Not So Innocent Abroad
Not So Innocent Abroad: The Politics of Travel and Travel Writing

Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ..................................................................................... vii

Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
“Naked” Politics in Travel Writing
Ulrike Brisson

Chapter One............................................................................................... 17
The Politics of Travel Writing in 2006
Bernard Schweizer

Chapter Two .............................................................................................. 38
A Short Walk through Afghanistan: Orientalism and its Discontent
in Recent Literature
Mark Graham

Chapter Three ............................................................................................ 59
The Politics of Travel Writing in Fascist Spain
Javier Torre

Chapter Four.............................................................................................. 85
Travel in Disguise: On Travel Writing and Cultural Governance
Hager Weslati

Chapter Five ............................................................................................ 110
The Personal is Political; but is the Political Personal?
Women Travel Writers and their Changing Political Roles
Maureen Mulligan

Chapter Six .............................................................................................. 135
Travel Writing, Emigration Laws, and Racial Whitening
in Nineteenth-Century German-Brazilian History
Gabi R. Kathöfer
Chapter Seven........................................................................................................... 162
British Female Radical Travelers and the Revolution Controversy,
1789-1815
Tsai-Yeh Wang

Chapter Eight........................................................................................................... 184
“A New Æra for Switzerland”: Political Instruction in Helen Maria
Williams’ and Sophie von La Roche’s Swiss Travel Narratives
During the French Revolution
Florence Widmer-Schnyder

Select Bibliography .............................................................................................. 208

Contributors............................................................................................................ 217

Index......................................................................................................................... 219
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—Ulrike Brisson

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—Bernard Schweizer
INTRODUCTION

“NAKED” POLITICS IN TRAVEL WRITING

ULRIKE BRISSON

Spaces of travel are spaces of political agency. One of the primary aims of this essay collection is to consider politics as an under-represented aspect in the study of travel literature and to open new possibilities in the discussions about travel. According to a recent PMLA publication, literary scholars have shown an increased interest “in the conduct of politics in relatively naked rather than veiled forms,” studying “acts of leaders and governments, mobilizations of national and international sentiments, transformations of partisan institutions” with a particular focus on the “dissemination of overtly political rhetoric,” as well as on the “writer’s confrontations with immediate apparitions of the state.” To date, however, very few have focused on the manifestation of “naked” politics in travel literature. With the new transnational scholarship, it is an imperative for travel theorists to openly address the political network in which travel and travel books are enmeshed, especially as travel and mobility lie at the heart of international relations.

In approaching the connection between travel and politics, it is useful to consider the etymological and philosophical meaning of the term “politics.” Politeia in Greek means constitution, that is, a written set of rules or laws, set up by an authority for regulating or governing society or a body politic. In Max Weber’s broader definition, politics involves the competition for power, the sharing of power, or struggles about the distribution of power, either between states or among groups within the state. Individuals or groups strive for power to serve ulterior aims, such as security, or for power’s own sake, and the prestige and privileges that come with it. Politics may also refer to independent personal leadership, and in the broadest sense it relates to questions of dominance and to the distribution of authority.
In general, the success of a polity depends on the material resources to sustain it, and thus, travel plays a direct role in advancing or securing a nation’s political system by contributing to its wealth. More specifically, politicians and travelers have had an impact on a nation’s economic life by participating in government financed explorations to foster geopolitical expansion, gain access to raw materials, establish colonies, and to increase their political influence at home or abroad. Travels in the name of science produced knowledge that was subsequently used to justify the domination and exploitation of lands and peoples. Moreover, it is often via travel accounts that some of these scientific facts have become part of the general western episteme that has, in turn, served as a lever for political and cultural hegemony.

Investigating the relationship between travel undertaken in the name of science or sponsored by political organizations is only one of the threads that link travel, travel writing, and politics. Other possible avenues of inquiry include surveying the ideological mind-sets of the travelers and how these affect their choice of destination, or how their political preconceptions might or might not change over the course of their journeys, or how putatively innocent travel narratives might later be used for political purposes. A few scholars have begun to investigate some of these aspects.

Monica Anderson focuses in her publication *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914* (2006) on travel writing by British women from 1870–1914, especially their “politics” of performance that took place within the context of Empire, which can be classified as veiled or soft politics. In his book *Radicals on the Road* (2001), Bernard Schweizer explicitly explores the search for alternative political systems in travel literature by English authors of the 1930s, such as George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Rebecca West. Theirs is a search that is almost always counterproductive, as the political ideals of these travelers become unhinged by the act of displacement. Similarly, in *Political Pilgrims* (1981), Paul Hollander compares the ideological travels of western intellectuals to China and Cuba in the 1930s with those of the 1960s. In the 1930s, this coterie of travelers had directed their critiques at the affluence and privilege of their home societies, but by the 1960s, they were reacting negatively to the irrationality, inefficiency, and wastefulness at home and sought model societies elsewhere. *Tourists with Typewriters* (1998), by Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, occasionally shades into political analysis, notably when discussing Robert D. Kaplan, whose travel
writing “crosses over into political journalism.” Another recent publications on this topic is Debbie Lisle’s work *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (2006) in which she studies contemporary authors such as Bill Bryson, Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, and Robert D. Kaplan—to name a few among others. She employs a discourse analysis approach utilizing the binary model of “colonial” and “cosmopolitan vision” (*Global Politics*, 4-5). These latter authors, however, are directly concerned with the conditions of modernity and post-modernity and how it produces new forms of cultural transactions and transgressions, thus skirting the subject of the traveler’s political impetus per se.

