

“Mapping Without Going”: Imagined/Imaginary Forms of Border Crossing and Cultural Exchange in the Age of Metaphorical Travel

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Abstract

In an age of fluidity and relativity in the definition of concepts, the word travel has been subjected to various revisionist endeavors to accommodate its latent and intangible forms—metaphorical, symbolic, and virtual—which are now gaining considerable ground in academic discourse. Undeniably, these approaches provide novel perspectives and offer alternative perceptions of how travel is defined and lived transnationally and cross-culturally. Revisiting travel as a discursive practice cannot be seen in isolation from the concept of border crossing, which is no longer viewed as merely a mundane act of passing, moving, and crossing, but fundamentally as a reflection of a postmodern condition and a form of ideological praxis. Inspired by Edward Said and James Clifford’s theoretical insights, the valorization of the touring and traveling cultures helps take the debate beyond the boundaries of academia to embrace other equally important spheres of influence concerned with immigration, cultural policy, identity, and diasporic politics. This paper seeks to review and ultimately reposition the concept of travel by exploring how the imaged, imagined, and imaginary forms of travel and physical movement reshape the field of travel literature, accounting for its discursive peculiarities, theoretical and ideological

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presumptions.

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“This is still the strangest thing in all man's travelling, that he should carry about with him incongruous memories.”

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Silverado Squatters* (1883)

It might seem obscurantist, or perhaps more accurately, apocalyptic to formally declare the end of the age of “authentic” travel at a time when physical movement and the quest for newness and exploration are on the increase as a result of the preponderance of the means of travel and the considerable improvement in their quality. The nostalgic reference to the period of good travel—when the “going was good”—is now but a platitude in postmodern travel discourse. As this paper does not aspire to be apologetic for that era of authentic travel and discovery, certainly not because this is not a matter worthy of academic investigation, the whys and wherefores are best left for a paper that surveys the field of travel, its rise and demise. As we move from the déjà vu and the inevitable, we witness a steady rise in other forms of travel reified mostly through metaphor and symbol, providing alternative perceptions of what might constitute travel in an age characterized by shifting concepts and definitions. Interest in the issue of border crossing, not merely as a mundane act of travel and physical movement, but more for its ideological purpose and cultural significance, has increased over the past three decades since Edward Said and James Clifford started focusing on the significance of the touring and traveling cultures, often taking the debate beyond academia to embrace other public spheres concerned with immigration, cultural policy, identity and diasporic politics, etc. The purpose of this paper is certainly not to document instances of the policies resulting from the new perceptions and definitions of travel in the postmodern context, but rather to explore how the imaged, imagined, and imaginary forms of travel and physical movement reshape the field of travel literature by accounting for its discursive peculiarities and theoretical presumptions.

Nations and peoples have always been defined by how they interact with others, and interaction has traditionally been associated with movement and encounter, with the classical definition of travel hardly shifting from the age-old definition of movement consisting essentially of departure, passage, and return. These static parameters, which have long informed human movement, are now nuanced as the journey no longer solely depends on what occurs at the spatial and temporal levels, for it is also defined in terms of virtuality. As bodies travel and tour places, cultures and ideas concomitantly do so as well, to fascinating and at times bewildering extents. Whether crossing actual borders or mental ones—one in fact needs to distinguish between the two just as John Henry Cardinal Newman dissociates the “bodily eye” from the “mental eye” albeit for a different purpose—the metaphorical associations therein need to be reckoned with, for as a metaphorical construct, the act of traveling is itself a way of interrogating, subverting, and destabilizing the matrices of self, place, identity, and culture. In the same way as the traveling self cannot exist independently of the explored/gazed other, as Chris Rojek and John Urry argue, “cultures do not exist in a pure state, hermetically sealed from each other, and possessing a clear and distinct essence” (12). Several questions can be raised in connection with these hypotheses, revealing how, in their interactions, cultures create hybridized images as they interact at the multiple “contact zones” which result from various cross-cultural encounters. To explore the several ways travel becomes a reflection of the postmodern condition, it seems useful to address the following questions: What types of signs and images does the discourse of travel present/represent as it transgresses lived and imagined/imaginary borders? How is the concept of place shaped by our perception of the very signs and images we attribute to the physical journey? Do these signs and images reinforce or rather mitigate the process of cultural creation and representation in the travel text? Is the perceived image a genuine or a distorting mirror? What is imaged and what is imagined about the self and the journey?

