

Advancing the Discourse on Travel Writing

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Kuehn, Julia, and Paul Smethurst, eds. *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 325 pages. ISBN 978 1 137 45757 8. Hb. \$90.

Travel writing has been a popular genre for centuries, providing information on far-away lands, little-known peoples, and the unfamiliar Other to a diverse group of readers, ranging from armchair travelers to scholars and politicians. Despite its long and popular history, however, serious scholarly attention with a specific set of tools available for analysis has been paid to this group of accounts only in the last few decades. Travel writing is not dismissed any more as a minor form of literature. This relatively short period, at the same time, attracted a large number of scholars due to the fact that travel writing as a genre—or a mixture of many different genres—provides a tremendous resource for researchers working in numerous academic fields including history, literature, ethnography, as well as cultural or area studies. The study of travel accounts has also played a major role in the field of English and American studies, both in terms of understanding how English and American travelers perceived the rest of the world, how they positioned themselves within it, and how foreign travelers “wrote back” and related to English/American cultures and societies. The importance of the genre is well exemplified by the large number of books, journals, and conferences in the field, the emergence of newer and newer research groups and centers, as well as the appearance of novel resources and approaches in travel writing studies.

As a result of this relatively new and extensive scholarly and popular interest in the genre, several introductions and companions have been published recently by prestigious publishers. Carl Thompson wrote his introductory *Travel Writing* in 2011, Tim Youngs published *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* in 2013, while the 8th printing of *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* also came out that year. Routledge has launched its Research in Travel Writing Series—edited by Youngs and Peter Hulme, and now including seventeen volumes—and also published *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* in 2016. Therefore, it seems that in travel writing scholarship there is still a need for introductory surveys defining the genre, presenting fundamental theoretical approaches, styles, themes, and providing a basic set of tools for scholars. At the same time, due to the rapid expansion of the field in terms of primary sources available, the number of scholars

coming from varied backgrounds, the novel theoretical approaches emerging, and the geographical variety of the texts studied, there is a simultaneous need to move beyond the discursive framework of recent years and offer additional and alternative approaches to the study of the genre. This is exactly what *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies* promises and delivers:

[I]t changes the emphasis from regional and historical surveys, or author-based approaches, and from collections organized around particular themes or sub-genres, such as post-colonial travel writing, tourism, gender and postmodern travel. This volume augments and complements these, as well as the companions, handbooks and introductions to travel writing. . . . It is also intended to provide a theoretical touchstone for further travel-related criticism. (2)

New Directions is thus an important contribution to the burgeoning field of travel writing studies, advancing the discourse with its attention to theoretical approaches as well as their practical application, focusing on areas and contexts not in the limelight before. The volume provides examples on how scholars can expand the study of travel writing by extending the corpus, the scope of geographical inquiry, the themes under investigation, or how the inclusion of new fields of theory could provide novel insights into the mechanics of the genre. Travel writing studies has by now become much more than the exploration of binary oppositions of the Self and the Other, the familiar and unfamiliar; *New Directions* not only calls attention to this but also shows how new methods can be implemented and used to advance the scholarly discourse on the genre.

Listing the contributors to this volume, edited by Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst—themselves the authors of many influential publications in the field—would be enough to persuade many to read the book. The essays were written by such established and prominent authors as Charles Forsdick (University of Liverpool), Tim Youngs (Nottingham Trent University), Claire Lindsay (University College London), Wendy Bracewell (University College London), and Bill Ashcroft (University of New South Wales). At the same time, their contributions are well complemented by the studies of emerging scholars of the field.

The volume includes eighteen critical essays discussing a wide variety of topics divided into six parts, all highlighting key concepts and frames of analysis. The term “new directions” included in the title is omnipresent throughout the book. While the essays (re)visit many of the recurring themes

of travel writing studies (also epitomized by the titles of the six sections: “Textuality,” “Topology,” “Mobility,” “Mapping,” “Alterity,” and “Globality”), they do so in an innovative way, challenging former approaches and assumptions, calling attention to possible interdisciplinary overlaps, and highlighting new, potential areas of research. Due to the limited space available in this review, I do not wish to provide a summary of each essay, instead I highlight the ways in which the collection of essays provides new directions for the field, and refer to those texts in more detail that might be of special interest for readers of *HJEAS*.

