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Postcolonial Travel Writing and Postcolonial Theory

Justin D. Edwards, University of Stirling

In recent scholarship, the convergence of the words postcolonial, travel and writing has led to a series of debates that revolve around, but are not limited to, the representation of otherness, the power of speaking of and for a foreign culture, as well as the hierarchies embedded in discourses of difference. For some theorists and critics, travel writing is a genre that can never truly free itself from its colonial heritage and, from this perspective, it will always remain a neo-colonial mode that reproduces a dominant North Atlantic idea of ‘civilization’ from which travel writers continue to consolidate a privileged position by classifying, evaluating and passing judgment on other parts of the world. For other postcolonial writers and theorists, the genre of travel writing has the potential to embrace revisionist, critical and subversive narratives, political positions and innovative modes of representation. From this perspective, travel texts can convey accounts that defy colonial discourses and challenge the politics of empire by approaching the experience of travel from a postcolonial angle and embrace new ways of telling the story of travel to foreign locations. Following this narrative trajectory, some of the innovative texts produced by postcolonial travel writers enable us to re-think the nature of the genre as well as its political, aesthetic and ethical potential. This chapter examines these debates by exploring the major scholarly work on travel writing by postcolonial theorists and literary critics. But it also examines several postcolonial travel texts to reflect on how

the traveller and his or her discourses have contributed to the debates in postcolonial studies.

Edward Said, Orientalism and Being Out of Place

Soon after he was diagnosed with leukemia, the postcolonial theorist Edward Said published *Out of Place* (1999), a text that merges the generic forms of the memoir and the travel narrative. As his death approaches, Said pieces together a series of distant memories and combines these with descriptions of a life of travel. Exiled from Palestine in 1948, the young Said and his family were forced to emigrate and, as a result, the text focuses on the many journeys of his life, thus articulating a personal disruption and a politics of identity that ties the narrator to a community of displaced Palestinians. His experiences of travelling engender a myriad of responses: his descriptions of the “social vacancy” of middle America are juxtaposed with the rich, teeming and historically dense metropolises of Jerusalem and Cairo.¹ The vibrant and busy streets of Manhattan are contrasted with the family’s quiet and secluded summerhouse in Dhour el Schweir. The winding lanes of London’s west end reverberate with memories of the Talbiyah, the Arab section of West Jerusalem where he spent parts of his childhood. Each of these descriptions is tied to a different motivation for travel: travel for holidays, travel for education, travel for work, travel for health, travel for family, travel for politics and travel for exile. In all of these forms, travel does not re-inscribe or re-confirm the narrator’s sense of self through reflections on the nuances of sameness and difference. Nor is travel considered to be a

¹ Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London, Granta, 1999), 235.

form of cultural capital that might lead, at least in a humanist sense, to a holistic and well-rounded self within the world. Instead, travel is part of the narrator's imagination of a Palestinian polity based on mobility, travel, diversity, and contingency.

Travel for Said is a way of life. In the final paragraph, for instance, he highlights a series of physical and figurative movements that foreground a sense of being "at home" in movement. Said writes,

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow during the waking hours, and at their best they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme.²

In this passage, the "cluster of flowing currents" combines with motions in time and place that produce unique combinations of identity: he is Arab and Christian, Palestinian and American, the Anglophone "Edward" and the Arabic "Said". This identificatory complexity is interwoven with the physical mobility of continuous travel between Cairo and New York, Beirut and London, Jerusalem and Boston, Dhour and Paris. These movements are not necessarily chronological or teleological but include various discordant tensions alongside harmonious cadences. We might read these numerous flows as an embodied form of diversity, and the celebration of a heterogeneous sense of self that is never easily defined.

² Said, *Out of Place*, 295.