Rick Steves’s latest book *Travel as a Political Act* (2009) moves in that direction, but it does not take a scholarly approach to this subject. It is a practical tour guide, a how-to-book about how “to travel more purposefully.” Steves, who defines himself a “travel teacher,” outlines the role of the modern traveler using the analogy of the medieval jester as the nexus between the king and the ordinary people of the kingdom. The jester mingles with the subjects, returns to the king and has the liberty “to tell truth to power without being punished” (3). Similarly, the traveler should meet people from all walks of life and then report back home. Written by an American for an American audience, this book addresses the “cosmopolitan traveler,” as defined by Lisle. Such a person celebrates diversity, finds travel a humbling learning experience, and returns with an enthusiastic sense of social responsibility. As Steves clearly expresses it:

… flying home from each trip reminds me how thankful I am to live in America, why I believe the rich blessings we enjoy as Americans come with certain stewardship responsibilities, and how we can enrich our lives by employing our new perspective more constructively back home. (23)

Such a celebratory sense of American values might be seen as an ideological blind spot on Steves’s part, promoting a specifically American brand of politics as being the “right” kind of attitude when traveling. By comparison, Lisle, views such enthusiasm critically. For her, cosmopolitan travelers “actually produce new forms of power that mime the ‘previous sensibility’ of Empire” (5). In his defense, though, Steves does not underestimate the dialectical processes involved in interactions between travelers and the “traveled” cultures, nor does he advocate a global betterment campaign. Instead, he advises travelers to employ their acquired knowledge at home and to travel with a mind attuned to the political dimensions of life abroad. Steves’s pragmatic approach is a long overdue call to situate travel, travelers, and travel writing squarely in a
Introduction

political context. This collection of essays seeks to move the conversation into a more scholarly context.

One of the difficulties that arose when soliciting contributions for this volume was the editors’ initial assumption that everyone had a clear understanding of travel writing as a distinct genre. This was, however, not the case, which is a reminder that until quite recently, travel writing has not been taken seriously as a literary genre. These works have traditionally received little attention by scholars, partly for an assumed lack of aesthetic value, and partly for their assumed fabrication of facts. Additionally, travel literature has often been subsumed under the genre of youth and adventure stories, such as the Robinsonades or excerpts from accounts of Cook’s voyages or Friedrich Gerstäcker’s adventure trips, and thus not considered profound literature. Yet, travel writing has played a significant role in creating and establishing discourses of alterity, which in turn have affected the way western countries have related to other (non-western) countries economically, culturally, and politically. Although scholars (Gilman, Spivak, Bhabha, Fanon) have previously explored the relationship between “foreignness” and discourses of race, ethnicity, and eurocentrism, further research about the connection between alterity and institutions of power will anchor travel literature more firmly in particular historical paradigms and political ideologies.

Travel literature has become a serious genre for academic study only with the rise of interest in Europe’s imperial past and its post-colonial legacy since the 1980s. Edward Said’s acute but controversial observations about the creation of an Orientalist discourse in his influential work Orientalism (1978), Mary Louise Pratt’s seminal study Imperial Eyes (1992) about the complicity between European imperialism and travel writing, and other post-colonial inquiries have all contributed to locating travel literature within specific theories of colonialism and post-colonialism, modernism, and feminism. Similarly, Sara Mills’s book Discourses of Difference (1992), investigates the imbrications of a colonial mind-set and the manner in which women negotiated the discourses of power and otherness in their travel writing. The common denominator of such analyses, one could say, is the Foucauldian connection between power and knowledge in the transaction between the traveler and the “travelee,” as well as the potential re-distribution of power and knowledge through the operations of discursive practices.

Our essay collection, though rooted in the post-colonial project of
exposing the constructivist power of discourses, extends beyond the traditional boundaries of Foucauldian analysis. As both Pratt and Schweizer have observed in their respective studies of travel writing, travelers cannot be figured solely as the politically and epistemologically privileged producers of dominant discourses. Their motivations are as varied as their resulting texts: curiosity about specific political systems or occurrences in particular countries, dissatisfaction with governments at home, philanthropy, escape from personal or political problems or the desire for adventure. Sometimes political motivations were dissimulated as either purely scientific or as leisure or educational travel, so as not to threaten one’s reputation or to avoid suspicion at home, as was frequently the case with women travelers.

Nonetheless, as soon as travelers set out, they become embedded in political structures. At the contact zone or in the bewildering territory of otherness, travelers are as much a product of their new locations as they are agents projecting their own values unto the environment. How then do travelers negotiate different political structures—the ones they are used to and the ones they encounter? Above all, how do they represent these contact zone encounters in their narratives? Hence, a more flexible, dialectical model of the politics of travel is needed to tease out the complex ideological and socio-political transactions that attend the act of journeying.

At the same time as we recognize the specific political dimensions of travel, we need to historicize the relationship between travel and politics more carefully. People have always traveled, but both the modes and manners of travel as well as their historical contexts are constantly in flux. The politics of travel under colonial conditions were very different from the ideologically motivated journeys of 1930s radicals, and both are again distinguished from the political and ideological concerns of today’s travelers. While 300 years ago, the customs tolls of every dukedom hindered mobility in Europe, passport controls no longer slow down the international traffic within the European Union in the twenty-first century. From stagecoach to high-speed trains, the borders crossed, the roads maintained, and the security provided—all this is the result of specific political decisions. Moreover, shifting borderlines, transformed ideas of the nation, and altered state politics have profoundly changed the possibilities of modern travel.

