



Transnational Identities and the Global South: Introductory Remarks*

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A Brief State of the Art

For centuries, travel writing has opened spatial and temporal gaps between different places, cultures, and languages, often causing a sense of disorientation and destabilisation. As a narrative form, it has constantly challenged readers, and encouraged them to adopt new and different interpretative criteria. It cannot be easily subsumed under a single literary genre and cannot be ascribed to a univocal ideological or scientific classification. It changes form and language according to the cultural context and to the world(s) it describes. Travel writing adopts multiple languages and forms of representation and develops new perspectives on the world; readers are compelled to re-orient themselves in order to understand and imaginatively re-create the narrated world, or multiple worlds, to which they can – albeit temporarily – belong.

Historically, the “South” has been identified as a space with shifting and unstable borders, open to multiple forms of representation and reconfiguration. It has long been connected to the possibility of observing and experiencing new forms of encounter which could defy and challenge Western normative sociocultural frames and subvert notions of gender identity and heterosexual desire. Women have often perceived travelling as an emancipating experience, as an opportunity to free themselves from the strictures of social conventions. Hence, their letters from abroad and travel accounts have granted them the opportunity to acquire an authoritative voice even on topics beyond their (supposedly limited) areas of expertise, while enabling them to compare and contrast their own condition with that of their foreign counterparts. In their work, the South may become a transformative and performative space in which they can express and empower their own narrative voices. If historically women’s travel writing has been consistently defined as more “confessional” (Foster 1990, 19) and “subjective” (McEwan 2000, 87), twentieth- and twenty-first-century women travellers redefine the intimate nature of their writing by reshaping the very form(s) they used. In a similar vein, by re-imagining the South as a space in which they could be freer to investigate their own sexuality and desires, queer individuals and sexual dissidents have also produced alternative narrative spaces by conflating existing textual forms in order to give a discursive shape to disruptive forms of identity.

More recently, textual representations have varied considerably in form and scope. By focusing on texts written between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the present day, this issue of *de genere* sets out to explore a multiplicity of written, visual, and intermedial texts by delving into writers’ experience of the Global South (in the widest sense of the term). It aims to show how they have grappled with issues of identity, difference, cross-cultural encounter(s), and belonging. In addition, it explores how the (de)construction of borders, social orders and strategies of control may be accompanied by a more nuanced, deeper understanding of the complex interconnections that link geographical and imagined spaces as well as identities.

Women Travelling South: From the Nineteenth Century to the Interwar Period

By focusing primarily on literary representations, *imagology* sets out to “describe the origin, process and function of national prejudices and stereotypes” (Beller 2007, 11). This interdisciplinary critical approach proves particularly insightful when it comes to travel literature, where the dynamics between *hetero-images* (portrayals of the Other) and *auto-images* (self-representations) are largely at play. Historically,

ethnocentric depictions of cultural difference have contributed to widening the gulf between what are now termed the Global North and the Global South. Drawing from Galeno's and Hippocrates's treatises, in fact, Jean Bodin, followed by Montesquieu, elaborated the so-called "climate theory", according to which Southern people were prone to indolence, self-indulgence, irrationality, and debauchery. In turn, these oversimplified and biased presentations of the Other strengthened the identification of Northern people as active, self-possessed, rational, and honourable. Accounts penned by "Northern" nineteenth-century women travelling South were certainly influenced by such clichés but, as the various essays included in this monographic issue demonstrate, stereotypes were often dismantled, while alternative paths of communication were successfully pursued.

The initial decades of the nineteenth century were marked by a dramatic shift in travel literature: as the experience of venturing abroad ceased to be "exclusively androcentric" (Melman 1995, 31), women travellers crossed physical, behavioural, and gender-normative boundaries, thus undertaking a profound transformative process. The reasons that prompted them to embark on their often solo journeys were multiple, at times even interlaced: health conditions that might be improved in a warmer climate, financial issues and the consequent necessity to relocate to a less expensive area, the craving for adventure, social recognition, better working opportunities as governesses or nurses, to name a few. In many cases, however, travelling granted them the opportunity to re-appropriate language and finally become "the authoritative voice of their own narration" (Fortunati, Monticelli and Ascari 2001, 6), by acquiring a professional identity as writers. Given the customary gendered construction of a feminised South – be it the picture of Italy as a beautiful captive, or the depiction of a seductive and alluring Orient, reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights* –, women travel writers were deemed the most apt to describe it. Consequently, they often managed to capitalise on their subaltern status as the Other within, to carve a special niche for themselves in the publishing market.