Whatever its nature or purpose, border crossing, which is becoming increasingly opaque and elusive, is not a mere act of crossing from one border or territory to another, or from one's own space to that of others, but is rather an act of transgression that resists closure and predetermined forms of referentiality, i.e. that only certain types of people can actually travel and their observations and narratives actually become the “tale of the tribe.” In fact, history shows, in an ironically undocumented way, that several acts of travel performed by nontraditional travelers, such as slaves, smugglers, tourist guides, interpreters and porters, refugees, exiles, and the like, often went unnoticed and, obviously, unrecorded. “Liminality” and the “third space,” the suspended one, do not require theoretical framing in order to be understood. Michael Kowalewski was probably one of the earliest twentieth-century critics of travel to point out that one of the attributes of the field lies in its fluidity and openness and that travel writing as a genre naturally resists specific, perhaps essentialist forms of definition, on account of its “dauntingly heterogeneous character.” Kowalewski draws a comparison between the two levels of crossing: the “literal” and the “figurative.” Physical movement has always been perceived as a mundane act through which human beings engage in painful and arduous experiences. We constantly bear in mind, while reading about the theory of travel or teaching it as an academic subject, that etymologically speaking, the word “travel” was intimately linked to the medieval word “travail” with all concomitant associations of infliction and self-flagellation before turning into a panacea, a purgatory, or a gateway for fame and worldly achievement. But in a postmodern context, the opportunities for pristine and engaged travel have deplorably shrunk as a result of excessive modernization and globalization, and also as a result of the pathological fear of travel, by financial woes, and by the now famously labeled inconvenience of “logistical restrictions,” overwhelming security apparatuses and tightly controlled borders, and, surprisingly, by a nihilistic feeling of ubiquitousness and sameness—the world becoming a platitude that replicates itself—and the relentless

commodification of cultural heritage and the mechanization of travel with its implacably touristy and pedantic character.

Since “life is a voyage,” as John Donne writes in the poem, “To Sir Henry Wotton,” then it would only make good sense to see the voyage itself as an articulation of life in a large sense, that when embarking on a journey the traveler carries with him/her a nontraditional form of baggage, essentially cultural and ideological in nature, and much more significant than the quantifiable gadgets and suitcases. Arguably, a good travel book is expected to differentiate between the two journeys. In his fascinating travel book, *Venture to the Interior*, the South African travel writer Sir Laurens van der Post writes:

I have said nothing, though it is traditional on these occasions, about what I had packed in my suitcases. The truth is that the journey might well have proved incomprehensible without some account of the state of mind and feelings that I brought to it, whereas the load in my suitcases was light and of little interest. (33)

Van der Post would rather talk here about the “mental load,” which visibly punctuates his travels in many parts of the world and is a recurrent motif in his travel works. The “mental load,” which he carried with him on his trip from Britain to Nyasaland, present-day Malawi, in 1952 as described in *Venture to the Interior*, eclipses all forms of quantifiable loads. Throughout the trip, the author/traveler emphasizes the mental journey as he ponders the sorrowful condition of modern society and the aberrations of material progress and civilization. He considers our age as that of “unreason,” though it incessantly claims to be exactly the opposite, i.e. that of reason. In the author’s view, it is an age which has produced only conflicts and wars, “class hatreds,” “race hatreds,” and “colour prejudices.” Being part of the metaphorical journey, the “mental load” is so important for Laurens van der

Post that it becomes the *raison d'être* of his travels in several parts of the world, and his constant valorization of its merits has led many critics to brand him a mystic, which has provoked a great deal of backlash and controversy until the author's death in 1996.

