

I  
Approaching the field of travel writing –  
The broad picture



# Self and Other, Here and There

## Travel writing and the construction of identity and place

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For the lay person, travel writing is a simple enough matter. A person leaves his or her domicile, travels to a foreign land, usually returns home, and writes down what he or she has seen and experienced. What could be more straightforward? And yet, we know that things are much more complex than that. It is not for nothing that a French proverb says, *a beau mentir qui vient de loin*, which is usually translated as “long ways, long lies.”

Of course, it is not just a question of deliberate falsification. Travel writing is a subjectively mediated construction for many reasons. It is inevitably selective, for one could not possibly describe everything, and what exactly one chooses to describe is of necessity largely arbitrary. It is inevitably citational, for the traveller will often have read earlier accounts of similar journeys and will tend to fill in the blanks in his or her own experiences with borrowings from others. It is inevitably corroborative, for past writings create expectations that current writers will seek to fulfill, and will be loath to disappoint. It is inevitably ethnocentric, for even the best-intentioned traveller cannot help looking at other societies through the prism of his or her own. In short, like diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies – indeed, like ethnography and historiography – travel writing is first and foremost a rhetorical practice. It is not so much what it says that concerns me here, but what it *does*.

In these brief remarks, I would like to discuss what travel writing does in one particular domain: the construction of identity and place.<sup>1</sup> My analysis is based upon the simple insight that the traveller does not enter the experience of travelling as an already fully-formed subject. It is in part through his or her confrontation with the place to which he or she has travelled, and with the people who live there, that the traveller’s own subjectivity is constituted. For this reason, the foreign land to which the traveller goes is not merely a passive stage for his or her travelogue; it is also an active constituent of the traveller and of the culture from which the traveller hails. Thus, through the works of Sir Richard Francis Burton, Mecca acts upon Britain; through the works of Ahmed Midhat Efendi,<sup>2</sup> Paris acts upon the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is largely based upon my *The erotic margin: sexuality and spatiality in alteritist discourse* (Schick 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See the contribution of Olcay Akyıldız in this volume.

Travel writing is a vast field, of course, and while some travelogues purport to be factual accounts of the travellers' experiences, others are avowedly works of fiction. For my purposes, however, this distinction is artificial, as the difference between fiction and non-fiction is first and foremost a matter of degree. In the final analysis, every text is an emplotment of isolated facts into a textual fabric woven by the author. This is as true of travel writing as of any other kind of text, and it is therefore more productive, from the standpoint of textual analysis, to view this corpus as comprised of points along a continuum.

### *The construction of identity*

Let me start by defining identity, a concept about which we have heard a great deal in recent years. Identity is a socially constructed, socially recognizable complex of attributes deriving from an individual's membership in such collectivities as nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, profession, generation, region, ethnicity, or religion. But identity is never complete; it is always "under construction." It is not an object, in other words, but a *process* – and an uneven one at that, since times of crisis or transition are often periods of particularly intensive identity construction. Thus, paraphrasing Teresa de Lauretis's formulation of gender, we can say that identity is a representation, and the representation of identity is its construction (De Lauretis 1987: 3). Identity comes to be through enactment, through performance, that is, through practices that construct it using a host of discursive instruments which, following Foucault, we may call "technologies of identity." Recall that Foucault introduced the term "technology" to denote the discursive tools with which knowledge of social realities and institutions is constructed, focusing on the technologies of production, sign systems, power, and the Self (See e.g. Martin et al. 1988). Travel writing is just such a technology, a technology of identity.

Though identity is a permanent process of construction and reconstruction, its fluid and mutable nature does not mean that it never enjoys any stability. A person's identity does not vary significantly from day to day, so there must be a slowly-evolving envelope containing (and constraining) the vicissitudes of self-enactment. I would suggest that this envelope is narrative. As David Harvey has noted, "while identity does not rest upon sameness or essence, it does acquire durability and permanence according to the stories we tell ourselves and others about our history" (Harvey 1993: 59). To be sure, this "durability and permanence" is only relative – a sustained period of construction or sequence of reconstructions; nevertheless, narrative plays a central role in the constitution and preservation of identity. It is a carrier of meaning, the channel through which an individual tells him- or herself and others the tale of his or her place in the world. It provides the Self with inertia, endowing it with some measure of temporal continuity.

