.

Recently analyzing the construction of Ground Zero as an object of the tourist gaze, Debbie Lisle suggests how powerfully the allure of the new or of the renewed operates both in the articulation of national identity and in the production of tourist desire. The site, Lisle argues, "reproduced [for visitors] powerful feelings of belonging, community and solidarity" (4) and became "a significant cultural site in the reproduction, dissemination and confirmation of a *renewed* American identity […] this was the primary location for restoring a strong 'America' after the shock of 11 September" (6, emphasis Lisle). The inclination, of course, is to read the transformation of Ground Zero into a mechanism for the production of national consciousness as a reiteration of themes familiar to scholars of travel writing: it becomes the commodification of culture, functions to reify nationalist values and hegemonic cultural identities, and demonstrates the objectification of the gaze. However, Lisle makes the intriguing argument that tourism does not simply function to replicate and "reproduce prevailing norms, values and attitudes" (5). The experience of

catastrophe would not be nearly as compelling if this were the case. Instead, tourism at sites like Ground Zero has the potential not only to make the familiar seem unfamiliar but to provoke patterns of perception and experience that are actually different. As every good travel writer knows, the voyage can be transformative, even if the itinerary has been familiar for decades or even centuries.

Voyages of Self

The authors of the essays in this book share a concern with the ways in which the experience of traveling simultaneously constructs and destabilizes the voyager's sense of "self" and personal identity. As Eric Leed points out in his study *The Mind of the Traveler*, the intermediary and often lengthy "passage" from home to away engages the mental and physical aspects of traveling, in many cases altering the body of the traveler through illness or affecting the mind of the traveler through chance encounters with fellow travelers. Leed reminds us that "travel" is a mental and narrative manifestation of a physical act:

> The mental effects of passage—the development of observational skills, the concentration on forms and relations, the sense of distance between an observing self and a world of objects perceived first in their materiality, their externalities and surfaces, the subjectivity of the observer—are inseparable from the physical conditions of movement through space. (Leed 72)

Often, the dialectical making and unmaking of the self is mirrored in the accounts that these travelers composed and is revealed at moments when conventional plots and perceptions give way to narrative rupture, at moments when narrative voices multiply or collapse. The multiplication or bifurcation of the self is a crucial element of the travel narrative as a genre, just as it is in autobiographical genres at large. This raveling and unraveling of the self is particularly fascinating in those texts that undertake most strenuously to represent the "outward" self as unified, stable, and organic. The efforts these writers make to collapse the distance between the personal self and the speaking author are frequently occasions for innovative experiments in that impossible straining for autobiographical realism.

The tension created by the linguistically constructed nature of both the private self and the authorial self is familiar ground both for poststructuralist thinkers and for those engaged in theories of autobiography. As Roland Barthes reminds us, there can be no writing of the self that coincides with the fragmentary and transitory passage of lived experience: "the one *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*" (261). Citing the work of Claude Bremond, Paul Ricouer

proposes that self-identity depends on "the attribution of some […] predicate-process to a subject-person" (Bremond qtd. in Ricouer 144). It depends, in other words, on ascribing characteristics of action (the predicate) to the actor (the subject-person). The self is constructed as a means of making sense of events that would otherwise remain incoherent. This interconnection between being and time that Ricoeur proposes enables readers of travel writing and ethnography to envision different aspects of the self. As Andrea Stöckl describes this belatedness of the self:

> The self we write about is turned into "an Other" when we progress in time. Thus, who we think we are when we write a text is already another self. We can thus know and write about our selves from a limited perspective […] If we create ourselves as an ego in the text, we should be aware that it is not always our selves we are talking about. (Stöckl n.p.)

