

DEPARTURES AND ARRIVALS: WOMEN, MOBILITY AND TRAVEL WRITING INTRODUCTION*

SALIDAS Y LLEGADAS: MUJERES, MOVILIDAD Y ESCRITURA DE VIAJES INTRODUCCIÓN

Raquel GARCÍA-CUEVAS GARCÍA

Author / Autora:

Raquel García-Cuevas García
Universidad de Extremadura
Cáceres, España
raquelcuevas@unex.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5043-004X>

To cite this article / Para citar este artículo:

García-Cuevas García, Raquel. «Departures and Arrivals: Women, Mobility and Travel Writing, Introduction». In *Feminismo/s*, 36 (December 2020): 13-21. Monographic dossier / Dossier monográfico: *Departures and Arrivals: Women, Mobility and Travel Writing / Salidas y llegadas: mujeres, movilidad y escritura de viajes*, Raquel García-Cuevas García y Sara Prieto García-Cañedo (coords.), <https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2020.36.01>

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Keywords: Mobility studies; Travel writing; Inclusivity; Women writers

Palabras clave: Estudios de movilidad; escritura de viajes; inclusividad; mujeres escritoras

With the recent turns to Mobilities Studies and Travel Writing, these academic disciplines have adopted transversal and multidisciplinary approaches which have helped re-examine their history and acknowledge some shortcomings. There seems to remain a longstanding debt with inclusivity; bridging this divide is, without a doubt, a titanic enterprise. It is in this spirit that we present this monographic dossier, *Departures and Arrivals: Women, Mobility and Travel Writing*, as an exercise of inclusivity that gives space, voice, and

* This volume is part of the ATLAS research project (GRE18-14), funded by the Research and Development Office of the University of Alicante.

visibility to women travel writers no matter their points of departure and arrival, nor the time of their travels.

Although mobility and travel go hand in hand, for there can be no travel without mobility (Smethurst 7), these academic disciplines have followed different paths. While Mobilities Studies have shown an increasing interest in experiences of enforced mobility—as is the case with some labour migrants or refugees, sustainable mobilities and technologies—Travel Writing has heavily invested in approaches that rely on postcolonial and feminist criticism. For this reason, both terms are included in the title of the present issue, in an attempt to encompass as wide a range of experiences of «movement and becoming» (Merriman and Pearce 497) as possible. The feminist approach gives us the opportunity of highlighting an aspect that needs to be clearly spelled out when discussing mobility and travel writing: privilege. It is when we take the question of privilege as a starting point rather than as a conclusion that we can read and analyse travel writing through a more critical lens.

1. PRIVILEGED TRAVELS

James Clifford has stated that «[t]he traveller, by definition, is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways» and goes on to clarify that «[t]his, at any rate, is the travel myth» (34). This travel myth relies, then, on freedom of movement; however, «the freedom of travel writers is not the freedom of all: it is the privilege of mobility that allows them to travel and to write» (Holland and Huggan 4). Throughout history men have traditionally been that ‘someone’ who could fulfil the myth, hence the numerous allusions in scholarship to concepts such as «man as heroic risk-taking traveller» (Bassnett 225), the «patriarchal tradition of travel» (Iverson 206), «mobile masculinity» (Smith xvi), or «the centrality of travel/mobility to *constructed* masculine identity» (Wolff 230). Nonetheless, the concept of privilege goes beyond gender: «travel and travel writing are determined by and determine gender, racial identity, economic status and a host of other interrelated markers of status and privilege» (Iverson 201). Consequently, the traveller has been, by definition, male, white, and middle-class because it is on account of those traits that «mov[ing] about in relatively unconstrained ways» (Clifford 34) has been traditionally granted.

Moreover, although there is no doubt that travel and travel writing are interested «in the figure of the traveller and in the spaces of travel» (Phillips 88), those «spaces of travel» which have received attention in terms of readership and academic analysis have historically been mostly non-Western because «the West assumed the narrative authority to represent ‘the Rest’» (Smethurst 1). Travel and travel writing have existed for centuries, all over the world, in all sorts of directions, and for numerous reasons; yet, our Western perception has been irrevocably influenced by two major periods: the Spanish colonisation of America (referred to as the ‘Conquest’ of America) in which pioneers played a key role, and the expeditions which took place during the ‘golden’ age of the British Empire.

The genre of travel writing reached its peak in the 1840s when new, safer and faster means of transport became more widely available thanks to the industrial revolution and longer voyages, such as the scientific expeditions to the poles, were made possible. These new forms of mobility, together with the unprecedented colonial expansion of the Victorian period, were determinant to establish a very close link between travel writing and colonialism which, for many critics, still persists nowadays: «Clearly, travel writing at its worst has helped support an imperialist perception by which the exciting ‘otherness’ of foreign, for the most part non-European, peoples and places is pressed into the service of rejuvenating a humdrum domestic culture» (Holland and Huggan 48). A tradition of departing from a European ‘centre’ has therefore become a familiar and widely accepted trope in travel writing, dismissing the facts that «the world was ‘mapped’ by non-European peoples as well, and that many of these peoples also left behind travel accounts» (Edwards and Graulund 2).