Before the 1980s, very few critical essays were devoted to the analysis of travel narratives authored by women. Their substantial body of works was either overlooked or, as Sarah Mills has observed, "ghettoised into a separate chapter" (1994, 35). Furthermore, their writings were branded as less artistically interesting, since, supposedly, they were straightforwardly autobiographical. The choice of the epistolary form adopted in many publications – which encouraged an intimate tone – reinforced this perception, whilst it was often meant as a strategic move, which enabled women writers to recreate an illusion of domesticity (the very domesticity they had transgressed by travelling and writing about their journeys). Women have even been excluded from the construction of a monolithic Orient as the Other par excellence. According to Said, in fact, "Orientalism itself [...] was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy" (1978, 215). Conversely, feminist and postcolonial scholars such as Billie Melman, Sarah Mills, Reina Lewis, Anne McClintock (and those who have followed in their steps) have focused on the ambivalence of women travel writers. On the one hand, in fact, from their gendered position, they were inclined to subvert the male Orientalist imagination, thus offering alternative views of the people they encountered and the places they inhabited. On the other hand, however, their belonging to the "Northern"

racism, as well as their class and nationality, determined their controversial adherence to Orientalist paradigms.

Accordingly, the accounts and travel narratives they published are rife with conflicting tensions. Their (more or less conscious) complicity with colonial discourses may be detected in the complex process of *othering the Other* women travel writers enacted in their works. Indeed, local populations were either infantilised (given their alleged lack of expertise, organizational skills, and technology), or suspended in a vacuum, almost stuck in the nostalgia of their historical past: in either case, their need of guidance by a superior (Western) culture was emphasized. Other times, the writers' commodifying and exoticizing gaze turned natives into a mere inventory of finely chiselled or even monstrous body parts, for the amusement of their readers back home. Moreover, in describing their foreign counterparts, female travellers also tended to reproduce the same patronizing attitude and imbalanced power relationship they were subjected to in their own countries: local women, therefore, were looked upon with pity (for their apparent backwardness), condescension, or even contempt.

Nonetheless, women's border crossing into the South also corresponded to a liberating experience, capable of generating potent counternarratives. Social identities became porous, thus producing fluid subjectivities of belonging, beyond binarisms. The concepts of home and homeland were renegotiated to such an extent as to become disconnected from a specific place. Motivated by a genuine interest in cultural difference, in their capacity as writers, many travellers also acted as cultural mediators, often struggling to learn the Other's language in order to communicate on equal terms without (stereo)typical filters. Finally, intercultural encounters also compelled women to reassess their position within their own society, while pondering on gender inequalities in both contexts.

Cross-dressing is an intriguing practice featured in many travelogues which epitomizes the above-mentioned contradictions and ambiguities. The shedding of constricting corsets and bodices in favour of flowing robes or other loose garments possibly signified the traveller's intention to evade social strictures; nevertheless, the temporary adoption of exotic attires was also associated with carnivalesque masquerades, with the phenomenon Kader Konuk has termed "ethnomasquerade", i.e., "the performance of an ethnic identity through the mimicking of clothes, gestures, appearance, language, cultural codes, or other components of identity formation" (2004, 393).

Delving more specifically into the essays that form the first section of this issue, the dichotomy between global North and global South lies at the background of Mary Shelley's *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842 and 1843*, the travelogue Giulia Bocchio focuses her attention on. As the author clarifies in her article, however, Shelley seldom indulged in stereotypical representations of the country as either an enslaved woman or the picturesque land of *dolce far niente*. As a representative of the new hybrid Anglo-Italian race, in fact, she uncovered unexpected channels of communication, genuinely sympathized with the inhabitants and their plight for freedom, while transcending any inbred sense of British superiority. To her, travelling was a transformative experience, just as it was for Lucie Duff Gordon, who spent the last seven years of her life in Southern Egypt, to recover from tuberculosis. In her essay, Claudia Capancioni reveals that Duff Gordon was well integrated within the community she earnestly portrayed in her *Letters from Egypt* (1865), going beyond the customary depictions of harem and hammams, and other picturesque tropes. Her

extraordinary ability as a translator from Arabic coupled with her medical expertise allowed her to develop multiple connections, while bridging cultural gaps and encouraging the mutual grafting of cultures.