The innovative form of *Out of Place*—with its merger of memoir and travel writing—contributes to cross-cultural communication between the Middle East, Europe and the US and explores the complexities of cultural mobility across these regions and nations. This leads to transcultural sensitivities that are culturally, socially and politically progressive. The text also highlights an awareness that representations of travel have often relied upon a “seeing I” to construct visions of otherness: even in the more inclusive contemporary manifestations of travel writing the gaze of the traveler still requires a coherent subject position “capable of describing, organizing, and translating difference” (Lisle 132).³ Even “a writer as gifted as Salman Rushdie,” writes the critic Debbie Lisle, is helpless in the face of travel writing, a genre that inevitably shackles writers into producing works exhibiting a spectacular “lack of multiplicity,” for it is a textual form that is caught up in the rhetoric of Empire.⁴

How does Said reconcile this tension? The answer, I suggest, lies in the relationship between form and content. For rather than dismissing the entire genre as simply continuing a colonial enterprise, Said engages in a progressive politics of mobility whereby the traveler/writer is self-reflexive about his participation in the genre and responds through a series of experimentations in form and style. For instance, Said circumvents the politically problematic gaze of the travel writer by negating the coherent subject position of the traveller: he uses quotation marks to mark out the name “Edward” and thus “Said” becomes “Edward’s” Other, “the person for whom *Out of Place* provides a journey of discovery and recovery”.⁵ Moreover, the

³ Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132.

⁴ Lisle, *Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, 49; David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993), 9–12.

⁵ Bryan Turner, “Edward Said and the Exilic Ethnic: On Being Out of Place,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 6 (2000), 127.

quotation marks around “Edward” articulate the unique subject position of the traveller by focusing on the self as a discursive subject. This articulates the paradoxical continuity of a traveller who is not only multiply located but also multi-directional. Said thus strives to represent the multivalence of identity through the places in which he travels and, in turn, complicate the powerful gaze of the traveller who is grounded in a coherent sense of self who clearly delineates “home” from “abroad.”

This experimentation in form combines with a politically-charged position that foregrounds the displacement Said and his family experienced after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The combination of innovative writing techniques and political content distinguishes *Out of Place* from travel writing that is associated with colonization. Indeed, in his seminal *Orientalism* (1978), Said points to how European travel writing often disseminates political, social and cultural hierarchies to assert control over the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.⁶ Citing Gertrude Bell’s *The Desert and the Sown* (1907), for instance,⁷ Said describes Bell’s view of the “immortal” domes of Damascus and the Syrian desert—where, “the heart of the whole matter,” Christians, Jews, and Muslims were united in a primeval battle against their Turkish masters⁸—as an example of European discursive finality wherein the traveller believes he or she has solved the problem of definition. For Bell, “[t]he Oriental is like a very old child [whose] utility is not ours, thus invoking significant discourses of difference and lead to judgments by presenting the Arab as a single, unchanging figure with ‘centuries of experience

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. 1978. (New York: Vintage, 1994).

⁷ Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown*. (London: Heinemann, 1907). [*Is the publisher William Heinemann? Yes*]

⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

and no wisdom.”⁹ Said concludes that “No one who does not know the East can realize how it all hangs together”.¹⁰

It was Said’s *Orientalism*, one of the most influential works of postcolonial theory, which first linked travel writing to the colonial project. Drawing on the scholarship of Michel Foucault, Said theorized Orientalism as a complex cultural and ideological discourse, “a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient.”¹¹ Travel writing was vital for supporting the Orientalist project and became an increasingly popular genre for audiences back home who wanted to read about how European colonial powers were engaging in ‘discoveries’, missionary projects, military conflict and trade. These travel narratives included seemingly objective accounts of ‘other’ places and peoples to construct distinctions between “the Orient” and “the Occident,” which supported imperialist expansion through depictions of “the East” as inferior. As a result, these texts were linked to socio-economic and political structures that sought to justify colonization and garner institutional support for imperial expansion.