As a case in point, the section titled “Textuality” works on positioning the genre, an endeavor that is a key feature of all scholarly books on travel writing. The essays do not attempt to provide yet another definition of this elusive genre, however, but focus more on “*where* it might extend through permeable borders and margins” (2). The essays reveal the difficulty of textualizing travel, and provide examples on how the semiotics of travel, the changing self-awareness of the author, the role of tourism, or previously little-studied paratexts, such as footnotes or prefaces, influence the genre.

While essays in Part II discuss how topologies mediate between the traveler’s sense of place/space and his or her cognitive response to it, such a theme is extended beyond the usual analysis when, for example, Joseph Gualtieri studies the experience of “empty spaces” or “unwritten” sites (like the Central Asian steppe) using spatial metaphors of the network and meshwork (also highlighting possible overlaps with terminology used in such fields as computer science, neurobiology, or sociology). Although the topic of mobility is perceived as an essential part of travel (writing), the essays in this volume also show how such basic assumptions can be challenged, for example, by disability studies. Forsdick reveals how perceptions of the role of sight or the privileging of visuality might be questioned in travel writing by studying narratives of blind and partially-sighted travelers, thus setting an example for “traveling through the other senses” (7). He also offers a critique of travel writing studies, arguing that “with several notable exceptions, studies in travel writing have been slow to engage with questions of disability. This significant missed cross-disciplinary rendezvous is perhaps surprising given both fields’ emphases on corporality, on visuality, and on identity formation” (114). The essay is also a good indicator of possibilities for incorporating disciplinary intersections into the study of travel writing. Other articles also call attention to the significance of studying often neglected aspects of travel accounts, including the role of infrastructure (Caitlin Vandertop) or modes of transport (Youngs). As Youngs observes, “how we travel affects how

quickly we arrive at a destination and by what route, but it also influences how we relate to the environment and to one another. Even the ways we structure our stories of movement may be affected by our means of motion” (145).

The act of mapping, both in the physical and metaphorical sense, has also been central to travel writing studies. Several essays in the volume highlight how maps work similarly to texts, where it is crucial to examine what is revealed or concealed in them and why. Also opening up potential new areas of research, Lindsay, in her essay on Mexico, calls for a “re-centering of maps in the consideration of ‘travel writing’” (200), showing how they are not only accompanying or supporting narratives but also laden with cultural meanings and charged with ideological or political assumptions.

The issue of alterity or otherness is yet another topic usually addressed but seen from a different perspective in this volume. Bracewell, for example, focuses on the often neglected travellee—“those people who were travelled *to*” (216)—and asks a key question in her essay, when she examines the responses of Europeans to travel writing about their societies. Bracewell’s essay, along with many others in the volume, also calls attention to the significance of extending the field of scrutiny geographically, thus studying less documented areas, including Eastern Europe, in more detail, along with the reactions of people living here to foreign travel accounts. “Such a project goes a long way towards fulfilling the transnational potential offered by travel writing studies—by opening to scrutiny intercultural conflicts of communication, influence and interaction, so often viewed from only one perspective, namely that of the Western European traveler” (216).

Of course, the collection is not and cannot be a comprehensive and all-inclusive survey of travel writing, considering all issues affecting the genre and its analysis, but it does not attempt to pose as such. Even the final section on globality reveals how a multitude of topics can and should be included in such studies (for example, connections between utopia and travel writing, travel and imperialism, colonial vs. cosmopolitan travel, or the idea of Afropolitanism), all potentially providing novel insights into (contemporary) travel writing. With a selection of essays addressing such diverse topics and representing a multitude of approaches, however, the editors still managed to keep the survey focused in a way that it highlights the prominence of theory in the field while also providing practical examples for its application. This, I believe, is the real strength of the book. It will surely become a basic (re)source in travel writing studies that I recommend to those who have already ventured into the

field and are familiar with the basic tenets and approaches, and to those who are encountering the opportunities offered by the study of the genre and are looking for possible ways to become engaged in this field of research.

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