

Authentic Travel in an Age of Global Tourism¹

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Looking at a handful of critical studies of travel writing, one will notice a recurrent feature of what is generally termed ‘modern’ travel writing. As always, exactly what constitutes the term ‘modern’ is contested as is the period of time it is supposed to cover. One fact, though, seems to be a commonly acknowledged characteristic of the genre. Namely that, as Ali Behdad’s put it in the title of *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (1994), the modern traveller, and hence the modern travel writer, is characterised by a sense of ‘belatedness’. In the words of James Duncan and Derek Gregory’s *Writes of Passage: reading travel writing* (1999), ‘the networks that made escape from home possible - railways and steamships, hotels and tour companies - ensured that modern tourism was constantly haunted by the spectre of belatedness, by the sense of arriving at the very moment that a non-modern world was fast disappearing under the impress of modernity’.² As Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan argued it in their seminal study *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998), the ‘spectre of belatedness’, doggedly tagging the modern traveller as a constant reminder that it is *too late*, is as a result ‘one of the staples of modern travel writing’.¹

As a consequence of this belatedness there are important distinctions between ‘exploration writing’ and its successor ‘modern travel writing’. The most obvious of these is that the former was a kind of travel writing manifestly *not* characterised by a sense of belatedness, but by its very opposite, namely novelty. ‘Authentic’ exploration writing, then, was characterized by ‘new’ discoveries. Obviously, if what you discovered had already been explored by someone else before you, it would hardly rate as a discovery, hence exploration writing portraying territory already discovered and described by others could be termed ‘inauthentic’. Unlike modern travel writing, however, this posed no real problem in that, as Joseph Conrad famously expressed it in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), ‘At

¹ This essay is largely an abridged version of the article ‘Travelling the Desert: Desert Travel Writing as Indicator Species’, first published in *Studies in Travel Writing*, Volume 10, no 2 (2006). I would like to thank the editors for allowing me to reprint it here.

² James Duncan and Derek Gregory, ‘Introduction’, in James Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds., *Writes of Passage: reading travel writing*, Routledge, London 1999:1-14 (7)

¹ Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* [1998], University of Michigan Press, Michigan 2003:95

that time there were many blank spaces on the map'.² Exploration writing, then, unburdened by belatedness, tends to be more enthusiastic about the prospect of 'authentic travel' than is modern travel writing.

Tone apart, another and equally important difference distinguishes the genre of modern travel writing from exploration writing - and that is the focus on self. Identifying the 'nexus' at which these two forms diverge, travel writing critic Casey Blanton sees the major change as taking place in the focus between exterior and interior worlds:

As the purpose of travel has shifted from political exploration or mercantile errands to travel for its own sake, gradual but fundamental changes have occurred in the narratives that describes these trips. Those changes occur at the nexus of the traveler's concern with inner and outer worlds.³

The explorer lives in an *age of exploration*, an age in which the world still presented regions in which 'blank spaces' could be found, whereas the modern traveller lives in an *age of tourism*, an age in which all locations in the world, from the craggiest mountaintop to the hottest of deserts, have all been visited by multitudes before. For the explorers of old, driven by the straightforward objectives of 'exploration or mercantile errands', travelling thus had the obvious and self-evident purpose of amassing wealth or fame through 'exploration'. In contrast, when the possibilities for wealth or fame were exhausted and therefore no longer constituted the prime motivator for travelling, the modern traveller was forced to rethink his or her reasons for going abroad in ways different than those who went to explore unknown territory. At 'one end of the spectrum' we thus find 'the narrator's thoughts and reactions are all but hidden' in preference of 'the object-bound journey'; at the other, 'the more explicitly autobiographical travel books that we have come to expect today as travel literature'.⁴

Now what was bemoaned by the modern travel writer became decidedly pointless for the travel writer of a postmodern and increasingly globalizing world. For the truly postmodern and global citizen, living in the great global village of the late twentieth century, the notion of travel itself became a suspicious activity as did, obviously, the act

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902], Norton, New York 1988:12

³ Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* [1995], Routledge, New York 2002:3