As state security and safety for travel go hand in hand, countries which
were once relatively free of risk become dangerous destinations, a fact that has the effect of discouraging some travelers while attracting others. Since the nineteenth century, the growth of the tourist industry has required an ever-increasing safety net for tourists, resulting in international political negotiations and the implementation of safety measures (police forces, fenced in compounds, detention facilities, health regulations) that might otherwise not have occurred. Most travel writers, who define themselves as “travelers” rather than “tourists” will inevitably be forced to share the same locations with their less adventurous brethren, for instance, in planes, airports, and hotels. These spaces of transit are high safety areas as well as symbols of political structures that result from international agreements between governments. Hence, specific forms of infrastructure have affected the way travelers plan their routes, the people they encounter, and ultimately the outcome of their travelogues. It is because of such developments that the study of the political dimensions in travel writing needs to be rigorously contextualized. This requires us to take a comparative look at how the political significance of travel has evolved over time and how it is related to the larger historical and social imperatives that define the place and moment of travel.

As Wulf Wülfing aptly expresses it in reference to nineteenth-century travel writing, “in this day and age in which the political is the literary and the political only has a chance to reach the public by means of the literary discourse, the current political conflict over the literary position of the travel account makes travel writing an exemplary case study.” Accordingly, political issues are not only incidental objects of travel literature, but the genre per se is an object of political debate. Its symptoms even emerge in the politics of the academe where the importance of teaching travel literature has still not yet been officially acknowledged. From Tim Youngs’s point of view, “travel writing studies is now in fashion” but as a subject it “has not (yet) become institutionalized in the way that postcolonial studies has.” Moreover, it has still not been recognized as actual literature by traditionalists. Perhaps one reason for travel writing being in fact marginalized in academe is because its political dimensions have heretofore been overlooked or ignored.

The concept of travel that we employed for the purpose of this essay collection is based on the idea of voluntary movement, thus excluding migration, exile, diaspora, military relocation, business trips, and travel in captivity. Despite this, the borderlines are not always clear-cut. In two of the presented case studies, the initial voluntary journey included a period
of captivity (Helen Maria Williams, Mary and Martha Russell). And the themes of migration, exile, and diaspora also make their appearance in some of the essays of this book, for example German colonial settlements in Brazil, but these themes were not the primary motivation for the authors of travelogues treated by our contributors. In addition, we excluded mere travel guides, second-hand accounts, or fictional texts that resulted from a journey. The sojourn could include a temporary residence in a foreign country, such as NGO workers or captives, but the intention of a return is a defining aspect of the travelogues for this collection.

As a brief outline, travel literature does not exist in a vacuum and outside of political debates; instead, political situations often initiate travel and the various facets of politics often re-emerge in the subsequent publications of travel experiences. The authors of this collection have approached the topic in different ways, ranging from a synchronic analysis of contemporary travel writers to a diachronic approach to writers from the colonial era to the present. Some have focused on a single author, others have compared two or more travel accounts, or offered an overview of a larger body of travel writing. They covered geographical areas from the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The articles focus on current political issues such as colonialism, revolution, war, terrorism, environmentalism, and questions of gender. The authors re-consider questions of imperialism and colonialism in the past and in today’s world of global travel, economy, and transnational politics. Considering that the authors of this volume are in themselves a diverse group of scholars working and living in places that were not their original home or having traveled extensively, they have all, in one way or other, personally experienced the political reverberations of spatial and cultural displacement. Hence, this essay collection sees itself as breaking new ground by offering an array of voices explicitly focused on “naked” politics in the emerging discussion about the political dimensions embedded in travel experiences and travel literature.

As Bernard Schweizer insists, privileged travelers must be responsible for providing informed accounts to audiences at home because the lack of political awareness can even “be a dangerous thing” especially if the individual is engaged in “politically relevant action” as was the case with an NGO worker in Africa. Schweizer examines three of the current serial anthologies of travel journalism: Best American Travel Writing, Best Travel Writing, and Best Women’s Travel Writing (all 2006). In his comparative, synchronic approach, he traces the implied or explicit
political positions of popular contemporary travel writers. He considers intersections between travel and the war on terror, but also explores other political issues such as globalization, neo-colonialism, environmental issues, and how gender affects perspectives on other cultures.

Schweizer’s study locates these accounts within the contemporary political landscape and explicates the travelers’ political awareness of the countries they visit. His approach is both quantitative and qualitative. For instance, only about 10% of the 93 writers of his survey openly included any political discussion. He finds that women in particular tend to shy away from political references and more frequently draw on the oceanic trope, but suggests that editorial selectivity might be one reason for such an impression. Schweizer concluded that the majority of travel writers avoided any political references and wrote in the sentimental mode with travel as a mode of escape, as self-fulfillment, or recreation. Those who did attempt to politically contextualize the countries and cultures of their visits tended to promote liberal notions of progress, tolerance, enlightenment, and peace. Interestingly, Schweizer finds only traces of post-colonial critiques, whereas environmentalist and conservationist ideas were audibly expressed in a number of texts.