The representation of identity is its own construction, then, and narrative is the medium through which that construction is realized. But the construction of identity is inseparable from that of alterity – indeed, identity itself only makes sense in juxtaposition to alterity. If we tell ourselves and others the stories of who we are, we also tell the stories of who we are not. To put it more explicitly, of the infinite multiplicity of characteristics that describe a given group of individuals, it is those that are *unlike* another group that are socially significant – in the measure to which, needless to say, establishing difference between the respective groups serves a social function. As James Clifford puts it, “every version of an ‘other’, wherever found, is also the construction of a ‘self’” (Clifford 1986: 23–24). The construction of identity, therefore, is contingent upon the positing of a negative-identity, an Other as the repository of opposites. Acknowledged qualities, whether real or imagined, are centered and taken as the norm; simultaneously, rejected qualities, whether real or imagined, are marginalized and exoticized. Collectively, these latter form a “constitutive outside” that delimits the Self and thereby defines it.

Travel writing is a technology of identity, a discursive instrument through which identity is constructed and reconstructed, precisely because it relentlessly sets up oppositions between Self and Other, because it explicitly thematizes the Other and thereby authorizes definitions of the Self. But there is more: travel writing involves displacements that bring about confrontations not only with the Other but also with the elsewhere.

### *The role of place*

Let us take another step, then: the notions of identity and alterity, of “us” and “them,” are closely linked to the sense of place, that is, to the notions of “here” and “there.” I want briefly to dwell on this idea. Thirty-five years after the publication of Henri Lefebvre’s pioneering book *La production de l’espace* (1974),<sup>3</sup> the notion that place is not a neutral or inert location in which social relations unfold, but that it rather both structures, and is in turn structured by, these relations, is no longer new. To quote Edward Soja’s succinct summary, “Spatiality is a substantiated and recognizable social product, part of a ‘second nature’ which incorporates as it socializes and transforms both physical and psychological spaces. As a social product, spatiality is simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationship. The spatio-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship (including class relations) are materially constituted, made concrete” (Soja 1989: 129).

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<sup>3</sup> For an English translation, see Lefebvre (1991).

Though Soja did not emphasize this point here, one generally differentiates between space and place, in that space is neutral whereas place is socially constructed. Place is, in other words, space that has been infused with meaning through human (spatial) practices. It follows, therefore, that in contrast to physical space pure and simple, *places* are not “objective” realities but exist only through particular human spatial experiences. According to Nicholas Entrikin, place is a “condition of human experience” since “as actors we are always situated in place and period and (...) the contexts of our actions contribute to our sense of identity and thus to our sense of centeredness.” It follows, Entrikin argues, that “our relations to place and culture become elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities” (Entrikin 1991: 1, 4). Place, therefore, is a fundamental element of existence and hence of identity; the Self unfolds in space, and therefore bears the indelible traces of the place it calls its Here.

But given the complexity of the social, dissected as it is by myriad cleavages, can one speak of spatiality in the singular? Surely there must exist a multiplicity of places – “cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism,” as Dorothy Massey puts it (Massey 1994: 3). Thus, there is no single Here that defines identity, nor even a simple Here/There dichotomy; rather, there are an entire archipelago of places with which one engages in discursive relationships of inclusion and exclusion, attraction and repulsion, acceptance and rejection. In their interesting book *The politics and poetics of transgression* (1986), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White investigated “the question of displacements between *sites* of discourse – the fairground, the marketplace, the coffee-house, the theatre, the slum, the domestic interior of the bourgeois household.” Arguing that “the very drive to achieve a singularity of collective identity is simultaneously productive of unconscious heterogeneity,” they showed that place plays a crucial role in that process: “The grouping together of sites of discourse,” they write, “the acceptance and rejection of place, with its laws and protocols and language, is at once a coding of social identity” (Stallybrass – White 1986: 194). The construction of identity, then, is at the same time the construction of a network of places – some tagged “here,” others “there” – which are constituted by and simultaneously reproduce social cleavages such as gender (e.g. domestic vs. public), race (e.g. suburb vs. ghetto), or class (e.g. club vs. pub).