An overview of the literature of travel reveals that the bulk of academic writing in the field has felt the need to shift its focus over the past three decades by relating travel to other discursive practices, concentrating in particular on the connection between travel and metaphor, and by placing the concept of travel in a context that is larger and much more complex than the traditional view of travel as mere physical movement or a proclamation of a celebratory act of discovery and exploration. The myth of *terra incognita* and utopia, and the exoticization of other cultures and spaces have been superseded by vulgarized spaces of encounter and the proliferation of virtuality in a frenzied, media-driven age. The shift in focus from the outward to the inward journey is also largely attributed to the impact of postmodernism and critical theory in approaching a field that has long been the territory of traditional exegesis with its “canonical” perception of the journey in mere epic terms. The *de facto* reality of “belatedness,” as Ali Behdad points out in *Belated Travelers*, and as debated by other postmodern critics with a vested interest in travel literature, has compelled the field to readjust its boundaries, which have long fascinated inveterate as well as casual travelers. The boundaries have been blurred by a third space—the space of the reflexive self—the self as a metaphorical construct—so that movement is no longer altogether outward or determined by *a priori* markers. Robert D. Kaplan's *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (1996) is a vivid example of this form of belatedness, as well as the travel works of some of the diehard members of this generation of travel writers like Paul Theroux in *Hotel Honolulu* (2001) or, a decade earlier, Mary Morris in *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone* (1989). A woman traveler, and a symbol of belatedness par excellence, Morris is aware she might not redo the exploits of, say, Mary Kingsley

(1862-1900), Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), or Freya Stark (1893-1993).

In “Strangers on a Train,” Paul Theroux writes:

When travelers, old and young, get together and talk turns to their journeys, there is usually an argument put forward by older ones that there was a time in the past—fifty, sixty years ago, though some say less—when this planet was ripe for travel. Then, the world was innocent, undiscovered and full of possibility. (30)

The rhetoric of nostalgia, associated with the clichéd narrative of “when the going was still good,” has become a leitmotif in the postmodern discourse of travel and writing. The ubiquitousness and commodification of travel, the rise of mass tourism as an industry and a major corporation, and the relentless globalization of a village formerly perceived infinite and inexhaustible, have largely contributed to this postmodern rhetoric of nostalgia. One should not overlook the role of what Pico Iyer calls in his not-innocently-titled work, *Video Night in Kathmandu, and Other Reports from the Not-so-far East*, “the latest weapons of cultural warfare,” in clear reference to the hegemony of media technology (5-6). The shrinking of time and space, the incessant mechanization of life, and the reinvention of the world in terms of virtual mapping and digitalized cartography (Google Earth, Earth TV, GPS, Remote Sensing), and other ramifications of the dotcom culture, needless to state here, have helped intensify the much-desired connectedness of human beings and material culture but, quite paradoxically, and in the same degree of intensity or even more poignantly, they have led to further heterogeneity and fragmentation with an alarming increase in the rate of displacement, exile, alienation, and immigration, among other ailments of the postmodern condition. The other no longer needs to be imagined or manufactured, for he/she is at our doorstep, thus proving that such ideas as

national boundary, border protection, territorial entrenchment, and cultural purity and distinctiveness are myths which are just as vulnerable as the very conditions that initially brought them to the fore. The same deconstructionist process can be applied to the concept of home and domesticity, which is rendered problematic as a result of constant fluidity, shifting definitions of identity and multiple allegiances and alterities.