The attempts of Olympe Audouard and Hubertine Auclert, who forcefully criticized Orientalist discourses and approaches towards the end of the nineteenth century, were far less successful, as Ylenia De Luca elucidates. Both feminist travel writers censured the French civilizing mission to the East which, in their opinion, was marred by chauvinism and misogyny. Yet, their alternative versions of universalism – Audouard’s cosmopolitanism and Auclert’s appeal to the assimilation of the Arabs – were as problematic, since the two authors paradoxically ended up reaffirming the very hierarchies they aimed at challenging. Emanuela Ettorre’s article explores Isabella Lucy Bird’s *Among the Tibetans* (1894), an account whose title seemingly conjures up images of inclusion and cooperation. Nonetheless, even Bird never fully managed to disentangle herself from an internalized sense of white superiority. In her effort to claim a larger role in British society, in fact, she replicated the same representational strategies and discursive tactics employed to keep English women in their subordinate place. Hence, Tibetans were either taxonomically assessed, fragmented into an anatomical list, or identified through their main characteristics according to the author (their filthiness, smell, deformity). Even though Bird frequently domesticated and assimilated foreign landscapes, however, she also progressively rediscovered the liberating potential, the energizing and vitalizing contact with wild and untamed nature. The complexities of Rosita Forbes’s travel narratives are examined by Mariaconcetta Costantini in her scholarly contribution, centred on the outcome of the traveller’s daring Saharan adventures: *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* (1921) and *El Raisuni: The Sultan of the Mountains: His Life Story* (1924). Moving beyond the tendency to racialise the Other exhibited by several fellow-travellers (who perceived difference through Orientalist lenses), Forbes was open-minded and animated by a sincere curiosity and admiration for local people, whom she praised for their intense spirituality and exquisite kindness. Drawing from Rosi Braidotti’s notion of nomadic subjectivity, Costantini follows the development of Forbes’s transnational identity, capable of multiple border-crossings and experimentations; the writer’s (homo)erotic tensions are also investigated in her essay.

Global South: Identities, Representations, Displacements

The Global South is a dynamic cultural and political spatiality characterised by complex intercultural relations and signifying practices. According to Xnour Dados and Raewyn Connell, “[t]he use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power” (Dados and Connell 2012, 12). Therefore, the Global South is not just a material entity or a geographical location which can be portrayed and visualised in maps and states, but is also a complex and multilayered sociocultural category. Its borders, which are porous and shifting, have been discursively inscribed within a sociocultural and geopolitical framework which demands a recognition of its complexities and variations. Moreover, the concept of Global South has also been thoroughly and consistently interrogated beyond its physical, geographical and political lines, in order to explore numerous contact zones, which can be considered as sites of colonial encounter and postcolonial dislocation.

In “Arts of the Contact Zone”, Mary Louise Pratt uses the concept of the contact zone “to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 1991, 34). Drawing on Pratt’s seminal paper, the contact zones in the Global South can be interpreted as comprising transcultural and interdisciplinary spaces that reflect the multi-layered and complex dynamics which characterise modern and contemporary societies. These spaces in turn enable the adoption of “a ‘contact’ perspective”, which “emphasises how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonisers and colonised, or travellers and ‘travelees’, [...] in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 2008, 7). While critical discussion of contact zones tends to assume a broader and general range of focus, more recently scholars have pointed out the necessity of carrying out research that privileges the analysis of individual subjectivities and specific locations, and how they are constructed according to different sociocultural frames (Hall and Rosner 2004; Lindsay 2011). For this reason, it is advisable to take a transcultural approach that allows us to critically evaluate “how subordinate or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 2008, 7). As a consequence, notions of space, mobility and dislocation are relevant to a critical examination of the contact zones in the Global South, alongside the countless forms that the narration of travel – and crosscultural encounters – has taken in the course of time.

In the articles that make up the second part of this issue of *de genere*, the Global South is posited as a highly contested terrain. Scholarly interrogations of this terrain have fostered a number of different positions and interpretations; they have also focussed on a variety of itineraries that are at the same time geographical and metaphorical, political and personal, subjective and collective, local and global. The authors and texts here discussed engage with different geographical contexts and decades of the second half of the 20th century by critically exploring the “contact zones” between cultures, literatures and languages from theoretical, methodological and thematic perspectives in the Global South. Discussions explore contexts ranging from Nigeria to the UK and the US, from Russia to the States, from Morocco to Paris. All of them question and tackle crucial issues such as displacement, diaspora, identity construction between and beyond national boundaries, gender, class, race, exile, from a wide range of theoretical positions and through recourse to a critical examination of a variety of literary and non-literary genres.

In “Gazes on the contemporary European Utmost South and the Coloniality of Space”, Luigi Cazzato discusses several travelogues and memoirs by English and Italian contemporary authors (including Duncan Fallowell, Charles Lister, Nicolette S. James, Patience Gray, Raffaele Nigro, Chris Harrison, Tim Parks) within the southern European space, and reflects both on the formation of cultural identity and on the separation between centre and periphery. According to Cazzato, this opposition has always characterized European imperial history, as well as the colonial present. He thus analyses the issue of the margins from the perspective of the geographic and the literary space in the wake of global South movements.