Claire Lindsay correctly asserts that the “influence of Said’s book on postcolonial studies and on the analysis of travel accounts (which are always representations of the cultural ‘other’) has been huge” (27).¹² She notes that the limitations of Said’s primary corpus poses the risk of generalization (a critique anticipated by Said) and that the methodology of *Orientalism* includes the risk of narrowing the conception of “the East” as a place that was “acted upon” by various forms of imperialism. Yet Lindsay also demonstrates how critics of travel writing—

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Claire Lindsay, “Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies,” in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Carl Thompson (London: Routledge, 2016), 27.

notably Ali Behdad and David Spurr—avoid these pitfalls by recognizing the potentially essentializing conception of Orientalism and drawing on other postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. For instance, in *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993), David Spurr explores how Western journalists, travel writers, and government bureaucrats represent the non-Western world, and he identifies twelve rhetorical modes through which “the Other” was and continues to be constructed (surveillance, appropriation, aestheticization, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealization, insubstantialization, naturalization, eroticization, and resistance) and he examines how these constructions work in texts that depict otherness and difference. Similarly, Ali Behdad’s *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (1994) begins by asserting that “there is no ‘outside’ to the language of empire” and thus the postcolonial critic must be aware of his or her “parasitic” dependence upon the imperial “system of power.”¹³ In fact, Behdad’s study of travel writing reflects on how the late-twentieth-century critic of Orientalism bears an uncanny resemblance to the belated Orientalist of the previous century. The project of the one cannot be simply extricated from that of the other. This is because the critic is contained within “the discourse of Orientalism” and “to write about the Orient inevitably involves an intertextual relation in which the ‘new’ text necessarily depends for its representational economy on an earlier text,” for both are situated within (historically different configurations of) the same limits (6). Given this complicitous situation, the political and aesthetic agenda of today’s postcolonial critic can no longer be simply one of transgressing these limits but of recording, with an

¹³ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 1994), 5–6.

ever-greater degree of self-consciousness, the fluctuating “micropractices” that make them possible: for Behdad, “one can only engage in a shifting and indeterminate practice of deconstruction, describing the ideological complexities and political strategies of Orientalism in order to expose their limitations and problems,” and registering the extent to which the “noise of contestation” produced by the critic serves not only to trouble the orientalist “discursive system” but to reinforce it, enabling a “continual process of transformation and restructuration that ensures [the] discourse of power its cultural hegemony.”¹⁴

Politics and Travel: Identities in the Contact Zone

Many feminist critics and theorists have criticized Said’s *Orientalism* for its lack of attention to gender. This has not tempered Said’s influence on, for instance, the work of Mary Louise Pratt, Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, but these critics have engaged in sustained analyses of women’s travel writing as a corrective to Said’s gender-neutral approach to texts. A significant example of this is Sara Mills’s *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1993), which is concerned with analyzing gender as an important variable in the construction of colonial and imperial discourses. Focusing on British women travel writing from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Mills argues that travel writers such as Mary Kingsley and Alexandra David-Neel “were unable to adopt the imperial voice with the ease with which male writers did” and were more cautious and less likely to adopt and disseminate the “truths” of British rule without reflection, consideration and

¹⁴ Ibid., 137.

qualification.¹⁵ Women like Kingsley and David-Neel, Mills argues, sometimes convey unease about the tensions between empire and gender and that, as a result, their texts include counter-hegemonic discourses within the colonial project. Drawing on Foucault's definition of discourse, Mills provides a significant theoretical paradigm that focuses on the question of subject "agency"—the extent to which subjects can use discourses or are constituted by them. With this in mind, it is important for Mills to identify the ways in which interpretive and conceptual schemas delimit understandings, and the gender politics involved in the intentional deployment of concepts and categories to achieve specific political goals. For while many British women travel writers have been involved in anti-imperialist and antiracist activities, it does not necessarily follow that the more personal voice of a white, class privileged woman will engender a critique of colonialism.

The de-colonization of knowledge as it relates to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion and class is central to the theoretical underpinning of Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992).¹⁶ Pratt's book begins with the premise that travel writing by Europeans (for European readers) produced knowledge about non-European places and supported expansionist politics by fashioning a domestic subject of European imperialism. Thus, Pratt seeks to de-centre the Western eye and reconceptualize the relationship between centre and periphery by theorizing spaces (contact zones) alongside colonial power relations (transculturation) as well as European critiques of imperialism (anti-conquest). The influence of the theoretical foundations of Pratt's book is widespread: these terms are now widely used in geography, anthropology, philosophy, history, cultural and

¹⁵ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (New York, Routledge, 1993), 3.