The stereotypical dichotomies of self and other, nativeness and foreignness, among other ubiquitous and polarized discourses traditionally associated with classical literature and the literature of travel in particular, have today metamorphosed into the hegemonic quest for sameness, coercive integration, and homogeneity. However, the question of defining the frame of reference, i.e. the authorial/authoritative perspective from which truth and falsehood are defined, becomes itself problematic, as when, for instance, attempting to differentiate—without succumbing to naïve purism and essentialism—between the native and the other. This is especially the case when indigenization is claimed by more than one social segment or cultural group. What/who is native and who should define the native in a complexly structured and ethnicised world, a world in which the visited space is no longer deemed foreign in the traditional, hierarchical sense, for the traveler himself/herself, as Robert Louis Stevenson says, becomes *the* foreigner: “There is no foreign land; it is the traveler only that is foreign.” For some, this is a perhaps surprisingly liberal and avant-gardish pronouncement made by a conservative Victorian man whose cultural and ideological referentialities were essentially informed by the entrenched values of the Empire.

In many respects, when the image of the other is defined virtually, fantasized, or when distorted, as is often the case, it only reveals the aloofness and the foreignness of the self. In fact, the virtual, or vicarious journey has always existed side by side with the physical one, with rarely raised eyebrows. Many of the literary figures traditionally studied under the rubric of travel writing never actually crossed borders, but as Edward Said

says, they managed to arouse the curiosities of their readers and to disseminate clichés about other religions and cultures, which were often accepted as absolute truths and became part of the Western collective imaginary. Impediments of a logistical and cultural nature made it difficult to verify these presumptions. Biographical records, for example, reveal that Jean Jacques Rousseau did not visit Oceania, Montesquieu did not visit Persia, nor did Montaigne visit America, Jules Verne tour the world in eighty days, or Jonathan Swift set foot on an actual Lilliput. The list of pseudo-narratives and grossly exaggerated locations and species seems inexhaustible set the foundation for phenomenal historical events and paved the way for massive colonization and the subjugation of other races under various guises, most conspicuously the “mission civilisatrice.”

It might seem odd, yet unavoidably tempting, to draw an analogy between the phantasmagoric representation of other cultures through virtual encounters, which has substantially informed the genre of travel writing over the centuries, and the postmodern discourse of travel, though the approaches and rationales of the two might have distinct trajectories. With the influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism, the traditional forms of discourse, including those of travel, which have long lent support to exegesis in academia across various disciplines and genres, continue to undergo the same, if not more aggressively, processes of subversion and revisionism they were subjected to during the last decades of the twentieth century. This is usually attributed to the influential role of politics and theory in the way texts are read and taught. One cannot ignore these trends and their powerful manifestations and ramifications in an age defined primarily in terms of fluidity, mobility, and the resistance and imperviousness to essentialist systems of thinking. It seems that sessility, in form as in concept, is anything but defensible in the epoch of mobility and hybridity, as ideas and values freely float, cross-fertilize and, more often than not, collude and clash, creating what some faddishly term the “clash of civilizations.” In the context of travel literature, and as a result of the hegemonic discourse which has for

centuries valorized the myth of the traveling self and the rhetoric of masculinity, heroism, and prowess, the image—the visual reproduction of the shape of things and entities—as an “iterological” element and as a metaphorical construct has, regrettably, often been suppressed or marginalized. In order for the journey to materialize, it should be quantifiable. However, in the light of poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, discursive forms of representation, graphic and otherwise, have become leitmotifs in the process of redefining our approach to the journey as metaphor and to the world as text, a borderless entity defined more as picture than space now that the opportunities to conquer uncharted territories and to encounter different species are thinning away. Commenting on this perception of the world as picture, Martin Heidegger says: “the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture” (134).