While important generic differences exist between travel writing and autobiography—perhaps most importantly that the autobiographer writes to an audience that is often first the self and only secondarily other, while the travel writer, though employing the "I," typically writes for a public audience—autobiographical theory stresses that all representation of the self, like memory itself, is selective, self-censoring, and constructed, an effort to impose the fiction of narrative unity and coherence on our lives and on the lives of others. Thus, any account purporting to offer a complete truth about an "elsewhere" must be treated as the product of a traveling, writing "self," one with a constructed narrative point-of-view.[2]

This has particular implications for how we understand the autobiographical and self-replicating strategies of narrative, including travel narrative, employed by writers located for reasons of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation outside majority culture. Recent work in cognitive-perceptual theory has demonstrated that personality—and the social construction of personhood in which it is often implicated—fundamentally shapes which experiences, events, and memories we chose to remember or recognize. The complexities of the gendered speaking self have been the subject of considerable study in recent decades by theorists such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, and Felicity Nussbaum, who have argued that the stories women tell of their own lives and experiences often reveal a particularly complicated negotiation between multiple selves and multiple layers of the self. Speaking in particular about the rather drab domestic lives of British travelers Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley, for example, Susan Bassnett observes that "the woman at home appears barely recognizable as the woman abroad" (10); it was travel itself that afforded "the space necessary for them to assert themselves" (11), to re-fashion themselves and their life stories as assertive, inquisitive, and adventurous.

Perhaps most importantly for the study of the travel narratives considered in this volume, Nussbaum illustrates in her book *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* that the emergence of middle-class women's life writing in the eighteenth century shaped British culture and politics in fundamental ways. Unsurprisingly, the rise of women's biography and autobiography coincides with the commercial explosion of women's travel writing in the eighteenth century, a period that produced early classics in the genre such as Lady Mary Montagu's Turkish embassy letters and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark* (1796).

The very fact of a commercial publishing industry had its own effects on the development of travel writing and on the ways in which the speaking subject represented his or her experiences abroad. Insofar as travel writers imagined that they were writing for an audience within their own home culture, they also constructed that audience for themselves and in their narratives as more like them than not. If our travel writers were, perhaps, willing to acknowledge that they were richer, luckier, or more daring than their average countryman or woman, they also imagined readers who would be interested in and ignorant of many of the same things that they had recently encountered as travelers. Aware that those at home are curious about the foreign and exotic and that their readers share certain pervasive cultural biases against, for example, "heathenism," these writers consciously or unconsciously tailored their accounts to speak to the concerns of their (often commercial) readership. Although there is in travel writing (as in autobiography) a rhetorical imperative to set down a truthful account of the journey, there is also pressure to recount a rollicking adventure. In the interests of immediacy and narrative pacing, travel writers conventionally reconstructed or invented dialogue that cast the authorial self as more intelligent, crafty, ill-treated, exasperated, or perplexed than he or she may "really" have been. Working in what Percy Adams has called a simultaneously documentary and fictional genre, travel writers selected and privileged certain narrative details and words over others in order to intensify the dramatic or comic effect of their prose and assumed that their readers would sanction this narrative license—the same narrative license that is, in fact, inescapable in any life writing.

Even when the account was derived from a diary that was ostensibly not destined for publication, the rhetoric of selection is evident. As Felicity Nussbaum observes of autobiography: "The diarist pretends simply to transcribe the details of experience, but clearly some events are more important to the narrative 'I' than others" (28). From the essays collected in this book, we discover, for example, the extent to which writers employed predominantly "imaginative" forms such as poetry and short story in order to reflect on the

significance of history or to educate readers about the salubrious effects of travel on the development of character. Claiming that the repertoire of narrative techniques available to the travel writer borrow from fiction is not to dismiss their effect as falsehood but to enrich our understanding as scholars of the complex connections between prose readership and writerly choices.

In imagining both their readership and their authorial selves, these writers also struggled with the problems of national identity. With the historical intensification of nationalism in the eighteenth century, the seeing self of the traveler and the encountered world came to be established through conventions of cultural representation, national consciousness, and an incomplete sense of self-knowledge. In some travel accounts, the social and national self collapses into fiction in the face of new experiences. There are tales of travelers "going native," narratives in which the (typically Oriental) other imposes itself upon the voyager, either as educative inflection or as monstrous infection, depending on the degree of cultural contact and interpenetration. These are the stories of Lady Mary Montagu in the harems and baths of Constantinople and those famous images of T. E. Lawrence, in the character of "Lawrence of Arabia," dressed in desert robes. In the context of imperial relations, Edward Said has famously theorized this experience as "hybridity," by which he means to describe the process of self-fashioning that occurs when the observed finds himself or herself taking on the manners, costume, and speech of the other. More often, however, the travel narratives of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries demonstrate an authorial effort to represent the national self as organic, unified, and stable, even in the face of new and often *personally* transformative experiences. Despite private idiosyncrasies and those "Frances Mayes" moments in which the traveler's most intimate self-perceptions about the direction or meaning of his or her life are altered, the travel writer enacts and performs national identity while abroad, and it is typically a national identity that remains unaltered by foreign experience. We read in the history of Western travel writing remarkably few narratives of defection. This is perhaps, in part, because each traveler carries with him or her certain collectively coded experiences that shape both the perception of the public self and the perception of the foreign other. And perhaps, in part, it is because few readers at home care to imagine an experience of travel that leads to such a radical disintegration of the self. As commentators on the travel writing traditions have often observed, few genres are more concerned with the strategies of narrative desire.