¹⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, Routledge, 1992/2007).

literary studies. Nevertheless, some scholars have pointed to the lack of specificity in the idea of the “contact zone,” questioning how it is delimited and how it can incorporate or distinguish regional differences in economic, cultural or environmental terms. Where is the contact zone? Where does it begin? Where does it end? And if some scholars find the notion to be too abstract and expansive, then for others it is too reductive. They argue that the contact zone is temporally problematic because of its confinement to an historical period in the past; it thus fails to take into account the politics of recent re-readings of the experiences of, and in, such territories. In this, the contact zone is not lie in the annals of history, but is still acting to influence people in the continuing politics of colonial encounters.

Transculturation is a theoretical term that Pratt adopts from Latin American scholars such as Fernando Ortiz and Ángel Rama,¹⁷ who use the word to describe a process arising out of the colonial encounter wherein intercultural and bidirectional dynamics are part of a two-way flow of information, knowledge, and cultural products. This process merges the acquisition of another culture (acculturation) with the uprooting of a previous culture (deculturation) to engender new cultural phenomena. Transculturation often arises out of colonial conquest and subjugation, particularly in a postcolonial era when indigenous cultures articulate historical and political injustices while also struggling to regain a sense of cultural identity. This gives the power of transformative cultural agency to the colonized subject by transforming, appropriating, adapting and ‘re-writing’ the modes and genres from the North Atlantic, sometimes engendering texts of resistance by revising models for articulating local experience and culture. However, if the contact zone lacks the nuance of cultural and

¹⁷ Fernando Ortiz, (1995), *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1995) page 13. Translated by Harriet de Onís. (Original Spanish edition published in 1940); Ángel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Adariego, 1982) page 21

political specificity, then Pratt's use of transculturation becomes an amorphous concept and, as a result, conceived too easily as a one-way process wherein the periphery has a profound impact on the metropolis. Specificity would have arisen out of particular examples, but because Pratt does not include empirical evidence she opens herself up to the claim that her use of transculturation is as monolithic a term as the contact zone.

A potential theoretical pitfall arising out of Pratt's work is the preoccupation with a reading practice that only focuses on "imperial eyes" and overlooks other complex dimensions of multi-layered and structurally sophisticated travel texts. Within this paradigm, travel and travel writing can be reduced to the gaze of power, and this has blinded scholars to "the chronotope of the random" and how those imperial eyes were "mediated through prolix, irregular texts."¹⁸ In *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (2006), for instance, Debbie Lisle asserts "that the cosmopolitan vision embedded in contemporary travel writing [...] is not as emancipatory as it claims to be; rather, it is underscored by the remnants of Orientalism, colonialism and Empire."¹⁹ While it is undisputable that some of the texts in her case studies re-inscribe the dichotomies of civilized / uncivilized or safe / dangerous, Lisle's theoretical footing is based on the claim that all contemporary writers participating in the genre "fail to address the intricate and ambiguous power relations" in the territories and borders they cross (9). "There may be good travelogues and bad travelogues," writes Lisle, "but as a whole, the genre encourages a particularly conservative political outlook that extends to its vision of global politics. This is frustrating because travel writing has the *potential* to re-imagine the world in

¹⁸ Ina Ferris, "Mobile Words: Romantic Travel Writing and Print Anxiety," *Modern Language Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1999), 458.

¹⁹ Lisle, *Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, 5.

ways that do not simply regurgitate the status quo or repeat a nostalgic longing for Empire.”²⁰ Such an assertion relegates the entire genre of travel writing to a Eurocentric and colonizing form and, in fact, early in her study Lisle makes the problematic claim that all travel writers conform to a North Atlantic perspective and “seek to jettison their colonial heritage” (4). Lisle adopts a conventional and Eurocentric view of travel writing, an understanding of the genre that is not entirely suitable for reading non-North Atlantic and postcolonial travel texts. In fact, by assuming that all travel narratives conform to a European or North American tradition, Lisle ignores the large body of non-European travel writings; but she also silences non-Western voices and limits possibilities for constructive discussions about other traditions of travel writing.