A foreign land depicted in travel writing is just such a There, a “space of otherness.” Indeed, domestic and foreign sites of discourse are often fundamentally related, as race and ethnicity often function as metonyms for class, and likewise class itself is often constructed in terms of racial difference. A recent example from Turkey: the urban, westernized, educated, staunchly secular upper class is now known as “white Turks” – a term laden with racial overtones that are, needless to say, entirely imaginary. In nineteenth-century Britain, according to V.G. Kiernan, the English gentleman’s “attitude to his own ‘lower orders’ was identical with that of Europe to the ‘lesser breeds.’ Discontented native in the colo-

nies, labour agitator in the mills, were the same serpent in alternate disguises. Much of the talk about the barbarism or darkness of the outer world, which it was Europe's mission to rout, was a transmuted fear of the masses at home" (Kiernan 1969: 316). The representation of plebian spaces such as the slum or the fairground, in other words, had much in common with that of colonies and other non-European territories.

But if identity goes hand in hand with place, and if identity furthermore only makes sense in the context of alterity, what can one conclude about the relationship between the Here and the There? First and foremost, that these two concepts define each other by delimiting each other: There begins where Here ends, and the Here is where any travel must commence and terminate: "The economy of travel," writes Georges van den Abbeele, "requires an *oikos* [...] in relation to which any wandering can be comprehended. (...) In other words, a home(land) must be posited from which one leaves on the journey and to which one hopes to return" (Van den Abbeele 1992: xviii). But there is more to it than that: taking a cue from Gaston Bachelard's *La poétique de l'espace* (1957),<sup>4</sup> we can say that the Here is not only the Not-There, it is also the place where the There is imagined. It is therefore fundamentally linked to the There, as both its opposite and complement, and its site of construction. To make this a bit more concrete, consider this example: the wood-paneled study in which the British gentleman, armed with his pipe and tweeds, his dog peacefully curled before the crackling fireplace, read his travel books and daydreamed of the fabulous Orient or the jungles of Africa, could not help being transformed by these thoughts, and infused with an entire array of meanings that would have never existed were it not for them. It is this oneiric dialectic that unites the Here and There: home is where one dreams of the world.

### *Border-crossing narratives*

Like identity and alterity, the Here and There are also constituted through narrative, and accounts of travel – both real and imaginary – play a central role in this process: they create both the context and the substance of a society's perception of the rest of the world. Suzanne Rodin Pucci has noted, for example, that in eighteenth-century Europe, "the growing interest in the objects of a culture far removed from the West and particularly of 'oriental' cultures was inextricably linked in both fiction and non-fiction to the narrative of voyage. Actual objects of beauty and curiosity plucked from foreign soil were brought by travellers to be sold, exchanged and inserted within the social and mercantile fabric of the West, whereas stories of these cultural objects in the form of adventures and travels were integrated into the narrative syntax of literature and document" (Rodin

<sup>4</sup> For an English translation, see Bachelard (1964).

Pucci 1990: 148). In this manner, travel narratives provided Europeans with what phenomenologists would call a “pre-thematic” awareness of the world.

Let me be more specific: Edmund Husserl held that we can only truly comprehend nature by factoring in our ordinary, intuited experience of it, in other words by grounding ourselves in our existence as creatures of nature in everyday contact with it, outside of – and indeed prior to – its being made the subject of scientific investigation.<sup>5</sup>

Husserl’s phenomenological approach has been applied to time and history by David Carr, based upon the premise that both the past and our consciousness of it are elements of our experienced world, we are historical beings first and historians second, and any philosophy of history must take into account the temporality of the historian. Narrative is the primary tool for organizing our experience of time, and therefore plays a key role in the construction of this temporality (see Carr 1991). In the words of Paul Ricœur, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ricœur 1984, 1: 52).