While Schweizer’s study focuses on a specific time period—the year 2006—Mark Graham’s analysis of travel writing concentrates on a particular geographical location—the war-torn Afghanistan. Graham critically assesses American and British literature about Afghanistan, such as Eric Newby’s *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) or Rory Stewart’s bestseller *The Places in Between* (2006). Contrary to the idea of the West having overcome Orientalism through post-colonial awareness, Graham demonstrates how this discursive approach is still lurking in a number of contemporary travel narratives, especially in those that enjoy great popularity among Western armchair travelers. He argues that “despite their apparent authenticity” these texts still “replicate Orientalist stereotypes.” Tinkering with the frightening and the fascinating, a typical element of Orientalism, “Afghanistan becomes” in the eyes of Western travel writers “the narcissistic reflection ... of their own imperial pretensions and desires” (Graham, 39). In the case of the American born Afghan teenager Said Hager Akbar, the flattening lens of American consumerism determines the way the traveler views and represents the Afghan world. In a way similar to Schweizer’s cautioning about the potential danger of travel without political consciousness, Graham condemns Åsne Seierstad’s best-selling travel book *The Bookseller of*
Kabul (2003) because the author actually endangers her host family in Kabul by fabricating and de-contextualizing some of her observations and by making them public. In addition to mis-representations of an Afghan family, the utter lack of Seierstad’s narrative “I” foregrounds the old suspicion of travel writing as a form of lying; this is all the more problematic because travelogues are also read as authentic eyewitness accounts.

Graham, on the other hand, gives credit to travel books such as Jason Elliot’s An Unexpected Light (1999) and Ann Jones’s Kabul in Winter (2006) as they are written with sympathy and compassion, initiating a dialogue with its people and offering new directions in travel writing that move away from an ethnocentric and imperialist stance. While Elliot tries to avoid an Orientalist perspective and sees “beauty in simple things” (Graham, 43), Jones provides historical context for her work as a teacher at an NGO in Kabul and does not impose her own sense of cultural superiority on Afghanistan. All the books of Graham’s survey were written with a specific political agenda, but only Elliot and Jones offer what Graham believes is “a compassionate vision of travel” (Graham, 55).

Spanish travel writer Víctor de la Serna Espina (1896-1958) delivered just such a compassionate vision of travel and of Spain under the Franco Regime in the 1950s; yet, as Javier Torre points out in his essay, it was done in support of Franco’s dictatorship and Spain’s emerging tourist industry. As Torre and Gabi Kathöfer (in her contribution about immigration to Brazil) make clear, the effects of travel writing can be subsequent mass movements by other individuals such as tourists or immigrants. Torre, in this case, explores conflicting descriptions of Spain “under Francisco Franco’s dictatorship” (Torre, 60). Depending on their ideological stance, different travelers’ representations of the same country can be favorable or unfavorable.

Torre distinguishes between two kinds of travel writing during this time period, “the social realist travel accounts” and the narratives of “the acquiescent travel writer of Francoism” (Torre, 80). Although both the acquiescent and the social realist travel writers were apologists for their respective political positions they depicted Spain in very different terms. Using de la Serna’s narratives as an example of an acquiescent travel writer, Torre investigates the connection between travel writing and political propaganda. In addition to discerning the glorious past and the industrial present as the most common themes in de la Serna’s epical texts,
Torre brings to light how travel writing can work to create a national image that turns “faults into virtues” (Torre, 79). De la Serna purifies Spain in terms of ethnicity, religion, and landscape. Dismissing Jewish and Arabic historical presence, he depicts a mono-ethnic Roman Catholic country populated by blond Aryan Spaniards residing in villages described as idyllic—villages that were actually falling to pieces and inhabited by residents of a more Mediterranean complexion. By contextualizing de la Serna’s travel books, Torre elucidates how de la Serna’s writings appeared at a time of Spanish transition from isolation to international relations and were not read unchallenged by a younger generation that rejected embellishments and cultural blindness for political purposes.

Hager Weslati uses the travel narratives of Freya Stark to ask fundamental questions about travel writing: What is travel writing, what constitutes a travel book, and what are its political reverberations? To what extent are politics an integral part of travel narratives or not? Hager demonstrates how Stark’s travel books do not replicate the linear form of a journey, but constitute a “set of Matryoshka dolls” (Hager, 92) with different layers and messages, which analytically also require a set of different interpretive tools. The overarching theme of Hager’s study is “cultural governance” “where ‘culture’ itself is an instrument of governance and an integral part of what came to be known as ‘the culture industries’ rather than a site of resistance or a free-floating field with subversive attributes” (87). Cultural governance also brings politics into the domestic sphere, which Stark employed by bringing Western films into harems. In other words, travel writing often dissimulates political messages by appearing adventurous, or innocent, or dull and uneventful on one level and propagandist on another. As Stark was becoming such a familiar sight, indeed almost merges with the locals, she was able to elicit information, which later became important intelligence for the British government. As exemplified through Stark, Hager points out how the power of a traveler’s and travel writer’s governance lies in its elusiveness rather than its frank didacticism.