Travel and Narrative Visuality

Perhaps one of the most important insights reaffirmed in this volume, then, is that the self of the traveler is fictionalized in discursive and often consciously

literary ways. However, as Mary Louise Pratt argued in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, travel writing has also been historically a genre that employed the technologies of the visible, often in aggressive ways. The seeing eye—often understood as an appropriate synecdoche for the seeing *I*—represented the voyeuristic impulses of the traveler and his or her desire to report scientifically and objectively on experiences that were fundamentally complicated in all the ways that selfhood and self-representation inevitably are. If in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this seeing subject ranged from the imperial eye of the colonialist period to the transparent eyeball of the American transcendentalists, in the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth it is the figure of the urban *flâneur* that most profoundly shaped modern travel and the emergence of contemporary tourism.

Recent critical work in literary studies has established the roving *flâneur* as a predominant metaphorical figure in nineteenth-century culture, one whose presence in a tale sheds light on narrative techniques of visuality. For, more than just a wandering and transparent eye, the *flâneur's* acquisitive stance toward the world defines a type of travel writing in which people and things are appropriated for their exotic nature. Derived especially from the work of nineteenth-century French writer Charles Baudelaire, the figure of the *flâneur* is particularly important to twentieth-century critics, who see in the experiences of this internal wanderer a universality that speaks to the presence of travel and mobility in modern urban life. In Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, for example, his *flâneur* walks the city, and in his movements layers of history and meaning unfold: "[t]he street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time" (416). Perhaps most importantly, Benjamin's work hints at the more direct relationship between the *flâneur* and the tourist/traveler, emphasizing the centrality of transportation technologies in the imagination of both (428).

Although the *flâneur* is traditionally a male, urban figure, his defining qualities replicate those of many travelers whose works are investigated in this book.[3] Perhaps most essentially, the *flâneur* is bourgeois, one who has the money, leisure, and class distinction to move freely within and across borders. As critics such as James Buzard and Dean MacCannell have argued, the twentieth-century tourist is a relentlessly bourgeois figure, engaged in the acquisition of cultural capital and representing the interests of what MacCannell calls "the new leisure class." The *flâneur* is the modern tourist's immediate predecessor. Like this new leisure class, the *flâneur* does not typically travel out of necessity but, rather, from a need to fuel his desire for pleasure and experience. And, not coincidentally, like the camera-toting hoards that descend each year on the capital cities of the West and tropical island paradises around the world, the pleasures of the *flâneur* are predominantly visual. To the *flâneur*,

the city is a canvas upon which the richness and diversity of urban life are painted. References to painters, ways of seeing, and the intense visual quality of the city are essential, for example, to Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur* as a visionary:

> We might also liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which, with each one of its movements, represents the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (Baudelaire, *L'Art romantique*, qtd. Benjamin 443)

Throughout the cultural tradition surrounding the figure, the attitude of the *flâneur* is a consciously adopted stance taken toward the world, one that emphasizes the visual or reflective nature of the modern capitalist self. As such, the *flâneur* represents one of a series of textual personas available to travelers, one that has become, with the rise of commercial tourism, increasingly prevalent.