There are, of course, fundamental similarities between our apprehensions of time and space, and thus something similar must hold for our consciousness of *place*:<sup>6</sup> directly, because of the epistemic and ontological centrality of space; and indirectly, because time/narrative needs a location in which to unfold. Both place and our consciousness of it, then, are elements of our experienced world. Before becoming explorers of foreign lands – or geographers, cartographers, anthropologists, orientalist, tourists... – we exist in space, in an immediate relationship with spatiality. Wide-scale spatial practices like travel, migration, or colonialism can only be understood if that immediate relationship is given adequate consideration. But saying that the relationship is immediate does not mean that the ensuing consciousness is, say, purely instinctive. As with time, narrative is the primary tool with which we organize our experience of space; hence, it is again through narrative that human beings acquire their pre-thematic awareness of place. Space becomes human, that is, space is constituted as place, to the extent that it is articulated through narrative; and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of spatial existence.

In his *L’invention du quotidien: Arts de faire* (1980),<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau discussed what he calls *réécits d’espace* or narratives of space, which organize places by describing displacements and function to constantly transform space into place. These

<sup>5</sup> See Husserl (1970: Part III A, particularly §§ 33–34 and 53–54).

<sup>6</sup> In his 1946 presidential address to the Association of American Geographers, John Kirtland Wright gave an early – possibly the first – articulation of the idea that the lived experience of spatiality must be factored into the practice of geography as a “science” (see Wright 1966: 68–88). On phenomenological approaches to geography and spatiality, see Pickles (1985: Parts 2 and 4).

<sup>7</sup> For an English translation, see De Certeau (1984).



are the narratives that embody our awareness of spatiality, that humanize the space in which we live by infusing it with meaning. But the construction of social space is not merely an intellectual exercise, it also determines praxis: narratives open a field for social practices (De Certeau 1984: 116, 118, 125). Thus, the experiences of travellers in foreign lands – ranging from the dilettante tourists, the writers and artists, to the occupying armies, surveyors, colonial administrators, and metropolitan officials – are overdetermined by the collective narratives that give normative significance to place, and thereby construct the Here and There.

In short, just as the historical past exists and must be tackled prior to and independently of its thematization in historical inquiry, geographical location too is part of our experienced world narrative provides us with a pre-thematic, background awareness of our global positionality which is key to understanding the politics of spatiality. Paraphrasing Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan's discussion of reading in history (cf. Hennessy – Mohan 1989: 326). I would suggest that the practice of geography always entails a theory of reading. Because geography (in the sense of actual places) is intelligible to us only through our locally available ways of making sense of spatiality, geography (in the sense of knowledge of places) is accessible to us only through its production by means of readings that are inevitably grounded in and colored by our local ideological biases. In this sense, reading is a material practice contributing to the construction of social reality; any reading is first of all an ideological intervention in the ways of making sense of spatiality available to the subject in the subject's own locality. Geography as a discursive practice must be evaluated not in terms of its performance in recovering a particular place "as it really is," but rather in terms of uncovering the local socio-cultural relevance of that place in light of the interests served by the geographical narratives as material practices that act upon social reality.

To put it most starkly, "without a reading, there is no place." Place is a discursive and rhetorical construct, and geography is therefore an inherently literary practice; as Stephen Daniel says, it is "a grapheme or writing of the world: it provides the text or topics which specify places not as precise functions of minutes or seconds of latitude and longitude but as functions of humanly significant concerns. (...) [T]here simply are no places at all until they can become incorporated into a vocabulary of interests" (Daniel 1989: 18, 21). Travel writing is an excellent example of a literary practice that specifies places "as functions of humanly significant concerns" and incorporates them "into a vocabulary of interests."

Now, some might object that while time travel still eludes us, and our knowledge of the past is therefore necessarily contingent upon the reading of texts (in the broadest sense of the word), the same does not hold for space: one could, in principle, go to virtually any place on the globe and acquire knowledge of it firsthand. Thus, one might argue, spatial knowledge is accessible in a far more unmediated form than is temporal knowledge. At first, this would seem correct; but empirical observation does not yield knowledge unencumbered by the cognitive

structures imposed by the subject's mind. Even the most unbiased traveller takes along a great deal of cultural baggage acquired prior to the journey which inevitably colours his or her perceptions; the acquisition of knowledge, in other words, is precisely an act of reading. Furthermore, no one can visit every square-centimeter of the world, so that any regional knowledge is necessarily the result of an intellectual process of interpolation. And finally, the overwhelming majority of people acquire their geographical knowledge (such as it is) through the mediation of books, magazines, newspapers, movies, television, and so forth. In short, it is texts (in the broadest sense of the word) that provide us with the tools for making sense of place – both foreign lands and, dually, our home territory.