The blind spots arising out of this theoretical paradigm help to explain how the movements of some (non-European) peoples have been effectively frozen under that narrative gaze. This blinkered perspective also helps to explain why the presence of non-European travellers has often been overlooked when they appear in European travel accounts: Tabish Khair and other scholars observe that eighteenth and nineteenth-century European travel writing about Ghana, Sudan, Libya, and Egypt include many references to Asian and African travellers, but these have been largely ignored by North Atlantic researchers fixated on encoding the colonizing gaze of the European traveller (7, 383–84).²¹ Such an erasure creates the perception of travel as European(ized) travel and negates centuries of travel by non-Europeans, many of whom left behind detailed and rich accounts of their journeys (11).²² This has resulted

²⁰ Ibid. xi, emphasis added.

²¹ Tabish Khair, “African and Asian Texts in the Light of Europe,” in *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, ed. Tabish Khair, Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and Hannah Ziadah. (Oxford, Signal Books, 2006), 7

²² Khair, “African and Asian Texts,” 11.

in a critical trajectory on travel writing that conflates travel with European modernity, thus negating both travel and modernity from the world outside of Europe. Writing in 2006, Khair notes that,

academic interest in travel writing over the past ten years has been dominated by critical readings of the accounts of white men (and, less often, white women) from Europe travelling through the world.... Such has been the centrality of later European Self-Other perception that even obvious facts—like the porous borders between Asia, Africa and Europe from prehistory through the Greek civilization and the Moorish era in Spain to the present times—have been overlooked outside of specialist circles.²³

In attempting to reveal the imperial eyes of European travel texts, scholars of travel writing have re-inscribed European centrality by looking through a limited lens that does not register Asian and African travellers or their texts. Travel writers such as, among many others, Al-Abdari, Ibn Battuta, Al-Amraoui, Dean Mahomed and B. M. Malabari are mostly overlooked in scholarly debates because they do not fit the European imperial eyes paradigm or they focus on cultural transactions between Asia and Africa that did not require the bridge of European colonization.

This long tradition of Asian and African travel writing informs contemporary postcolonial writers who choose to engage in the genre. And these travel texts do not necessarily engage in an orientalist project that separates the West from the rest by imposing hierarchies and casting the non-European as the exotic other. For instance, the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra asserts that in his travel texts he is not interested in engaging in “exoticism or complete ‘Otherness’” but instead seeks a “degree of familiarity between the reader and the page”: “I suppose,” he states, “it is another

²³ Ibid. 15.

aspect of the self-exploration that travel writing is for me, that as someone journeying out of ignorance I can't pretend to superior ethnographic knowledge for the sake of the reader. And the awareness and disclosure of my own assumptions is part of the process.”²⁴ Here, Mishra articulates the self-reflection and self-awareness that characterizes many postcolonial travel texts: he is mindful of his physical and conceptual proximity to his subject; he is conscious of his political position as a traveller with an Indian passport, and he articulates his experiences of the world as a citizen who is not from a North Atlantic country.

Reflexivity and the Transnational Traveller

Self-awareness about travel and travel writing has led to innovative forms in postcolonial travel texts. In Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1983), for example, self-reflection engenders narrative fragmentation so that the text remains open to the plurality of stories and the rejection of metanarrative.²⁵ Similarly, M. G. Vassanji's *A Place Within* (2008) includes new organising principles for narration by drawing on a poetics of place and ethnicity based on a synchronous foreignicity that embraces antithesis, polarity and confusion.²⁶ And Caryl Phillips's *Atlantic Sound* (2000) questions notions of home by articulating different forms of travel and highlighting disjunctions while also using montage and juxtaposition to convey a single position in multiple places, thus representing the world as multidimensional and

²⁴ Tabish Khair, “An Interview with William Dalrymple and Pankaj Mishra,” in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 201), 175, 178.

²⁵ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London, Picador, 1983).

²⁶ M.G. Vassanji, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 2008).

presenting the self within that multiplicity.²⁷ Whatever textual strategy is employed, the postcolonial travel writer highlights his or her presence within the construction of the text and actively negotiates the multivalence of their lives. In this, the distinction between the reader and the writer falls away because knowledge is rethought as experience throughout the text. Rather than representing a subject's travels from one point to another, these texts embrace fragmentation and disruption.