This is not, of course, to suggest that other historical models of travel did not significantly inflect the rise of the tourist as culture figure. Certainly, the archetype of the colonial traveler and his "imperial eyes" also persists as an important component of the contemporary rhetoric of travel. Once again, however, these are representations that emphasize the same visuality at the heart of the *flâneur*. The legacy of the colonial traveler is so strong that it has shaped popular perceptions of "the traveler" in visual media ranging from film and television to advertising. In twentieth-century film, there is the khaki-clad elegance of Ralph Fiennes in *The English Patient*, Harrison Ford as the now-archetypal Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Tom Selleck in *High Road to China*, and Michael Douglas in *Romancing the Stone*. That these travelers are male, English, and American, however, is significant. Charismatic mavericks who speak the language of the natives, these male travelers are untroubled by their singular position in the world of the other. Their qualities are physical strength, charm, resourcefulness, and an adroit ability to resist the corruption of the environment—and they make quick use of a weapon. Even Paul Fussell plays with this identity in his influential study *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*. As he laments the decline of travel and the rise of tourism, he recounts his travel fantasy of an excursion to the South Pacific, drawn from the pages of Somerset Maugham: "I saw myself lolling at the rail unshaven in a dirty white linen suit as the crummy little ship approached Bora Boara or Fiji in a damp heat which made one wonder whether death by yaws or dengue fever might be an attractive alternative" (41). This archetype of the gentleman traveler in crumpled linen is clearly shaped by the imaginative power of colonial exploration and settlement.

Mapping the Voyage Out

As we have suggested, these themes and questions are at the heart of the essays that follow, and the collection begins in Chapter Two with Valerie Smith's reflections on a contemporary travel narrative, Rebecca Solnit's *A Book of Migrations* (1998), a work ostensibly about contemporary Ireland that reveals Solnit's attempts to come to terms with her Irish heritage. As Smith demonstrates, Solnit's work is travel narrative as "cultural autobiography," a text in which the author interpolates history, autobiography, and travel in order to articulate a definition of national identity. In this regard, Solnit's book reflects the broader shift in twentieth-century travel writing away from the genre's earlier documentary impulses. If the typical travel narrative of the nineteenth century was a scientific text addressed to professional colleagues, purveying useful information for the colonialist project, recent accounts track an individual writer's "responses or consciousness" in response to place (Carr 74). While readers learn about the country of Ireland from her writing, they also learn about Solnit's predispositions and attitudes, about the habits of mind that shape her written word. Departing from a Modernist perspective of alienation that posits the relative stability of the self, Solnit's quest to understand and define "the Irish" for herself and for her readers reveals that identity is liminal, fluctuating between the personal and the national and often realized in outward cultural artifacts such as film.

Smith's essay on Solnit demonstrates that lived experience is often inseparable from textual experience, and this relationship between life and art is further explored and problematized in Jeanne Dubino's contribution to this book in Chapter Three. Dubino demonstrates the extent to which autobiographical works depend on nostalgia and cultural commodities for structure and meaning. American author Melinda Atwood moved to Kenya, built a home, raised her son, and lived in the country for six years. She recorded her experiences and later published them as *Jambo, Mama* (2001). As Dubino observes, however, the resulting written work depends heavily on Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937) for its tone, its vision of African life, and its construction of the female colonial self. Blixen's work is the template for Atwood's book, and her account is further mediated by the filmed version of *Out of Africa* (1985), starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, which offers Atwood stylized constructions of the colonial self that she liberally invokes in order to craft her authorial persona. Despite recent criticism linking the romance of colonialism directly to the ideologies of race and empire, the imperialist is powerfully alluring to Atwood, whose work demonstrates the extent to which the legacy of European expansion into Africa is softened—if not elided—by the cultural memory of film and literature.

In his essay "Firebrand and the Cat" (Chapter Four), Russ Pottle also illuminates the complexity of self-fashioning and the development of textual identity and to important rhetorical effect. In the case of his subject, the colonialist English landowner and surveyor William Byrd, more than one textual identity was fashioned by the traveler. Byrd composed his *History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* in a style and form addressed to his natural-science colleagues in London and crafts in the text a consciously public and formal persona. At the same time, however, Byrd was also writing a parallel text, the *Secret History of the Line*, a satirical text intended for "an intimate circle of readers" (Pottle), in which he is gossipy, splenetic, and far more candid. Pottle's analysis of these divergent texts and authorial personas argues for the constructed nature of documentary accounts both of history and of the self.