Freya Stark also plays an important role in Maureen Mulligan’s comparison of English women travel writers’ political engagement from pre-WWII to post-War and early twenty-first-century authors. Mulligan contrasts Stark to women authors such as Gertrude Bell and Ella Maillart, with Maillart serving as the prototype of the post-War women travel writers by making the personal a condition for the political. While Bell and Stark ostensibly took a purely scientific and “objective approach” to
both ethnography and geography, including political details, a later generation of women travel writers influenced by feminism and its rallying cry that “the personal is political” rejected such a format. Mulligan assigns writers such as Dervla Murphy, Robyn Davidson, and Christina Dodwell to this category. These women focused on the individual assuming either the role of a hedonist (travel for self-fulfillment) or martyr (image of the “macho lone struggle”). Their confessional style was en vogue, and they chose to go home or take shortcuts if their journeys became too uncomfortable. Similar to Schweizer, Mulligan finds such publications problematic, and she raises the question of the political ramifications inherent in such “innocent” travels and writings.

A more mindful exception to this trend, also mentioned in Graham’s study, are the travel accounts of Christina Lamb about war-ridden regions such as Afghanistan and the Sudan. Lamb’s historically and politically informed narratives, take the early twentieth-century writings by Bell and Stark a step further by including the authentic voices of some of the indigenous population. With Lamb’s travel reports in mind, Mulligan stresses the importance of politically conscious travel writing so that “we will feel implicated in the political reality of what is too often done in our name by governments who rely on our ignorance and apathy to get away with murder” (Mulligan, 132). Hence, travel should not simply be understood in hedonistic, self-centered terms; rather, personal responsibility and responsibility for other cultures should be paramount for travelers. There is no journey in a politically free zone, neither now, nor in the past.

Travel books of the colonial era, especially British ones, have long been recognized for their complicity with colonial rule by their “Othering” discourses. These texts evoked both fear and desire in a European readership through their ambiguous mix of savagery and cannibalism or of Edenic and utopian settings. Although these travel writings may have once appeared as innocuous forms of entertainment, the images they created of a foreign Other and how these images filtered into public discourse and effectively promoted or discouraged colonialism firmly place them in a political context. They functioned as both indirect and direct agents for future colonial settlements, justifying often officially ordered brutal subjugation and exploitation of indigenous populations, or, quite contrary, as warning voices against colonial expansion.
Rather than exploring the travel writings of the British Empire, Gabi Kathöfer looks to German travelers and their publications as an example of active political involvement in the colonial enterprise. By analyzing the socio-political function of travel writing with regard to nineteenth-century German emigration to Brazil, Kathöfer demonstrates how South-America played an important role in German identity construction. She traces the history of German travel to Brazil as far back as the seventeenth century and further illustrates how immigration waves, children’s literature, and travel literature all contributed to establishing a German identity vis-à-vis a created foreign culture and setting. The confining legal environment in nineteenth-century Germany—tightened censorship and assembly bans, as well as in Brazil—the parceria system, a form of exploitative land lease—stimulated individuals to travel and to report in a politically sensitized manner. Depicting Brazil as an exotic, fertile, or dangerous place affected the way emigration to Brazil was either promoted or discouraged. Prussia, for example, brought emigration to Brazil to a halt in 1859 under the influence of the admonitory travel writings by Thomas Davatz and Robert Avé-Lallemant. Using the German-Brazil nexus as an example, Kathöfer thus elucidates the dialectical relationship between travel writing and emigration politics.

At the end of the eighteenth century, a number of European travelers set out to witness at close-hand the French Revolution, and they became entangled in the Terror in Paris and the rest of France. Two of the contributing essays explore the narratives by women travel writers who experienced the gruesome corruption of the Revolution’s ideals. Tsai-Yeh Wang discusses in her essay the political reactions of British women travelers to the French Revolution and their ideas about the future implementation of the principles of liberté and égalité. Florence Widmer-Schnyder also focuses on women travellers of that era. Although the women she writes about were traveling in Switzerland, they nevertheless dealt with issues of the French Revolution and used their ideas about the Revolution and the following period of the Terror as instruction for their fellow countrymen.

These women travelers displayed high political awareness. Wang categorizes authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her second daughter Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe, Helen Maria Williams (who is also subject of Widmer-Schnyder’s research) as radicals, although their enthusiasm for the French Revolution was eventually tempered by the sobering effects of its ensuing brutality. Their initial idealism turned into pragmatism as they
perceived that a populace unprepared for liberty and equality could wreak terrible havoc. Mary Wollstonecraft observed that the Revolution did not necessarily change old ways of thinking. Martha and Mary Russell became disappointed with the lower classes, who, they perceived, were acting out of mere self-interest and lacked political idealism. Like the Russell sisters, Mary Shelley felt that common people should take some responsibility for all the misery. Moreover, the combination of observing the Jacobin atrocities along with the destruction in the ensuing English-French war caught these women travelers in a dilemma between patriotic loyalty and revolutionary ideals. In contrast to other observers of the Revolution such as Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who came to regard the British constitution as the best political form to represent the interests of the people, their female counterparts never abandoned their belief in the ideals of the Revolution. Carried out in the right manner—under guidance and with intelligence—Wang concludes, they believed that liberty and equality "would finally benefit humankind and be treasured by everyone" (Wang, 178).