### *The semantic density of place*

It is important to appreciate the fundamental nature of this geographical awareness. As Kay Anderson and Fay Gale point out, “the cultural process by which people construct their understandings of the world is an inherently geographic concern. In the course of generating new meanings and decoding existing ones, people construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions and environments. In short, they construct geographies.” Thus, like time and temporality, space and spatiality too guide human consciousness and praxis at a most basic level. Moreover, the representation and construction of place is a perpetual process: “Human geographies are under continuous invention and transformation by actions whose underlying fields of knowledge are themselves recreated through geographical arrangements. People’s cultures and their geographies intersect and reciprocally inform each other” (Anderson – Gale 1992: 4–5).

Because life itself depends on it, the element of space has of course been present in narrative since the earliest times; however, its meaning has not always been precisely the same. Emphasis on the specificity of place increased markedly during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: increasingly, works were set in a distinctive locality that took on an independent imaginative existence, rendering the story’s setting at least as important as other narrative elements, and sometimes more so. Indeed, the fictional genres of the early nineteenth century generally put great emphasis on place, grounding their narratives in specific geographical regions that were seen (by both authors and readers) as embodying particular moral and cultural values (Keith 1988: 3; Perera 1991: 35).

The view of space as an active and constitutive component of the social has not yet been fully assimilated into social science practice. Spatial units are generally treated as given, and the socio-political forces underlying their selection or construction are not questioned. As Alexander Murphy writes, although “regional settings are social constructs that are themselves implicated in that which is being examined,” too often “the regional framework is presented essentially as a backdrop for a discussion of regional change, with little consideration given to

why the region came to be a socially significant spatial unit in the first place, how the region is understood and viewed by its inhabitants [or, for that matter, by people who live elsewhere], or how and why that understanding has changed over time” (Murphy 1991: 24). It is necessary, in other words, to problematize regionalization itself, and understand how and why regions are conceptualized as distinct spatial units.

Rob Shields has noted that “as space is humanized and infused with meaning, sites or groups of sites acquire symbolic significances and become metaphors for particular states of mind or value systems. In this manner, real spaces are hypostatized into the symbolic realm of imaginary space relations. The world is cognitively territorialized so that on the datum of physical geographic knowledge, the world is recoded as a set of spaces and places which are infinitely shaded with connotative characteristics and emotive associations. The resulting formation – half topology, half metaphor – is inscribed as an emotive ordering or *coded geography*. It is enacted in ritual, as gesture, and encoded in further guiding metaphors which define our relationship to the world” (Shields 1991: 29, 264–265).

In other words, places have significances that transcend their physical/geographical characteristics, and these significances mediate our relations with our environment. The significance of a particular representation of place derives in large part from the connotative power of the metaphors used to construct it. References to Auschwitz or Hiroshima, Entrikin writes, “have a ‘semantic density’ that extends far beyond the geographic locations to include the terrible events that took place there” (Entrikin 1991: 11). It is impossible to hear them without instantly tapping into a large collective memory that endows such places with meanings transcending their physical/geographical realities. Places take on meanings according to events that occur there, becoming infused with human memories, hopes, values, and fears. But places also take on meanings according to what has been written about them, whether or not it has any basis in fact.

In a series of lectures on the importance of place in fiction, the novelist Eudora Welty argued that “every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else. Imagine *Swann’s Way* laid in London, or *The Magic Mountain* in Spain, or *Green Mansions* in the Black Forest” (Welty 1957: 11–12). Unthinkable? Perhaps, but why exactly? Is it because each one of us has travelled to Proust’s Combray, Mann’s Davos, or Hudson’s Upper Amazon – not to mention London, Spain, and the Black Forest – and can vouch from personal experience that the stories would be irredeemably altered if transposed? I do not think so. Rather, I would argue that knowledge of place largely derives from text, and it is important not to lose sight of this circularity when assessing the relationship between spatiality and literature. Welty writes that location “is to be discovered” by the writer (Welty 1957: 25), but in fact it is to be invented, based upon a combination of personal experience and available knowledge.