2. WOMEN AND TRAVEL WRITING

In Western imagination, Odysseus is presented as «the appropriate archetype for the traveller, and by extension for the travel writer» (Hulme and Youngs 2); in consequence, his wife Penelope becomes the archetype for women: the ever faithful spouse who patiently waits at home. What this implies is not only that the activities of travel and travel writing have been established as a male domain, but that the study of those activities has validated that premise for decades. This «centrality of travel/mobility to *constructed* masculine

identity» (Wolff 230) has of course affected its female counterpart, associating women with stasis¹.

In fact, the very term ‘travel writing’ already points to two activities that have been traditionally male, hence excluding women as both travellers and writers and exposing them to a double exercise of gender bias: «by writing about travelling, the women authors were bringing upon themselves criticism for both the writing and for the travels which they represented; they were laying themselves open to attack on charges of exaggeration and of sexual impropriety» (Mills 41). The «familiar hero/adventure/action paradigm of male travel narratives» (Foster and Mills 10) that definitely flourished in the nineteenth century left no space for women, who saw their femininity and respectability compromised (Foster and Mills 8).

Nonetheless, women did travel and wrote about it. If the record of travel accounts written by women that has reached our days is considerably smaller than its male counterpart it is not due to a lack of production on the side of the writers or to questions of quality. In fact, Mills has compellingly argued that

it is necessary to recognise that women’s writing practices can vary because of the differences in discursive pressures, but that they will also share many factors with men’s writing. The most striking difference often lies not so much in the writing itself (although differences may be found there) but rather in the way that women’s writing is judged and processed. (Mills 30)

That is, it is the context of production that represents a real differentiator between men’s and women’s travel writing and not gender per se. And this context is tightly linked to language itself. Travel writing has been considered one of the many «public space[s] of male textuality» (Foster and Mills 10) because men have dominated the genre, hence giving shape to the narratorial forms and styles that have become a hallmark. It is with those tools that women have had to model their own travel accounts, having to adopt and adapt a frame of reference which worked to exclude them, «just as the practices and ideologies of *actual* travel operate to exclude or pathologize women, so the use of that vocabulary as metaphor necessarily produces androcentric tendencies in theory» (Wolff 224).

1. In this particular context I use the term stasis as the negation of mobility and not as a component of it.

However, because language «becomes the arena of a dynamic power engagement» it is possible to see how «[t]he transcultural space of language enables both ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ participants to act, to either perpetuate power or disrupt it, to entrench it or transform it» (Ashcroft 233). And this is why this volume emerges as a tool to examine how women travel writers have negotiated throughout the centuries with a genre that has traditionally excluded them and if this power struggle has had any effect on their identities.

Previous notorious works on women and travel writing include, among others, Jane Robinson’s *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers* (1990) and *Unsuitable for Ladies: An Anthology of Women Travellers* (1994); Sara Mills’ *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991); Suzanne Schriber’s *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920* (1997); Cheryl McEwan’s *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in East Africa* (2000); Sidonie Smith’s *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women’s Travel Writing* (2001); Shirley Foster and Sara Mills’ *An Anthology of Women’s Travel Writing* (2002); Kristi Siegel’s *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* (2004); Monica Anderson’s *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914* (2006); Zoë Kinsley’s *Women Writing the Home Tour, 1682-1812* (2008), Susan Roberson’s *Antebellum American Women Writers and the Road* (2011); Teresa Gómez Reus and Terry Gifford’s *Women in Transit through Literary Liminal Spaces* (2013); Inmaculada Fernández Arrillaga’s *Lúdicas y Viajeras. Mujeres que se recrean en la modernidad* (2019), and Birgit Braasch and Claudia Müller’s *Off Shore: Perspectives on Atlantic Pleasure Travel since the 19th Century* (2020). Adding to the already outstanding scholarship on the topic, *Departures and Arrivals* seeks to help to settle this longstanding debt with women travel writers. This issue presents seven essays which focus on women travel writers from the eighteenth century to the present day and cover several continents as well as forms of writing. The articles deal with different experiences of female mobility and in so doing, they explore the different realities of the woman traveller and writer paying attention both to their physical and psychological journeys.