⁴ Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 2002:3-4

of *writing* about it. The fact that ‘nowhere is remote anymore’⁵ consequently forced the travel writer of the global age to rethink her or his personal reasons for going abroad in ways even more drastically than the modern travel writer. If everywhere is exactly like home, as the global age has taught us, then why not just stay put? In addition, the news-value of arriving on distant shores is obviously likewise diminished: a contemporary British traveller’s first sighting of Botany Bay today can hardly be likened to that of James Cook’s two and a half centuries ago, nor even to that of a tourist of the early twentieth century where a trip to Australia was a matter of weeks, not hours. Hence the justification (let alone the interest) of committing the experience of travel to print in anything other than postcard format is highly questionable. Finally, if the ‘realism of the “anything goes”’ in which ‘so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery’⁶ results in ‘the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real’,⁷ it would seem that any genre claiming some sort of hold on reality - belated or otherwise - should automatically be considered defunct.

Travelling the Desert

What I will be suggesting in the following is nonetheless that the basic tenets of travel writing have in fact not changed fundamentally over the years. Specifically, I will be looking at a certain variant of travel writing, a *desert* variant, in order to examine the ways in which travel writing of the twentieth century has outmanoeuvred the many challenges that should, on the face of it, have rendered it a dying genre many decades ago.

Now the particular branch of travel writing known as desert travel writing at first seems perfectly suited for the self-inquisitiveness of postmodernity and that long before postmodernity was ever a factor to be reckoned with. The desert does not offer a clear-cut challenge in the form of a peak, a pole or a cape even in the days of exploration. The desert can be crossed, but from what direction and by which route? When have you actually crossed/conquered the Sahara, the Rub’ al Kali, the Negev, the Simpson or the Sonora as opposed to merely skirted its edges or visited its more benevolent regions? With no obvious terminal point to be reached, no definite way of claiming mastery over it, and no riches to be gained from it, the exterior purpose (the ‘object bound’ journey) of going to the desert is from the beginning unclear. There may of course be reasons for

⁵ Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 2002:29

⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1984], Manchester University Press, Manchester 1997:75 and 73

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1988:177

staying in the desert. Yet the travel writer choosing to go to the desert will be hard pressed not to question her- or himself what in fact these reasons may be. Furthermore, desert landscape is, by definition, an empty landscape – one, which is deserted of life and often of anything but the most repetitive of features. Due to a lack of any external focal points, macroscopic (e.g. mountainous regions) or microscopic (e.g. jungle territory), the desert traveller has a tendency to turn attention upon inner rather than exterior landscapes, at times to the degree that the traveller has trouble discerning the two. The desert, after all, is where you go mad, where you lose yourself, the place you go if you want to forge a new identity. Last but not least, since the one experience of the desert that tends to sit the strongest with its chroniclers is the pure and intensely individual sense of *being there*, in the desert, it seems futile to attempt to convey this experience to anyone else. The desert experience, scores of desert writers tell us, is unique in that it cannot be reproduced. Whatever the specific form of this experience, it is almost always one that is described as being incommunicable and supremely subjective, the conclusion being that one can as little gain knowledge of the desert by staying in a city as one can get it from a book. That, in fact, the *authentic* desert experience could not be represented at all precisely because what made it authentic was the fact that it was not mediated, but experienced.

This is not to say that desert travel writing was in some sense always postmodern, from the time of Herodotus up to Bruce Chatwin. It is, however, to claim that the desert provides a landscape exceptionally potent in evoking these themes of self-inquisitiveness and self-doubt. In the desert, the questions posed by postmodernity presented themselves more readily than in most other forms of landscape/text relations. Already weak in the days of exploration, the traveller's position seems conspicuously more pointless - and therefore more questionable - when even the thin veneer of exploration is no more:

[T]he man from the west who decides to test himself against the forces of nature, [...] finds himself to some extent caught in a paradox. For the more profoundly he plunges back into the 'natural' life, the more artificial becomes his decision to do so. He does not *have* to be in the desert.⁸

⁸ Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of the Myth* [1977], Quartet Books, London 1979:22

Travel writing about the desert was thus especially efficient in questioning the traveller's motives for travelling it, as was it for inquiring into the necessity and possibility of the subsequent reproduction of the travels in text form. Even more so, for those looking for the inherent instability of *all* representation, the desert offers itself as a perfect example, and metaphor. If one desires to undermine the notion of the authentic, then, and certainly of the possibility of rendering the authentic in writing, there seems no better place to go than the desert. Pondering on Flaubert's encounter with the desert, Behdad's thoughts on the subject are indicative of the typical poststructuralist reading of a 'desert travel writer' who had been dead a good hundred year before the term 'postmodern' was even invented:

The desert is the evasive listener that provokes a crisis in the orientalist's relation to representation: Flaubert could only repeat the word *silence* in the desert. The desert is the brink of the Oriental reality; once reached, it throws the orientalist into a discursive void, into dead silence.⁹

Seeing that Behdad is capable of mining all that 'discursive void' from a mid-nineteenth century text, it should come as no surprise that once the leading cultural trends began to veer towards themes of subjectivity, simulacra and simulation over a century later, contemporary desert travel writers could see themselves as belonging to a breed of seers, a long line of prophets and exemplars of postmodernist thought that they had in fact always embodied. Desert travel writing could thus be envisioned as containing the embryo of a form of writing that had for centuries, if not millennia, nurtured the postmodern idea of the impossibility of the authentic, of the real. There is, however, a rather serious catch to such a claim. Namely that the empirical evidence, the travel writing books produced, seem to say the exact opposite.¹⁰

⁹ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* [1994], Duke University Press, Durham 1999:57

¹⁰ The single reading offered in the following obviously does not suffice as proof for the claims made and is only offered as an example. For a wider and more thorough range of readings, see my articles 'From (B)edouin to (A)borigine: The Myth of the Desert Noble Savage', *History of the Human Sciences*, Volume 22, no 1 (2009) as well as 'Travelling the Desert: Desert Travel Writing as Indicator Species', *Studies in Travel Writing*, Volume 10, no 2 (2006).

Tracking the Self

Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980) is at first sight a textbook example of travel writing of the postmodern era. Deciding to give up her easy life in the city, Davidson goes to Alice Springs in the centre of Australia in order first of all to learn how to train camels, secondly to cross the desert on them. There is no need for her to do this other than the fact that she *feels* that *she* needs to do it. Her choice of transport, her route from Alice Spring to the coast, the fact that she decides to go most of the way on her own - all this is based solely on her *own* definitions of what feels *right*. Specific though she may be, Davidson is nevertheless highly suspicious of her own motives for travelling as is she of the nature of the discourse in which she mediates these travels. Davidson openly discusses the external circumstances - the funding - which allowed her to pursue her travels in the first place. She is much concerned over the money given her by National Geographic, just as she is constantly weighing the pros and cons of various approaches to the travelling process itself.

For all her postmodern inquisitiveness and self-critique, for all her awareness that such choices must in the end be arbitrary, based on her own evaluation of what feels right rather than some intrinsic, authentic essence of the world 'out there', Davidson is thus still obsessed with the concept of authenticity. Wondering whether the backing by National Geographic does not render her project *inauthentic*, she feels that, 'It all seemed rather pointless. I had sold the trip, misunderstood and mismanaged everything'.¹¹ Her ideal of an *authentic* trip, then, is not only one undertaken without aid of machinery and on foot, but one that is completely free from any outside investment, financially and otherwise. She is consequently worried that, 'I was allowing myself to get more involved with writing about the trip than the trip itself'.¹² From Davidson's perspective, her trip can only be truly authentic if she does it solely for reasons that she can trace to herself and *no one else*. Her very reliance on self, for good and for worse, is what makes the trip authentic to her. Authenticity, then, ultimately boils down to being 'true to yourself'. Importantly, though, being true to yourself is, for Davidson at least, apparently all the easier once the exterior is stripped down, once you are left to your own devices, free to act in a world of your own making rather than the one enforced upon you by others. For Davidson, as for so many other travel writers before and after her, the desert provides the perfect setting for a quest like this.