Whereas France served British women travelers as a stage to test their political ideals, travelers to Switzerland, as discussed in Widmer-Schnyder’s essay, tended to create a mythical image of an idyllic country along “quasi-prelapsarian tropes” (Widmer-Schnyder, 185). Nevertheless, influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution and affected by the period of the Terror, a group of women travelers of the eighteenth century resisted this stereotypical image of the Swiss and Switzerland; instead, they promoted their political ideas for “freeing a disenfranchised majority of Swiss inhabitants from oligarchic power structures” (203). Writers such as Helen Maria Williams and Sophie von La Roche, designed their texts with a didactic purpose in mind. Both deconstructed an idealized image of Switzerland in order to create a more reliable or political, rather than romanticized or mythologized version, and both of them viewed the Swiss socio-political and economic landscape against the backdrop of France and the French Revolution. Although Williams acknowledged the errors of the Revolution, she never questioned its principles, which she believed could help the Swiss out of their “social and political stasis” (196). On the other hand, Sophie von La Roche, who moved in aristocratic circles, did not support the ideas of the French Revolution but believed in the English aristocratic system and the value of education. She thus utilized her narrative to serve as a “veritable bibliographic guide to authors and works” most appropriate “for enlightening her female readership” including her daughters (189). Class consciousness and gender awareness are an issue in
both travel accounts, albeit for different reasons. Williams and La Roche strongly believed in leadership of the elite and women’s important role in self-education and the education of others for the future of Switzerland.

Remarkable is the fact that both women travelers wrote about one country (Switzerland) from the perspective of another nation (France). Such an outside-in view, and in some instances even a double outside-in perspective like Williams’s (England, France—Switzerland), renders new insights into the ways women travel writers perceived the political realities of the countries they visited. Although in Steve Clark’s view “travel writing is inevitably a one-way traffic, because the Europeans mapped the world rather than the world mapping them,” this is not necessarily the case for Europeans traveling within Europe.14 As both Widmer-Schnyder’s and Wang’s essays exemplify, constructing the Other was not a one-way affair; in fact, cultural and political cross-pollination tended to be generic for European travel writings. This is ultimately true for all travel accounts, considering that the travelers’ baggage of ideas about foreign countries and life in general becomes altered and rearranged from encounters with other cultures.

Regardless of the time period, the geographical area, or the scholarly approaches to the travel writings of this collection, a number of common themes have emerged: First, travel is unavoidably political, but not all travel writing reflects that fact. The degree to which travel narratives engage in explicit political discussions is often related to the political atmosphere of a specific time period, e.g. rising totalitarianism in Europe during the 1930s or the climate of the French Revolution, as well as to certain fashions among travel writers, e.g. the perception that contemporary female travel writing is about soul-searching and spiritual rebirth. Further, gender and class play important roles in regard to the travelers’ political awareness, their focus on historical events, and their interpretations of local conditions. More importantly, seemingly innocent information embedded in travel accounts can tremendously impact present and future international and transnational relations. Hence, travel writing is never quite apolitical, despite some of its practitioners’ pretensions to the contrary; especially today, in an era of rapid globalization, it is paramount that the privilege of travel be accompanied by a more inclusive sense of responsibility and by a political awareness that transcends national and cultural boundaries.
Such results raise further questions about the ramifications of travel and travel writing. What should “politically correct” traveling and travel writing look like? Who is to judge what is an adequate representation of another culture, including its political situation—the readers at home, readers of the visited country or countries, experts and pundits? To what degree are travelers and travel writers aware of the effects of their publications about the specific images they are creating of other nations? How do these ideas affect international relations or relations to immigrants in one’s own country? These are a number of questions that still require further exploration and discussion when travel and travel writing constitute “a political act.”

Notes


In 1930, Evelyn Waugh made his first of several trips to Africa, in order to report on the coronation of Haile Selassie. But no matter whether he bounced around Addis Ababa or basked in the hospitality of settlers in the Kenya colony, he felt dogged by a force that he finally identified halfway through the book: “it is very surprising to discover the importance which politics assume the moment one begins to travel.” As I have shown elsewhere, the connection between travel and politics was not just Waugh’s private realization at the time; it can actually serve as a motto to describe 1930s travel writing in general. There were very few British travelers who did not chose their destinations on political grounds, who did not frame their impressions from abroad through a political lens, or who did not use the distance from home to throw light on the socio-political climate of their own nation. So strong was the political impulse that the travel writing sometimes took a back seat in favor of pure socio-political commentary, as in Waugh’s *Robbery Under Law* (1939) or George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). However, some of the most interesting travel books of the decade, including Graham Greene’s *Journey Without Maps* (1936), Robert Byron’s *First Russia, Then Tibet* (1933), or Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, are hybrid vehicles of keen political and social analysis, mixed in with compelling narratives of travel, adventure, and discovery. No matter whether the travel writers belonged to the Auden coterie or whether they were “unaffiliated” writers like Orwell, Waugh, West, or Stark, they all had in common that politics was on their mind; they either followed or traversed ideological fault lines, they took sides on controversial issues (both during the journey and while writing their travelogues), and their political awareness deeply affected the experience of travel.
So, how does this situation compare to the climate of travel writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century? On the surface, it would seem that travelers setting out in, say, 2006, could hardly avoid being aware of the political implications of their journeys. After all, the United States was in the grip of an ideologically polarized discourse (the red versus blue states dichotomy), there was the post-9/11 awareness of supra-territorial threats posed by global terrorist networks, the visa requirements and traveling safety protocols were tightened internationally, and the botched war in Iraq provided grist for all kinds of anti-American mills. At the same time, the global expansion of capitalist market forces in tandem with the unprecedented mobility of goods, services, and people across national borders dramatically altered the old political landscape based on nationalistic ideological paradigms. Given such a dynamic political landscape and based on the vast ongoing socio-economic changes, it could be expected that today’s travelers, like their 1930s forebears, are once again acutely aware of the crucial nexus between traveling and politics. To test this hypothesis, I read three collections of travel essays, all published in 2006: *The Best American Travel Writing 2006*; *The Best Travel Writing 2006*; and *The Best Female Travel Writing 2006*. I chose the year 2006 because it seemed a typical post-9/11 year: it was the year of the American mid-term elections; it was the fifth anniversary of 9/11; it was the third year of the Iraq conflict; it was the year when Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian elections stoked the conflict with Israel; and it was also a year of continuing terrorist alarms in airports and public spaces. I further chose 2006 because the line-up of writers in these books seemed so delectable: besides lesser-known authors, there was a strong contingent of some of today’s most exciting writers: Pankaj Mishra, Alain de Botton, Michael Sedaris, Caitlin Flanagan, P.J. O’Rourke, Pico Iyer, Francine Prose, Gary Shteyngart, Maya Angelou, Ann Lamott, and many more. So, during the leisurely summer months of 2008, I transformed myself into an armchair traveler for a few weeks, looking for ways in which these contemporary travel writers responded politically to the world that they encountered along their journeys. During my eclectic sampling of contemporary travel writing, I did not only look for direct politically motivated action abroad or for concrete statements about ideology and state apparatuses by travelers, but also for the more indirect manifestations of political convictions in terms of cultural critique, environmentalism, or gender.