### *Writings and readings of the world*

But how does this come to be? How do places acquire these layers of meaning? Again following Foucault, we can say that places are discursively constructed by means of “technologies of place.” These are the discursive instruments and strategies by means of which space is constituted as place, that is, place is socially constructed and reconstructed. It is clear that travel writing is a technology of place. Like colonial novels, travel narratives too are not merely reflections of their authors’ exposure to foreign peoples and places, they are also “narratives of space” by means of which spatial knowledge is encoded and the world is cognitively constructed. Or, to put it another way, they are *writings* of the world, through the *reading* of which space is made into place.

And therefore they are among the building blocks with which a political discourse of spatiality is constructed. Why “political,” one may ask? For the reason that, as Michael Keith and Steve Pile have argued, “all spatialities are political because they are the (covert) medium and (disguised) expression of asymmetrical relations of power” (Keith – Pile 1993: 38, 220). For example, Mary Louise Pratt has analyzed how European travel writing produced “the rest of the world” for European readerships, as well as fostering Europe’s differentiated conception of itself in relation to its Others, how travel books created the domestic subject of European imperialism, and how they engaged metropolitan reading publics to expansionist enterprises (Pratt 1992: 4–5).

What I am trying to say is that carving the world into regions is never innocent. It invariably entails marking some as “central” and others as “peripheral,” some as “here” and others as “there.” And unequal power relations always underlie such practices. Let me present to you a passage from Foucault’s *History of sexuality* which I have modified to refer to spatiality instead:

“One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of *spatial construction* that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of *exclusion and inclusion, or centering and peripheralization*, brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. If *place* was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because relations of power had established it as a possible object; and conversely, if power was able to take it as a target, this was because techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investing it. Between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power there is no exteriority, even if they have specific roles and are linked together on the basis of their difference.”<sup>8</sup>

That is to say, the very existence of a discourse of spatiality is reflective of a system of power. In an analysis of the social construction of the outsider, and of the

<sup>8</sup> Foucault (1978–1986, vol. 1: 98). Instead of the three phrases/words which I have italicized here, the original passage has the words “sexuality”, “prohibition”, and “sexuality”, respectively.

nature of the spaces to which outsiders are relegated, David Sibley has shown that marginalization “is associated not only with characterizations of the group but also with images of particular places, the landscapes of exclusion which express the marginal status of the outsider group” (Sibley 1992: 107). In other words, segregation reproduces itself: spaces of Otherness become not only repositories of Others but indeed one of the primary indicators/producers of alterity.

Like eddies, the exercise of power spawns places of identity and alterity, both mimicking and reproducing the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion prevalent in society. Asking rhetorically, “Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations, the milieu in which their combination takes on body, or the aggregate of the procedures employed in their removal?”, Lefebvre replies: “The answer must be no. (...) [S]pace serves, and (...) hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a ‘system’” (Lefebvre 1991: 11). Hegemony, then, moulds space into place, and hegemonic constructions of place in turn reproduce power relations. Not only does power influence spatial practices, but the very existence of a discourse of spatiality is born out of the functioning of power. The territorialization of space is a discursive practice, as is our consciousness of those territories; they cannot be analyzed independently of the networks of power that generate them.

This political angle is worth keeping in mind when one studies travel writing. In his well-known essay on Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* (1791), Foucault wrote that “a whole history remains to be written of *spaces* – which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat” (Foucault 1980: 149). Following this line of thinking, we could ask ourselves what power relations travel writing reproduces, and how we can read this literature – this technology of identity and place – against the grain.