In «Beyond Epistemological Confinement: The Sentimental *Ethos* of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *The Turkish Embassy Letters*», Yolanda Caballero explores the transcendence of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s epistolary account within the context of eighteenth-century Britain. Writing against

what Caballero calls an «epistemology of closure», Montagu assumes the role of the ‘frontier writer’ to question contemporary stereotypes about the Orient. Moreover, and thanks to an exercise of «empowerment through literature», Caballero shows how Montagu’s *Letters* incorporate a «rhetoric of pleasure» which destabilises not only romantic aesthetics and epistemes, but also «patterns of female oppression». It is thus that Caballero discusses Montagu’s journey at the levels of literature, philosophy, and epistemology.

«A Nineteenth Century Bengali Housewife and Her Robinson Crusoe Days: Travel and Intimacy in Kailashbhashini Debi’s *The Diary of a Certain Housewife*» explores questions of travel and mobility for the *bhadramahila*, a figure usually confined within the household. In this article, Swati Moitra discusses societal tensions in nineteenth-century India on account of preserving the purity of the *bhadramahila* during the act of traveling and shows how the narrator in *The Diary of a Certain Housewife* negotiates between convention and self-affirmation, domestic bliss and the freedom of travel constructing an unstable narrative which does not comfortably fit any specific genre.

Eastern experiences of travel writing are also presented by Irene Villaescusa and Babs Boter in «Self-Fashioning and Othering: Modern Women’s Double Strategies of Travel Writing». These authors discuss the travel narratives by journalists Mary Pos and Aurora Bertrana about their sojourns in the Dutch East Indies and French Polynesia, respectively. While both journalists identified as modern women, Villaescusa and Boter explore the recurrent contradictions in their writings and the constant negotiation between open-minded attitudes and imperialist nostalgia. Pos is shown to impersonate the well-known ‘I-eye’ position traditionally ascribed to male travelers; Bertrana, on the other hand, longs for the pre-modern society she encounters in her travels. In this article, Villaescusa and Boter tease out the unstable positions that make Pos and Bertrana oscillate between different cultural discourses.

Rarely discussed explorations are also present in this volume. In «A Feminist Becoming? Louise Thompson Patterson’s and Dorothy West’s Sojourn in the Soviet Union», Katharina Wiedlack focuses on the expedition that took a group of African-American artists to Russia to shoot *Black and White*. Analysing the accounts by political activist Louise Thompson Patterson and writer Dorothy West, Wiedlack provides a new approach to this sojourn that highlights female experience. Both authors were used to the harsh racism and

gender constraints in the US of their time, and Wiedlack traces through the written accounts of their journeys the authors' – not unproblematic – coming out to free love, independence, and solidarity among their soviet comrades.

Establishing a dialogue between four twenty-first-century American travel memoirs, Leah Butterfield discusses different types of mobility and their impact on identity with the US as both point of departure and arrival. Her essay «Towards a Feminist Politics of Mobility: U.S. Travel and Immigration Memoirs» enters in present-day debates about mobility and feminism. Advocating for the «feminist potential of both memoir and mobility» and building on the concept of «the global intimate», Butterfield analyses four memoirs recounting experiences that range from leisure travel to migration in order to originally propose a «feminist politics of mobility» which offers the opportunity of subverting conventional understandings concerning traditional categories such as gender, race or geography.

The essay that follows Butterfield's is an exploration of two recent counter-travel narratives. In «Contestations of Nationhood and Belonging in Contemporary African Women Travel Writing», Maureen Amimo explores Leah Chishugi's *A Long Way From Paradise* (2011) and Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking For Transwonderland* (2012) as instances of travel writing rather than trauma narrative. Amimo discusses the narrative transgression and subversion characteristic of twenty-first-century African travel writing. Amimo analyses how both works problematise notions of home, self, and identity due to enforced mobility and trauma. Having to negotiate their agency in relation to the land, both authors, Amimo argues, experience displacement and a sense of (un)belonging which fluctuates throughout their journeys.

The closing essay, «Women's Travel Writing in the Cyber-World – Ecofeminist and Difference Feminist Approaches in Travel Blogs» by Mirja Riggert discusses one of the latest media of travel writing and establishes a dialogue between travel blogs written by women and different strands of feminist theory. Acknowledging that this medium is perceived as primarily female, Riggert goes on to analyse how women's virtual travel writing is encoded in performative-gender terms. These travel blogs, Riggert argues, establish a transnational and transcultural network of sorority while at the same time relying on 'topical structures' and motifs.

Starting with the epistolary form in the eighteenth century and reaching a port in the transmedia portrayal of today's travel blogs, this volume sails through different experiences of travel writing in different times and spaces. Moving beyond the canonical perspective of the male travel writer, the seven essays presented in *Departures and Arrivals* contribute to enrich the field of travel writing by giving agency to the silenced voices, the ones that have always been there but have been traditionally left out of main criticism around this genre. The volume editors would like to thank all contributors and reviewers for their work and for their help in this journey.

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