All in all, the three anthologies I read contain 93 accounts of travel, roughly 30 per volume. 50 travel essays were written by women and 43 by men (the gender imbalance can be explained by the fact that one volume
Overall, 90% of the travel essays were written by Americans. Besides *The Best American Travel Writing*, obviously written entirely by American travelers, *The Best Women’s Travel Writing* contains only three essays by non-American writers, while *The Best Travel Writing* had about six contributions by international writers in it. All three series are of recent vintage. *The Best American Travel Writing* is published annually by Houghton and Mifflin and edited by luminaries of the genre like Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer, and Tim Cahill. *The Best Travel Writing* and *The Best Woman’s Travel Writing*, put out by the travel writing emporium Travelers’ Tales, have been published annually since 2003 and 2004 respectively. In style and approach, all three volumes are similar, insofar as they all contain short travel essays or excerpts from travel books, not instances of the guidebook genre.

After reading all 93 travel reports in these three collections, one of the most surprising revelations was the fact that the large majority of them simply avoided any political considerations whatsoever. It seems that today the notion of travel as escape, self-fulfillment, and recreation dominates, relegating to a minority those travel accounts that engage in a meaningful way with the socio-political and historical realities of a given destination. Out of the 93 travel essays that I read, only 25 performed any sort of political analysis, and an even smaller number, only 11, engaged in explicit political discussions (as opposed to merely implicit social and political references). Despite their scarcity, I will focus mainly on these few politically motivated travel essays, outlining some of the dominant approaches manifested in them and contrasting their politically sensitive procedure with essays that are politically blinkered. I will then direct the discussion towards gender by demonstrating that the predominance of purely personal over political aspects of travel writing is quite directly correlated with the gender of the travel writer. Indeed, contemporary women travelers quite predictably pursue a tendency towards identification, merging, and re-birth in foreign surroundings, at the expense of public and political awareness. Next, I will consider the possibility of fusing the female immersion motif with the male political interests in the emergent tradition of environmentalist and conservationist travel literature, and I will close by answering the question of what kind of ideological tendency most frequently underlies politically engaged travel writing today.
To give a sense of what I have in mind when I refer to overtly political travel writing, I would like to introduce three of my most favorite essays: Mark Jenkins’s “A Short Walk in the Wakhan Corridor,” George Saunders’s “The New Mecca,” and Patricia Hampl’s “The Art of a Wasted Day.” Mark Jenkins’s piece is an apt example of the successful fusion of adventure travel, investigative journalism, and political commentary. The essay’s title alludes to Eric Newby’s classic travel book *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), and Jenkins is indeed in some way following in the footsteps of Newby. As did Newby, Jenkins travels in a remote corner of the Hindu Kush. But contrary to Newby’s account of his failed first ascent of Mir Samir, Jenkins and his partner are experienced climbers who successfully completed a few first ascents in the Wakhan Corridor. Also, contrary to Newby’s procedure of inserting a few historical vignettes while mostly staying away from politics, Jenkins takes the political bull squarely by its horns. Indeed, Afghanistan’s northeastern “panhandle” has its share of the political unrest, spilling over from the greater political instability of post-Taliban Afghanistan. This situation is not lost on Mark Jenkins and his companion. The fact that they are accompanied by Greg Mortenson, author of the bestselling *Three Cups of Tea* (2007), adds further credence to the socio-political consciousness of this group of people.