In fact, the shift from the perception of the world and other objectified phenomena in terms of images and metaphors should not come as a surprise. The image of the thinker as traveler is all too familiar in classical literature, as the act of reading a text is in itself a form of voyage. The word “metaphor,” lexically associated with the act of transferring through the application of what Aristotle calls “an alien name,” helps vehicle different forms of engagement with the other, which might be textual or cultural, real or vicarious. Fundamentally, all forms of physical movement can be interpreted in their nonphysical attributes, and in interpreting the transference process from the physical to the nonphysical, one is inevitably engaging in metaphor. When their boundaries are sufficiently stretched, and when metaphor is employed liberally, all narratives can be seen as travel narratives, ubiquitously permeating texts, including those that are, from the point of view of strict genre, remotely linked to the discourse of travel proper. In Michel de Certeau’s view, travel and narration are not mutually exclusive acts and, accordingly, “every narrative is a travel narrative” (206). Even such traditional literary genres as the picaresque and the epistolary, notably associated with the rise of the novel in English literature, contain some of the

intrinsic characteristics of travel literature. Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), Henry Fielding (1707-1754), and Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) wrote essentially adventure novels, episodic and epistolary, but their works are all unconsciously modeled on the travel form at the heart of which lies a defining journey motif.

Undoubtedly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to cross borders for the same purposes as those witnessed in the not-too-distant past (also borders are now becoming sites of frustration, nervousness, and angst instead of fulfillment, tranquility, and celebration), or to accomplish any major cultural breakthrough using actual travel and physical contact, as the chances of doing so have been irreversibly diminished by the loss of the myth of otherness and by the deromanticization of travel in favor of the “massification of tourism.” Though the postmodern condition has allowed the space of culture, in its diverse manifestations, to expand in significant ways, it is becoming increasingly fragmented and its compass distorted, with such terms as hybridity and pluralism, celebrated by interest groups in minority contexts, becoming mere rhetorical devices and political slogans rather than genuinely felt cultural practices. The connection between travel as an extension of cultural engagement is all too clear, and the postmodern condition of culture is not different from that of travel as discourse and as practice. Juxtaposing the words “fragmented,” “hybridized,” and “shabby” to describe the postmodern condition of travel, Helen Carr writes: “Travel writers became increasingly aware that they were describing fragmented, hybridized cultures, the shabby remnants of the tapestry of otherness their predecessors had woven” (82). The new ways of mapping, if the word is still valid in a context in which, ironically, the terrain has already been neatly charted and is probably not in need of reinvention and remapping, stipulate a reexamination of the boundaries imposed from within and from without, i.e. those produced locally and which include new forms of othering, and those stiff barriers imposed by the outside world on countries which export immigrants and refugees, and within the diasporic, ethnic and cultural

communities established by those who have successfully “made” it. Thomas Pynchon, among other postmodernists, talks about blurred boundaries, deconstruction talks about the dismantling of hierarchies, and postcolonial discourse reifies multiculturalism and hybridity, while in reality the boundaries are continuously being erected and strengthened, seen as bulwarks against the “invasion” of the other, the visible cultural and economic other. So, realistically, fewer and fewer borders are actually being literally crossed, and the entrenchment and fortification are impeding narratives of self and place and the free articulation of the experience of passage. This, ironically, is happening at a time when media and technology give the impression of a borderless, seamlessly connected world in which social networks play a vital role in creating virtuality and interconnectedness. While new ways and technologically advanced models of communication and connectivity are being invented at an incredibly fast rate, other ways and lifestyles, as they relate to nonmaterial culture, are being hampered and threatened. Globalization has paradoxically given in to the coercive urge of for settlement and conformity, thus rendering such practices as nomadology or nomadism impractical, and trivializing—perhaps revolutionizing for some—the actual sense of travel and exploration. It has also given birth to an identity crisis plaguing a whole generation that feels forcibly out-of-place, to avoid using the word displaced since they might not genuinely feel so, who only experience globalization somewhat vicariously, blind consumers of global trends and gadgets, not their designers or creators, an imitative generation that fetishizes slogans and products often produced locally through outsourcing but bearing the seal of trendy foreignness. The fetishes of other cultures, represented by soccer and baseball icons, Hollywood and pop stars, television anchors, and sometimes just slogans and advertisements written in foreign languages and whose nuances and cultural referentialities the bearers rarely grasp, give them somewhat of a simulacrum of identification with foreignness and attachment to others, and a transient and virtual escape from the constraints of the self and domesticity. In attempting

to cross cultural borders, they end up feeling alienated and rejected—or perhaps they might never become aware of such a problematic condition, or of the whole identity issue for that matter, by simply thinking, as James Clifford explains, of what they are doing as merely “a way of localizing global symbols” (114).