A salient example of this is Amitav Ghosh's *At Large in Burma* (1996), a travel narrative that interlaces family reminiscences, political activism, as well as colonial and postcolonial history.²⁸ Ghosh's text, like some many works of postcolonial travel writing, demonstrates a reflexive awareness of the postcolonial travel market and a recognition that the travel writer is always in some way complicit in the travel industry and the forms of exoticization of postcolonial subjects and cultures. The text begins with Ghosh's stories of his aunt and uncle's expatriate life in Burma before WWII. For his Indian uncle, Burma was "a golden land" during the British colonial period, a time when many merchants and moneylenders from India settled in Burma and held government posts (a situation that, as Ghosh points out, fuelled Burmese nationalism and led to anti-Indian riots).²⁹ During in first visit to Rangoon, Ghosh finds the Spark Street Temple where his family spent much of their time and he traces his uncle's connection to the place alongside the political history of Burmese independence, the assassination of Aung San and the rise of Ne Win's military rule. Here, the trace of a retrospective narrative looks back to the past as it articulates the present and projects into the future. This "looking back" structures this section of *At Large in Burma*, but it is also caught up in tracing the mobility that is the subject of

²⁷ Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (New York, Vintage, 2000).

²⁸ Amitav Ghosh, *At Large in Burma* (Delhi, Ravi Dayal, 1996/1998).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

retrospection: the trace is, after all, a track, a path, a “mark, wherein the narrator traces the paths that take him from one place to another, marking out the various territories he moves through in this foreign and familiar land.

Traces of the past are also present in the text’s representation of political activism. Before visiting Aung San Suu Kyi (who is under house arrest in Rangoon), he recalls first meeting her in 1980 in Oxford, where he was a graduate student. He harks back to her “life of quiet, exiled domesticity on a leafy street in North Oxford” and reflects on the political voice she found in Burma in the late 1980s and early 1990s.³⁰ During his trip, Ghosh interviews her and describes the gateside meetings where she speaks to her local followers as well as foreign tourists, travellers and journalists. Throughout the interview, Ghosh glimpses the complexity of Burma’s colonial and postcolonial history with the internal tensions that arise out of its ethnic, religious and ideological diversity. This inspires him to partake in a dangerous journey: he travels to the mountainous frontier of eastern Burma to meet the Karenni insurgents, a guerrilla network that has been engaged in an armed struggle for independence since 1946. He seeks answers to questions about what it means to fight for so long and what “freedom” means for the Karenni people.

But in this remote place, Ghosh finds sameness, not difference. When he arrives at a base camp “deep inside the forest,” Ghosh meets a commander who asks, “Are you Indian?”, in spoken English that sounds eerily similar to his own.³¹ The Karenni commander is Burmese but of Indian decent—his mother Hindu, his father Sikh—who had been part of the Indian business community in Burma established under British colonial rule. Ghosh reflects on the fact that “our relatives had [probably] known one another once in Burma” and he is confronted with the happenstance of

³⁰ Ibid., 75.

³¹ Ibid., 87, 88.

fate: “each of us,” he writes, “could have been in the other’s place.”³² Here, as he searches for knowledge about freedom, independence and armed struggles, Ghosh encounters his own sense of self through a random twist of history that delineates what he is and what he might have been. In this, the sense of place in the text moves beyond the discourses of difference associated with the limited paradigms of us and them, here and there, home and abroad. The multivalent perspectives and shifting points of view do not assert a single authoritative voice that is stable, normative or incontestable. Consequently, the text does not simply reduce the world to a single set of prevailing discourses or perspectives to represent a seemingly incontrovertible reality. Nor does the text veil the processes of discursive ordering by providing observations as neutral documentations of a stable, single and ordered reality. Rather, the competing narrative modes and different conceptions of home and belonging engender an interstitial place in-between difference and sameness that unmask their own discursive ordering as well as conventional conceptions of travel, place and identity. This is not to say that the text includes a postmodern disavowal of political positioning; instead, it betrays an awareness that in order to take a stand—to demarcate what constitutes home and self to *us*—we must first be attentive to the claims of other and register familiarity within the foreign.