Jenkins gives a useful exposition of the country’s history, emphasizing that “Afghanistan is a palimpsest of conquest” and referring to the contemporary political situation there: “In October 2004, Afghanistan elected President Hamid Karzai, but his control barely extends beyond Kabul. As it has been for centuries, the Afghan countryside is ruled by tribal and regional leaders. It’s a complex power network fraught with shifting allegiances” (“Walk,” 159). Although not exactly news, it is relevant to be reminded about Kabul’s “ministry of Vice and Virtue, whose Taliban enforcers had patrolled the city, whipping women for infractions as minor as revealing their ankles” (162). The author then outlines Greg Mortenson’s “vision for Afghanistan” (168). Part of that vision includes a solution of the region’s peculiar dilemma, namely, that they have to rely on opium-growing in order to avoid starvation, even while the opium trade makes them dependent on the whims of local warlords and subject to the fluctuations of international drug trafficking. The reader is given specific numbers (“in 2004, Afghanistan produced 4,200 tons of opium, 87 percent of the world’s total population” [169]) as well as a sense of “a radical alternative: legalize opium for medicinal purposes” (169), a “solution” that is placed in the context of India, which
“is already licensed by the International Narcotics Control Board … to
grow opium and produce generic pain medication for developing nations”
(169). Besides considering the possibility of remunerating Afghanistan’s
opium growers as pharmacological raw producers, Jenkins presents
another kind of solution to the nation’s persistent underdevelopment: “If
you can educate a girl to the fifth-grade level, three things happen: infant
mortality goes down, birthrates go down, and the quality of life for the
whole village, from health to happiness, goes up” (169). Besides such
sensible and pertinent information about the political make-up of the
country, its troubles, and possible solutions to them, the adventure part of
the story seems at first to take a backseat. The ascent of an unclimbed
mountain in the Pamir range is told without much drama, in summary
fashion. But it gets more compelling when Jenkins and his climbing
partner are arrested while setting foot on Tajik territory after leaving the
Wakhan. The scene of confusion, interrogation, fear, and bureaucracy that
descends on the two hapless trespassers is a fine mix of comedy and
suspense demonstrating the author’s skill at shifting from analysis to
adventure, from description to action. The reader is left with a good sense
of the principal issues facing people today in the Afghan borderlands; one
obtains a glimpse into the socio-cultural life of these people, and one gets
a good dose of exploration and adventure into the bargain. This is what I
call well-rounded travel writing.

George Saunders takes a different, though no less politically astute,
approach to traveling with his exploration of Dubai’s luxury resorts. His
piece focuses on matters of culture, specifically Arab culture, in
connection with social class stratifications. The essay is pleasantly literary
and allusive, spoofing eighteenth-century chapter headings (“In Which I
Fell in Love with a Fake Town”) or referring to Coleridge’s Kubla Khan
(“Put That Stately Pleasure Palace There Between Those Other Two”).
Moreover, informative statistics let us in on the knowledge that nationals
of the United Arab Emirates “comprise only 20 percent of the city’s
population,”* that these “nationals occupy the top rung of a rigid social
hierarchy” (“New Mecca,” 242), and that “even within this class there are
stratifications” (243). Surely, Arab society is not egalitarian, and even our
travel writer, despite his avowed liberal humanism, confesses to being
swept up in Dubai’s blissful materialism built on such social
stratifications: “Man, it occurs to me, is a joyful buying-and-selling piece
of work. I have been wrong, dead wrong, when I’ve decried consumerism.
Consumerism is what we are. It is, in a sense, a holy impulse” (246). This
gives away the ironic temper of the piece, which is nevertheless filled with
tonal complexities: “Dubai raises the questions raised by any apparent Utopia: What’s the downside? At whose expense has this nirvana been built, on whose backs are these pearly gates being raised?” (246). The question is answered by an informative account of the hardships undergone by the city’s army of migrant construction workers. The result is not abhorrence or one-sided condemnation, but a recognition that despite “the potential brutality of the system,” it is partly redeemed by “its flexibility relative to the Saudi system, its general right-heartedness” (247). There is an element of playfulness in all this, as evidenced in Saunders’s contention that the migrant workers of Dubai, though exploited, are a “model of stoic noble determination that makes the Ayn Rand in you think, Good, good for you, sir, best of luck in your professional endeavors” (247).

Despite the author’s scorn for American theme parks, he admits that the Madinat Jumirah, a so-called super-resort, had enchanted him: “the air is perfumed, you hear fountains, the tinkling of bells, distant chanted prayers, and when the (real) Arabian moon comes up, yellow and attenuated, over a (fake) Arabian wind tower, you feel you are a resident of some ancient city” (241). One notes the wistful tone introduced by the parenthesis. This is neither naïve effusion nor a jaded mockery of the leisure business. We get everything, from the close-up of a personal interview with a member of the working poor, to the bumbling adventures of the ingénue traveler (the author himself), to the intimate description of the physical surroundings, to the political analysis. Finally, there is a dose of philosophical meditation as well:

In all things, we are the victims of The Misconception From Afar. There is the idea of a city, and the city itself, too great to be held in the mind. And it is in this gap (between the conception and the real) that aggression begins. No place works any different than any other place, really, beyond mere details. The universal human laws—need, love for the beloved, fear, hunger, periodic exaltation, the kindness that rises up naturally in the absence of hunger/fear/pain—are constant, predictable, reliable, universal and are merely ornamented with the details of local culture. What a powerful thing to know: that one’s own desires are mappable onto strangers; that what one finds in oneself will most certainly be found in The Other. (263)

Paradoxically, then, travel reinforces in Saunders a deeper understanding of what binds cultures together rather than what defines their separateness.