In an age which has ceased to produce commanding travel books and master narratives on account of the dramatic decline in interest in the literature of travel as a genre, and also principally on account of the decline in the opportunities for discovery and exploration, and the surge of interest in mass and packaged tourism as a lucrative commodity, the image—imagined perhaps more than actually lived as we have seen so far—might be considered the only redeeming form of visual/virtual representation capable of disseminating ideas about people, places, and objects, and is the only viable way of (re)imagining and living authenticity and sublimity. Redefined, the journey becomes a *de facto* simulative process whereby people virtually travel, ideas float, and images tour. Edward Said and James Clifford, for instance, see the quest motif in the travel book, and in classical literature as a whole, as a phenomenon which is much larger than the self and its conditioning environment, reflected in its transgressive bent and its tendency to transcend borders and boundaries. As quest forms, cultures and ideas travel and tour—spatially and mentally—thus reinforcing the perception of the travel book as a largely metaphorical construct. It then becomes obvious that with the proliferation of the means of virtual travel and the vulgarization of the forms of placement/displacement, with the obvious complicity of technology and the power of imagination to assimilate and recreate, border crossings and different forms of encounter are not necessarily defined by quantifiable physical movement, since the classical tripartite notion of departure, passage, and return is no longer measured physically and sequentially. Metropolitan centers today celebrate human diversity and the presence of various ethnic and cultural artifacts, localized and transformed through “native” languages and lifestyles. So, borders are crossed or

transgressed cognitively and imaginatively, and the traveler is in fact anybody who is capable of imagining not merely the shapes of things but, above all, the significances of the things themselves. Severed from its “confirming and confining matrix,” the traveling self is reshaped and redefined to embrace the postmodern condition of fluidity and the mobility of ideas and objects.

In conclusion, it seems a daunting task to figure out what one is exactly expected to do about the various borders we cross on a daily basis but only in their imaginary and metaphorical manifestations, and the numerous ones we fail to physically confront and cross. The virtual or metaphorical journey becomes compensatory, or perhaps merely illusionary, a form of self-gratification, especially for those who have been incapacitated by the burdens and restrictions of actual travel and border crossing. Also, what are we supposed to do with our own entrenched borders, which might take the shape of culture, gender, social status, etc.? Do we really need to cross other or others’ borders before having successfully crossed ours? The real journey, one might argue, takes place first within as one is confronted with self-imposed barriers, inhibitive thoughts and perceptions. All the ailments of modern civilization, such as discrimination, prejudice, racism, intolerance, disenfranchisement, denial, and other manifest and latent forms of exclusion, are artificial borders in themselves, among several real and imaginary ones erected in the name of the sublime self by a “high” culture to underrate a supposedly “low” one. The new ways of mapping are no longer quantifiable as they have to undergo what James Clifford refers to as the process of “mapping without going,” and what van der Post, decades before him, referred to in *Venture to the Interior* as the internal journey, the voyage within, which makes the traveler feel

really on a journey in the fullest sense of the word; not just a shifting of the body from point to point but a journey that moves through all conceivable dimensions

of space and time, and beyond. For a voyage to a destination, wherever it may be, is also a voyage inside oneself; even as a cyclone carries along with it the centre in which it must ultimately come to rest. At these moments I think not only of the places I have been to but also of the distances I have traveled within myself without friend or ship; and of the long way yet to go before I come home within myself and within the journey (46-47).

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