In Chapter Five, Shoshannah Ganz casts further light on the question of intertextuality and autobiography in her detailed study of the 1940 poem of pilgrimage, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*. E. J. Pratt's poem was inspired by the story of the perilous experiences of seventeenth-century Jesuits in Canada, who had established a mission near what is today Midland, Ontario. Sympathetic to and friendly with the Huron, the priests fell afoul of the Iroquois, who captured and tortured them. In the early twentieth century, a shrine was erected near the site of the old mission, and archeological work began to uncover Brébeuf's grave and significant artifacts from in the area. Pratt began researching the life of Brébeuf to lend historical and topographical accuracy to his commemorative poem, relying heavily on the records of missions compiled in the *Jesuit Relations* (1632-1673) and on the work of nineteenth-century scholar Pelham Edgar. Yet, as Ganz reveals, despite the painstaking historical research, the work represents a personal journey of faith and is inflected by the same strategies of storytelling and allusion that make the site a popular Christian tourist destination in the present moment.

In Chapter Six, Clare McCotter considers seafaring as a symbol for self-construction and colonial encounter in travel writing, and, focusing on the rhetoric of the voyage out particularly, McCotter argues that, for Irish travel writer Beatrice Grimshaw, the boat becomes a metaphor for exploring and testing domestic relations and gender stereotypes. Taking a psychoanalytic approach, McCotter encourages us to read Grimshaw's writing for the experiences of liminality and self-construction embodied in the text.

In Chapter Seven, Sarah Wadsworth's essay "Travel Reading and Travel Writing in Louisa May Alcott's 'Poppies and Wheat'" explores the instructive qualities of American writer Louisa May Alcott's short fiction and its relationship to autobiographical travel writing. Wadsworth demonstrates that Alcott's didacticism deliberately employed the figure of an idealized traveler

throughout her short-story collection *A Garland for Girls* (1888). At the same time, the stories have a simultaneously autobiographical and commercial aspect. In 1865 and 1866, Alcott had traveled to Europe as a companion to a wealthy young American woman, and her short story "Poppies and Wheat" fictionalizes her experiences and observations while employing her celebrity status as an author. Contrasting the characters of the flighty "Ethel" and thoughtful, less-privileged "Jenny," Alcott provides her readers with a model of self-improvement that centers on the educative effects of travel as an occasion for historical, aesthetic, and moral study.

As the writers collected in this volume demonstrate, travel writing embodies the richness of physical adventure and personal self-discovery while celebrating the familiarity of the beaten path and, throughout the modern era, the pleasures of acquiring cultural capital. Sometimes the acquisition of that cultural capital has served purposes of which it is important to be critical—purposes of colonialism, conquest, and domination of different sorts. And yet, as these writers also show, in some instances learning to see the world and to see oneself differently as a result of the encounter, however limited historically and culturally that perception may be, also results in a kind of education that is intimately connected to the very idea of the Western self and that mobilizes the permeability of the inner and the outer, the discourse of self as voyage.

Notes

[1] As James Buzard observes in *The Beaten Track* (1993), by the nineteenth century certain itineraries that had once represented a mode of exploration had become just that—itineraries, mapped and predictable spaces that became part of a familiar model of cultural reproduction and consumption.

[2] On the relationship between travel writing and autobiography, see especially Ineke Bockting (1998), Lloyd Davis (2003), Vesna Goldsworthy (2000), and Richard van Leeuwen (1998).

[3] Scholars debate the possibility of the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse*. See works by Rachel Bowlby (1992), Dana Brand (1991), Anne Friedberg (1993), Chris Jenks (1995), Deborah Parsons (2000), Griselda Pollock (1988), Erika Rappaport (1999), Keith Tester (1994), Judith Walkowitz (1992), Elizabeth Wilson (1992), and Janet Wolff (1989).

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CHAPTER TWO

REBECCA SOLNIT'S *A BOOK OF MIGRATIONS*: *SOME PASSAGES IN IRELAND*, CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY THROUGH THE DISCOURSE OF DISCOMFORT

VALERIE M. SMITH

Rebecca Solnit opens her 1997 travel narrative, *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland*, by declaring "my purple passport with its golden harp seems less like a birthright than a slim book on the mythologies of blood, heritage, and emigration" (vii), thus clearly signaling her willingness to problematize essentialist formulations of identity. Solnit then spends a large part of her narrative troubling and troubled by both biological and cultural notions of ethnic and national identity. Identity theorist Anthony D. Smith argues that "[p]raised or reviled, the nation shows few signs of being transcended, and nationalism does not appear to be losing any of its explosive popular power and significance" (170), but I would argue that Solnit's text exposes important tensions surrounding currently available conceptions of national identity formulations.[1] Solnit's desire to trouble overtly conceptions of identity illuminates nuanced social concerns and anxieties about the legitimacy of existing identity formulations, and the contradictions which emerge from her text expose the stress-lines and boundaries that mark contemporary struggles to imagine, or re-imagine, alternative formulations of identity.