¹¹ Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* [1980], Picador, Chatham 1998:146

¹² Davidson, *Tracks*:136

Consequently, Davidson never attempts to debunk the concept of authenticity. For even if she cannot stop worrying whether she lives up to the standards of the 'authentic travel experience', she quests for it as ardently as ever. Indeed, it is doubtful whether travel writers of any form can be classified under the heading of 'postmodernist writers'. As Holland and Huggan argue, although 'it certainly seems there *ought* to be an affinity between travel writing and postmodernism ..., postmodernist devices have not so consistently infiltrated the travel book as they have the contemporary novel'.¹³ Though obsessed with postmodern themes of the artificial and the constructed, writers like Davidson continue 'to cleave to modern realist conventions'.¹⁴ For all the recognition 'that the landscape we observe is a cultural construct',¹⁵ that 'landscape is the work of the mind',¹⁶ travel writers - and not just desert travel writers - have by and large refused to follow the notion that the real and the authentic are useless terms; which is perhaps not so very surprising if one considers the implications of such a move. Namely that 'everything in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality',¹⁷ but that if travel writers were to wholeheartedly do the same, they were no longer to exist as a class of writers. They would then be indistinguishable from novelists.

'Many readers still hope for a literal truthfulness from travel writing that they would not expect to find in the novel',¹⁸ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs write in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), and rightly so, I argue, for without this contract of trust between writer and reader, travel writing will have dissolved itself as a genre. In contemporary travel writing, as in any travel writing, there is therefore no Barthesian death of the author or complete breakdown of the reliability of the discourse. In the case of Marco Polo's *Travels* (c. 1298), large parts of the narrative may not stand closer scrutiny if weighed in terms of truthfulness, yet for Polo to be classed as a travel writer, at least parts of the narrative must be deemed to have some sort of anchoring in actual travels. Likewise, that the 'postmodern' travel writer often presents the world as being in turmoil due to the rapidly shifting versions of 'reality' does not mean that the travel writer in question has stopped questing for the *right* sort of peoples

¹³ Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*:157

¹⁴ Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*:158

¹⁵ Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998:3

¹⁶ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* [1995], Fontana, London 2004:7

¹⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* [1987], Routledge, Cambridge 1999:219

¹⁸ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, 'Introduction', in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002:1-16 (6)

and places, nor has it meant giving up the hope that this sort of experience can be rendered meaningfully in writing.

The Will for Authenticity

Despite the focus on the subjective experience and the difficulty of representing this (or any) experience truthfully to the reader, the desert travel writer hardly ever becomes discouraged in his or her quest for the enlightening 'desert experience'. Travel books on the desert, no matter how suspicious they may set out to be, tend to go in the exact opposite direction, to a kind of instinctive belief in the possibility of attaining authenticity and the representation of such. Behdad may therefore in passing read Flaubert's encounter in the light of a deconstructionist discursive breakdown in which the desert stands for 'a crisis in the orientalist's relation to representation'.¹⁹ But as is so often the case, desert travel writing turns out to be rather more than that once it is analysed in detail instead of just paraphrased in the clichéd language pertaining to the desert as 'void'.

Even if pessimists have continually predicted the imminent fall of 'authentic travel', desert travel writers continue to find ways in which to circumvent this. For despite the heavy patina of nostalgia attached to the desert landscape, despite it being the perfect spot for indulging in the lament of glories of times past, the desert is also the site where latter-day travellers continually claim to experience the authentic. For the Western travel writer intent on making an escape from modernity, it is possible to discard these Western gadgets and go to the desert on a self-imposed pilgrimage of penance. One may still, as Davidson does it, strip naked and wander around for days without meeting a fellow human being to criticise one for one's unseemly behaviour. Add to this suffering and loneliness, and you have elements of authenticity allowing a return to an earlier, more primitive and 'purer' (simpler) way of living, the kind of authenticity that the desert continues to offer for those that willingly seek it.

The age of explorers has long since gone and so has the supposed 'authenticity' conferred upon the explorer performing 'a first'. The will for authenticity, though, has not. The form has simply changed and is now more susceptible to personal interpretations of what constitutes the 'properly' authentic. At first sight, desert travel writing may therefore have seemed to offer itself as the epitome of postmodern reality

¹⁹ Behdad, *Belated Travellers*:57

testing, hence indicating the direction in which travel writing as a whole would be going. The opposite increasingly seems to be the case, though, with the desert once again becoming a place of pilgrimage, only this time around with authenticity as the divinity sought out. Acting as a temporary if somewhat misleading indicator for the postmodern paradigm, desert travel writing may paradoxically also end up as indicator for the authenticity paradigm. And that paradigm, I think, has really always been the heart of all forms of travel writing.

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