### *Writing difference*

Admittedly there may seem to be a bit of a paradox in the way travel writing figures in this scheme. It presupposes the presence of the author in the space of otherness, but also assumes that the author has made it safely back to his or her home. To be sure, the traveller’s encounter with the foreign land and its people could lead to a sort of *rapprochement*, a deeper understanding of each other. But I think that more often than not travel writing tends to exoticize the Other and thereby leads to a territorialization of the world. That this goes hand in hand with power politics is clear from the fact that, during the nineteenth century, the European outlook on the world – to use Lefebvre’s terminology, the space of representations devoted to Europe’s representations of space (Lefebvre 1991: 33,

38–39) – was not only a reflection but a prime mover of the spatial practice that was colonialism. The transformation of the earth into a constellation of places – the filling in of the big blank spaces on the map,<sup>9</sup> so to speak – was intimately related to hegemony, and must be analyzed within that context.

How are spaces of otherness actually constructed? Michel de Certeau has emphasized the role of *boundaries*, arguing that:

“It is the partition of space that structures it. Everything refers in fact to this differentiation which makes possible the isolation and interplay of distinct spaces. From the distinction that separates a subject from its exteriority to the distinctions that localize objects, from the home (constituted on the basis of the wall) to the journey (constituted on the basis of a geographical ‘elsewhere’ or a cosmological ‘beyond’), from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers” (De Certeau 1984: 123).

But it seems to me that it is not, strictly speaking, the *boundary* that defines a place, rather the imagined *contrast* between the “inside” and the “outside.” Encircling an arbitrary chunk of Antarctica with a picket fence would not appear particularly meaningful to most observers, since there would be little or no difference between what lies within and without the fence. Likewise, what makes the home is not the four walls that delimit it, but rather the fact that it is that unique place where we can be together with our loved ones, sleep at night, enjoy our belongings, or keep warm in the winter and dry during rain. Doreen Massey makes this argument more precise: she proposes an alternative interpretation of place based upon the premise that “what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.” Thus, she writes, instead of “thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey 1994: 154).

It is *difference*, then, that makes place; to imagine a place, it is not even necessary to know explicitly the precise location of its boundaries. Take for example the “Orient”: in the nineteenth century, it was sometimes held to begin at the river Leitha, a small tributary of the Danube just downstream of Vienna (Armstrong 1929: xii). But how literally must such an assertion be taken? Surely it was not a real or imagined line passing through the southeastern suburbs of the Austrian capital that divided East from West, but rather the differences between the respective characteristics attributed to each region. In other words, in contrast to physical locations, whose boundaries can be expressed in degrees and minutes, the distinctions between *socially constructed* spaces are primarily *qualitative*.

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<sup>9</sup> [Sir Arthur] Conan Doyle (1912: 13). Joseph Conrad’s use of this image is perhaps better known: cf. Conrad (1988: 11f.).

This is what travel writing often does. It constructs difference. This is not to say, of course, that there was no difference to begin with. The point is that one could, in theory, write a travel account in which only those aspects of the foreign country that are identical to those of the home country are retold. Such a book would seem boring and pointless, would it not? Consequently it is always difference that travel accounts underscore. And for this reason travel literature is complicit in the territorialization of the world, with all attendant power asymmetries and political consequences.

As an example, it is instructive to consider the 1956 film based on Jules Verne's *Around the world in eighty days*.<sup>10</sup> Certainly this is a delightful imaginary voyage, and a fine example of Hollywood at its classical greatest. But what is genuinely striking about the film (and the novel) is the degree to which it represents each visited country by the most minimalist set of stereotypes. Spain is flamenco dancers and bullfights, India is elephant rides and widow immolation. This is perhaps an extreme case, but it provides a good illustration, I think, of the propensity of travel writing to essentialize geographical areas and thereby construct regional differences.

The chapters that follow discuss travel writing both generally and through descriptions of specific travel accounts by particular individuals. Some are noteworthy as literature, others as ethnography, still others as autobiography. In all cases, they are fascinating for what they tell us about power asymmetries and about differences between Here and There, Self and Other.

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<sup>10</sup> Directed by Michael Anderson, screenplay by James Poe, John Farrow, and S.J. Perelman, produced by Michael Todd, William Cameron Menzies, and Kevin McClory. For more information, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048960/fullcredits#writers> (accessed 26 November 2011).

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