Solnit also spends much of her preface firmly positioning herself as anything but an authority on Ireland, thereby signaling her awareness of the problematics of cultural representation within the travel narrative. Solnit begins by announcing "[t]his is not a book about Ireland so much as it is a book about a journey through Ireland," then "hasten[s] to disclaim any great authority on the subjects of Irish history and culture" (vii). As if still troubled that readers may misconstrue her intentions, she further asserts, "this is no core sample of

contemporary Ireland; in the same spirit Irish tourists may head straight for Graceland, I took off for the places that appealed to me and let attractions and invitations stitch together the rest of my route" (vii). In reiterating her awareness of the problematics of cultural representation within the travel narrative in this deliberate manner, Solnit moves beyond signaling mere consciousness of a problem to self-consciously exposing her struggles as a travel writer grappling with tricky ethical issues. In order to signal further her understanding that readers may approach travel narratives with certain expectations, she carefully promises, toward the close of her preface, that "[t]his book is itself not a travel book in the usual sense" (viii). Her avowal, which clearly rests upon what she considers genre-conventions, establishes her conscious decision not to work within those conventions.[2] The "discourse of discomfort" that repeats itself throughout Solnit's text consciously and self-consciously focuses on problems of reception, audience expectation, and the travel writer's ethical responsibilities, but Solnit's narrative does not rest there. *A Book of Migrations* weaves an intricate, multidirectional consideration of history, empire, and the impact of globalization[3] through its often less-than-comfortable, highly self-conscious exploration of identity politics and travel, thereby chronicling an important moment of contemporary "cultural autobiography."

"Cultural autobiography," in brief, is the story of the cultural concerns and anxieties that emerge from travel narratives which expose or illuminate entrenched values and ideological assumptions—and the tensions that surround them—from multiple directions.[4] Rebecca Solnit's narrative reveals nuanced cultural concerns and anxieties through its self-conscious construction of a narrative persona, its representation of other peoples and cultures within asymmetrical relations of power, its consideration of identity politics, and through the slippages that surface in spite of its overtly announced ethical stance. In spite of Solnit's careful production of a narrative persona engaged in the "discourse of discomfort" and her troubling of conceptions of identity and the relationship between tourism and imperialism, Solnit's narrative ultimately remains unable to move beyond the necessity of establishing markers, based upon biological formulations, to re-legitimize national identity. The significant limitations Solnit's narrative reveals in its consideration of identity from multiple directions allow us to explore crucial contemporary stresses surrounding the intersections of ethnic and national identity, travel, travel writing, and imperialism, globalization and the epistemology of modernity. On a more local level, Solnit struggles to find a solution to the conundrum of national identity for Americans in an era in which tensions between multiculturalism and assimilation are raising increasingly complex issues.

What I call the "discourse of discomfort" is a system of discourse that deliberately engages in the conscious and self-conscious troubling of social and

ethical issues within the unique framework provided by the nonfiction travel narrative. As the study of the travel narrative has grown, so has, I would argue, an overt awareness of the ethics of cultural representation on the part of travel writers.[5] Solnit's travel narrative is unusual in that it explicitly cites several theorists whose work has helped to provide an apparatus for problematizing the representation of other peoples and cultures in textual accounts.[6] Solnit's early references to the works of Dean MacCannell and Edward Said deliberately highlight her awareness of the ethical dimensions implicit in the acts of travel and tourism and in the production of written accounts that represent peoples and cultures. Solnit's careful production of the discourse of discomfort through her engagement with travel theory collides with her more stock representations of Ireland and the Irish, which reflect ideological assumptions based upon more essentialist conceptions of identity. What ultimately emerges from Solnit's work is a map of the vexed borders that contain contemporary concerns about the legitimacy of national identity: what can be said and why and what still remains unspeakable even within narratives that attempt to interrogate such limits.

