



Carl Thompson. *Travel Writing*. The New Critical Idiom Series. New York: Routledge, 2011. 240 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-44464-4.

Reviewed by Ryota Nishino

Published on H-Travel (October, 2017)

Commissioned by Evan Ward (Brigham Young University)

The past two decades have seen a steady stream of introductory texts to travel writing.[1] Academic journals such as *Studies in Travel Writing* and *Journeys* have sustained this momentum, as have numerous journals with interdisciplinary and postcolonial sensitivities. Amid this profusion, Carl Thompson's *Travel Writing* is a concise, informative, and helpful introduction to the genre and the practice of travel writing study.

Thompson offers a lucid and skillful orientation to the genre (introduction and chapter 1). The rich intellectual landscape he paints shows that travel writing scholarship deserves greater recognition than previously credited. He then introduces the reader to the scholarly debate on the definition of travel writing. Numerous references to established and emerging scholars put the reader on the map of "who's who" of travel writing studies, and their intellectual trajectories.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the evolution of travel writing from antiquity. The selection of the texts he introduces and analyses lean toward British and American canons. To criticize this focus as an indication of his Eurocentric bias misses the very point of travel writing scholarship. As Thompson makes clear, travel writing scholars probe and critique how travelogues have become integral to the cultural impulse driving colonialism and imperialism. Rather, engagement with

the Western canons will equip scholars with the requisite idioms and frames of inquiry to scrutinize travel writing against the grain.

Among many merits of Thompson's work is his application of an inclusive definition of travel writing. This approach helps accommodate the protean themes and voices travel writers adopt. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 delve into the entanglement of travel writing with ethnography, and autobiography, which helps to transcend the traditional disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, between the post-Enlightenment European and Anglo-Saxon reading public, the travelogue stimulated curiosity toward the foreign and the exotic. Thompson insists on incorporating travel writing as a mode of ethnography as opposed to separating them. He acknowledges how the professionalization of anthropology has privileged ethnography as the "highbrow." Meanwhile, the travelogue has earned a lowbrow reputation as lacking in intellectual rigor. Thompson repositions the travelogue as the genre that can illuminate the blind spots professional ethnographers may overlook.

In chapter 4, Thompson shows how travel writers across the ages wrestled with the authentic representation of the world, which entailed not only faithfully rendering the journeys and impressions but also garnering the reader's trust. This issue of authorial voices—triumphant and

anti-heroic—becomes pertinent here: it validates the complicated nature of the presentation and representations of multiple selves. The traveler's self is not a singular construct. Rather, the richness of the travelogue, as Thompson argues, lies in the descriptions of the foreign and the outer worlds the travel writer describes as well as in the exploration of the inner world journeys prompt. Here, he cites examples from Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of Guinea* (1596) and Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Italy* (1705) to show how travel writers engage in self-reflections even where they have not explicitly intended to do so. These subtler forms of self-reflection compare with the more explicit declaration from the later period. This suggests a tendency that he terms "self-historicising" and "self-narrativising" whereby the travel writer projects desirable selves that speak to the prevailing sensitivities of the times (p. 113).

Thompson then expands the narrative tension of representing the self and others to other spheres. He addresses the interlocking relationships of travel writing with colonialism (and imperialism) and gender. Colonialism and gender are two seminal themes that galvanized travel writing studies.[2] In what he calls "Strategies of Othering I," he continues to show how classical travel writing, such as Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), created and sustained the dominant discourse in service of metropolitan imperial projects. "Strategy of Othering II" reveals how contemporary travel writing replicates the ethos of imperial projects which practically reinforces neocolonial geopolitical dynamics despite the formal demise of colonialism. However, Thompson does not tar the entire genre with the same brush; he shows works that sought to subvert the orthodox ideology. His appraisal of textual colonialism extends to his analysis of gender difference that manifest on the forms and the substance in travel writing. While Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling represent the arch imperialists' masculine voices of the Victorian age, female counterparts Mary Kingsley and Gertrude Bell

demonstrate the ambivalence between "racial" privilege and gender discrimination. Thompson's analyses of these well-chosen canons resist facile typecasting, be they past and contemporary travelogues, and observes the shrinking of the gender difference among contemporary travel writers.

From the vantage point of 2017, we now have two subsequent introductory texts to travel writing, one by Tim Youngs (*The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* [2013]) and the other, an edited volume, by Thompson himself (*The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* [2016]). While Youngs and Thompson deal with similar themes, the two complement each other in themes and texts analyzed. Thompson's edited volume updates his own introductory text and widens the geographical, temporal, and thematic fields. If the publisher affords Thompson an opportunity for a second edition, further exploration into emerging issues such as LGBT travel and social media would be worthwhile (Thompson's *Routledge Companion* features chapters on LGBT travel and social media). This caveat aside, Thompson's book has fulfilled its initial premise to equip the reader with the wherewithal to evaluate seminal debates on the scholarship and has established itself as a reliable guide.

Notes

[1]. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[2]. Sara Mills, *Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Mary Louise Pratt, *The Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-travel>

Citation: Ryota Nishino. Review of Thompson, Carl. *Travel Writing*. H-Travel, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50157>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.