Isabella Villanova examines two novels published by two writers of Nigerian-Igbo descent: Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). She compares the different migration experiences of the two protagonists, Adah and Ifemelu, as well as the two writers, who migrated

respectively in the United Kingdom and the United States. Villanova connects characters and authors' experiences by focusing on their common purpose of narrating and giving voice to women's resistance, reassertion, and renewal. According to Villanova, writing for both authors is not only a tool to explore their personal experiences in the Global South, but it is also a political instrument with which they denounce social inequalities, challenge hegemonic representations, and Eurocentric and masculine epistemologies. In their novels, the "South" already exists in the North, which is configured as a plural space in which they negotiate their complex and multifaceted identities.

The reclaiming of black female voices and diasporic memories is at the core of Giuseppe Polise's analysis of Beyoncé's *6 Inch*. Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) is an audio-visual album that intertwines the protagonist's personal experience of betrayal with a history of the sexual abuse of black women. In the author's view, Beyoncé articulates the unwritten narratives of black women's pain by refiguring the South as a counter-hegemonic space in which memories of erotic expression survive the repeated forms of black female oppression and sexual exploitation. Beyoncé evokes black diasporic mythology to disrupt the Western and Christian flesh/spirit dichotomy, while challenging the normalized commodification of the hyper-sexualized mulatto women. The South then also becomes a site of black feminist theorizing through which Beyoncé reconfigures her relationship to the past by embracing a black female erotic agency.

In "Travelling 'back' to the Caribbean: Female Transnational Identities and Linguistic Relatedness in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Edwidge Danticat's *After the Dance*", Federica Zullo inscribes the two Caribbean writers in the "corpus" of postcolonial travelers who have been engaged with colonial heritage and issues of belonging as well as new interactions of de-territorialization or extra-territoriality (Korte 2000, 172). Starting from the personal migrations of the two authors (Marshall was born in New York to parents who had migrated from Barbados, whereas Danticat was born in Haiti and later moved to New York), Zullo takes into account their contribution to a transnational community of "authors and readers attuned to the legacies and persistence of past forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the emergence of new modes of cultural, economic, and political dominance" (Clarke 2018, 1). Thus, the article focuses on their engagement with multilingual contexts, since they have moved between multiple languages, so that monolingual paradigms are inadequate to read their worlds, shaped and transformed by colonialism, migration, and globalization.

Gabriela Alexandra Banita's "The Cosmopolitan's Other through the Cosmopolitan's Gaze: Refugee Representation in Helon Habila's *Travellers*" tackles the problem of how refugees are represented by the postcolonial elite and the tension that such an operation engenders. The article analyses the novel's focus on the encounter between the cosmopolitan protagonist and a number of refugees trying to make a new life in the city of Berlin. Employing Gikandi's critique of the cosmopolitan elitism characterising postcolonialism and its non-relation to the refugees' life experiences in *Between Roots and Routes* (2010), it argues that the novel explicitly presents what Durrant (2020) calls "the failure of registration" of the refugee life from a position of privilege. By rendering this occlusion visible, the author's representation tries to escape the danger of eliding the voices of the people represented.

Mohamed Baya discusses two works by writers of Moroccan descent that examine the phenomenon of migration and elaborate on what Ato Quayson has called the “diasporic imaginary”. Written as first-person narratives, Abdellah Taïa’s *Une Mélancolie arabe* (2008) and Saphia Azzeddine’s *Mon Père en doute encore* (2020) approach the migration experience from a gay man’s and a heterosexual woman’s perspective who both experience departures, arrivals, and nostalgic yearnings. Taïa’s semibiographical novel is about the narrator’s fascination for music and cinema that takes him to Paris and Cairo, as well as his coming to terms with homosexuality. Azzeddine amalgamates the autobiographic and the fictional to tell the story of her father who arrived in France in the 1960s. Although the authors cover different geographical and historical contexts, both writers draw upon a common Moroccan heritage. Moreover, as diasporic writers, they examine the constraints of diaspora life from different gender positions and through recourse to a variety of genres.

Michele Russo examines Nina Berberova’s *The Italics are Mine* (1969), an account of Berberova’s memories of her emigration from Russia through western Europe to the US. Russo identifies her text as a narrative experiment which deconstructs social and literary conventions by using different narrative forms, which include letters, essays, poems, and lists, so as to trace her past, as well as to relocate herself in western Europe first, and in North America later. The article aims to analyse Berberova’s physical and metaphorical transnational travelling, which leads her to look into her inner world and to re-explore her sexuality. In its final section, the article focuses on Berberova’s unpublished sequel, which delves into her transcultural passage to her North American identity, thus bringing to light her subversive attitude and her sexual orientation.

Taken together, these articles offer rich, nuanced and complex perspectives on a selection of cultural texts which engage with challenging questions of transnational migration, hybrid identity and transcultural modes of expression. Collectively, these scholarly analyses employ cross-disciplinary theories to explore cultural, literary and linguistic contact zones and transnational identities and confirm the importance of tackling and investigating the hybrid, “liquid” borders of the Global South.

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