As part of her project, Solnit's narrative recognizes and deliberately troubles ethical issues surrounding what Dean MacCannell calls the "unifying consciousness" of modernity. Modernity, as defined by MacCannell, results in a view of the modern world as "alienating, wasteful, violent, superficial, unplanned, unstable and inauthentic" (2), but it also results in an impulse for control, a desire to conquer all unindustrialized worlds and imbue them with the unifying consciousness of modernity (3). "Moderns" (those who live in industrialized nations for these purposes) believe that the modern world is corrupt, competitive, exploitative, amoral, meaningless, and alienating. One solution to the disaffection experienced by moderns is to seek spiritual renewal by traveling to more "authentic" regions, such as Ireland, as Irish tourism theorist Barbara O'Connor notes in her discussion of "Myths and Mirrors: Tourist Images and National Identity" (72-73). While Solnit's narrator decries "New Agers" who search for spiritual renewal with their parasitical relationship to other cultures, her own touristic spiritual quest, as she searches for answers to alternative formulations of national and ethnic identity in Ireland, certainly seems to belie the distinctions she wants to make between herself and New Agers and consciously recognizes as uncomfortably less than merited. As Solnit admits, "Perhaps I shouldn't say too much about the [International Transpersonal Psychology Association] conference or its audience. It may be that the flocks of New Age followers annoy me because in some ways I resemble them" (89). In recognizing her similarities to those whom she would criticize, Solnit exposes her awareness of her own embeddedness within the structures of tourism and imperialism, in spite of her ethical condemnation of those structures. In signaling her discomfort with the apparently limited

positions available, Solnit's narrative exposes strengths and weaknesses in the ideological assumptions that construct and constrict the epistemology of identity for moderns.

Solnit first announces the "quest" upon which she is bound, thus revealing her own desire for "spiritual renewal" through travel to more "authentic" regions, in her preface, when she declares "Ireland delighted me by offering so many stories and circumstances in which individuals and populations were fluid rather than ossified, undermining the usual travelers' dichotomy of a mobile figure in an immobile landscape. It was this play between memory, identity, movement, and landscape that I wanted to explore, and the ebb and flow of populations that constitutes invasion, exile, colonization, emigration, tourism, and nomadism" (vii). In making such a statement, Solnit positions Ireland as offering a unique setting through which to "explore" her concerns; Ireland as place serves Solnit's modernist needs by providing an appropriate environment in which to seek answers. She further explains her quest when she remarks, "I wanted to think in a different landscape about questions that had arisen for me in my own: about the concentric circles of identity formed by memory, the body, the family; by the community, tribe or ethnic group; by locale, nationality, language and literature—and about the wild tides that have washed over those neat circles, tides of invasion, colonization, emigration, exile, nomadism, and tourism" (7). Her description of the questions that have impelled her trip, along with her desire to consider them "in a different landscape," implies an understanding of particular types of landscape as somehow more capable of providing answers to her questions. Solnit then rounds out the description of her quest by explaining that "new and unknown places called forth strange, oft-forgotten correspondences and desires in the mind, so that the motion of travel takes place as much in the psyche as anywhere else. Travel offers the opportunity to find out who else one is, in that collapse of identity into geography I want to trace" (7). Solnit's desire to find out "who else" she is outside the structure provided by the familiar landscapes of modern, industrialized society clearly situates her within the framework of the spiritual quest, in spite of her equally clear ethical discomfort with such a framework.

Questions surrounding identity formations and formulations, definitions of "who else one is," become more urgent as the tensions between nationalism and globalization produce both centrifugal and centripetal pressures. Increasing globalization often requires new, contradictory conceptions of citizenship, but, as Smith notes, "[n]ationalism provides perhaps the most compelling identity myth in the modern world" (viii). Whether we work under what Smith terms a "Western" model of identity in which individuals have to "belong to some nation but [can] choose to which [they] belong," or under a "non-Western or ethnic concept," in which "[w]hether you stayed in your community or