For critics such as Inderpal Grewal and Sam Knowles, the theoretical paradigm of transnationalism is appropriate for reading postcolonial travel texts by Ghosh and his contemporaries. For Knowles, transnationalism opens up the possibility of reading these texts as a “reshaping of the national and as a response to the idea of modernity” wherein transnationality challenges binary divisions of space (home and abroad, foreign and familiar) and allows minority communities to negotiate their collective

³² Ibid., 89.

identifications.³³ Likewise, for Grewal, transnational associations formed by contemporary diasporic communities engenders postcolonial histories, literary and aesthetic productions that circulate forms of knowledge that bypass metropolitan centres (181).³⁴ To put it simply, transnationalism is a social phenomenon and a theoretical paradigm for cultural research that has grown out of the heightened interconnectivity between people and the receding economic and social significance of boundaries among nation states. Most importantly, transnationalism raises the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of otherness and the nation-state. Theories of transnationalism thus offer insights into a postcolonial travel writer's complex personal, textual and geopolitical relationships to the places where she travels and her links to multiple homelands or senses of belonging. For transnational movement engenders an erosion of clear-cut national affiliations and this, in turn, has a profound impact on the ways in which the traveller experiences and represents the place where she travels.

Transnationalism opens up the possibility of shifting away from hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations in travel and travel writing. This arises out of a sensitivity to 'transversal' movements of culture that allow for the emergence of networks that circumvent the North Atlantic centres of European imperialism. Understanding transnationalism in terms of cultural transversalism rather than vertical relations between center and margin is fruitful for analyzing contemporary travel writing because it complicates the dated notions of hybridity central to the construction of North Atlantic locales as privileged sites of plurality. By

³³ Sam Knowles, *Travel Writing and the Transnational Author* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014), 16.

³⁴ Inderpal Grewal, "Amitav Ghosh: Cosmopolitanisms, Literature, Transnationalisms," in *The Postcolonial and the Global*, ed. Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 181.

distinguishing between “global” and “transnational,” Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih suggest that “the logic of globalization ... assumes a global universal core or norm, which spreads out across the world while pulling into its vortex other forms of culture to be tested by its norm ... with all the attendant problems of Eurocentric universalism.” (5) By contrast, the transnational works in a less centripetal fashion, for it “can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation ... where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center”.³⁵ Within postcolonial travel writing, the transnational imagination presents a prospect for transgressing fixed national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic control. This is done by circumventing North Atlantic top-down power and by exploring imagined communities of modernity that challenge macropolitical (global) dominance and turn to micropolitical (cultural) experiences of everyday life.

Conclusion

The convergence of travel writing and postcolonial theory contributes to an understanding of cultural difference as unstable, in flux, and how the history of racialization contributes to the formation of subjectivities, but not a unified subject position. In other words, by composing postcolonial travel texts that are in process, multiple, collective and disruptive, the genre allows writers to compose the travelling subject as a possible site for active cultural and ideological struggle. These are particularly critical issues in the context of postcolonial politics and the colonial legacy of the genre. At a moment when cultural plurality, cultural mobility and

³⁵ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

hybridity have challenged the metanarratives of cultural nationalism, not only are postcolonial travel writers able to experiment with new forms of expression, but they also enter into dialogue with political debates raised in postcolonial theory, particularly about cultural, racial, ethnic and national difference in the varying historical contexts of travel practice. Moreover, the unique strand of self-conscious textuality foregrounded by these writers is extremely pertinent as a wide range of writers and theorists continue to insist on new diverse cultural performances while, at the same time, maintaining a critical context of articulation within the border pressures of globalization. In fact, questions about cultural mobility and the narrating (travelling) subject are especially important now, after two decades of increasing global connectivity and the decline of nation-based power. There is more than ever a need to find new ways of expressing a sense of belonging and exclusion that takes into account the flows of global mobility and that disrupt centre-periphery conceptions of space and place.