emigrated to another, you remained ineluctably, organically, a member of the community of your birth and were forever stamped by it" (11), we will almost always find ourselves bumping up against contradictions within the models, as does Solnit, especially if we interrogate their underpinnings. Smith's "Western" model is based upon ideas surrounding the cultural construction of identity and the value of assimilation; his "non-Western" model is based upon biological or essentialist concepts of identity, neither of which is an entirely comfortable fit for Solnit, yet neither of which she can entirely escape, just as she cannot entirely escape the epistemological framework of modernism. Even if we think of nations and national identity, in the sense in which they exist today, as relatively modern constructs, as do most historians, dating their emergence to anywhere between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, it is difficult to view ourselves outside the system of discourse that constructs us as nationals—yet increasing globalization often demands we do just that. I use the term "globalization" here as a means through which to consider one increasingly visible aspect around which identity is becoming re-imagined.[7] The freshness of the air we breath, the purity and availability of the water we drink, the spread and treatment of disease, the unprecedented movements of peoples across the globe, and the transnational nature of the global economy are all reliant upon more than national conceptions of identity, yet conceptions of national identity still appear prevalent.[8] While one aspect of the identity axis demands that we imagine ourselves beyond national boundaries, another aspect demands that we continue to imagine ourselves within those national boundaries, and yet another aspect trains our focus toward ethnic conceptions of identity.

One of the most important stories that emerges from Solnit's travel narrative is the story of the constraints and contradictions through which the United States is attempting to re-imagine itself in a global era as it struggles with the centripetal and centrifugal forces outlined above. Part of this story revolves around Solnit's struggles with trying to re-imagine an ethnic identity. The problem occurs when Solnit attempts to interrogate the "myth" of national identity while remaining within the structure of the myth, and the ideological framework of modernity is exposed both in the discomfort she posits over her "purple passport" and in her troubled explanation of her "ethnic" identity. She describes herself as a "third-generation Irish-American," but then immediately qualifies that with "I'm not much of an Irishwoman, let alone a Catholic, since my father's parents were immigrant Russian Jews, and I've been in hybrid California, world capital of amnesia, nearly all my life" (6). It seems there is no one place from which Solnit can comfortably speak *about* the forces that are assumed to produce ethnic identity—they are too contradictory to produce a coherent narrative—yet the modernist epistemological framework desires unification. Solnit displays her awareness of many of the complex issues

surrounding the imagination of ethnic identity through the discourse of discomfort in which she engages, as well as through her conscious construction of an anti-sentimental narrative persona, which she early on and quite vigorously adopts as if to deliberately combat any stereotypical image of Irish-American sentimentality her audience may be expecting.

Even though some historians would argue that Irish Americans had important advantages in terms of their eventual social acceptance,[9] early anti-Irish nativism resulted in the proliferation of such virulent stereotypes as "drunkenness, ignorance, laziness, moral laxity, idolatry, political indoctrination" (Kenny 117). In his discussion of *The American Irish*, historian Kevin Kenny theorizes that, although originally lacking "any well-defined sense of national, as distinct from regional or local, identity," the Irish, as did many immigrant groups, eventually developed a more coherent sense of ethnic identity as part of the process of assimilation (Kenny 148). Instead of stereotypes "hindering assimilation," Kenny argues, "the development of [a previously nonexistent] ethnic identity [through the adaptation of some stereotypes] expressed through a rich institutional and associational life [the result of the need for group cohesion to counterbalance nativist animosity] was the primary means through which the American Irish assimilated" (148-49). In other words, through their organizational life, the American Irish adopted an ethnic identity by which they found a means of cultural assimilation. Maureen Dezell implies agreement with Kenny's argument in *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, in which she claims that

> American popular culture by the 1900s had embraced the idea that the Irish were a genial, down-to-earth, self-effacing people with a romantic past and a weakness for drink. For better and for worse, so had the Irish—which is why those notions define Irish America's image and self-image to this day. [. . .] Descendents of dreamers and tale-tellers in the land of money, myth, and Disney, the American Irish early on developed a capacity for romanticizing their heritage and sentimentalizing themselves[.] (18).

It was this sentimentality, Dezell further argues, that "became Irish America's signature style" (24). This "style" allowed Irish Americans to scoop out a relatively unthreatening niche for themselves in the stewpot of assimilation,[10] but not one without lingering repercussions.

Because of the greater degree of at least superficial assimilation experienced by many Irish Americans, Solnit's narrative is freer to move beyond the pressures and boundaries faced by many other ethnic American writers. Even so, *A Book of Migrations* is, in some sense, still locked within and limited by an ongoing conversation about the markers of Irish ethnicity. Solnit's careful construction of an anti-sentimental persona, which she first establishes through