



Money Matters: Encounter and Economic Disparity in Irish-language Travel Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Travel has always been an extremely important theme in Irish-language literature, but often this travel was motivated by financial hardship and, up until the late twentieth century, Irish-language accounts of travel largely documented the emigrant experience. In more recent years, however, Irish-language literature has witnessed a transition from emigration literature to travel literature, with Irish-language writers now recounting journeys undertaken for leisure purposes to destinations all over the world. The evolution of travel literature in the Irish language is, therefore, rather different to the evolution of the genre in major world languages, such as English or French, and the growth of Irish-language travel literature in recent years has highlighted that Irish-language travel writers have a unique background and perspective. Writing in a minoritized language, Irish-language travel writers themselves occupy a somewhat marginal position and, coming from a country that has first-hand experience of colonization, they often criticize Western hegemony and express solidarity with peoples who have lost elements of their language or culture as a result of their encounter with dominant world powers. On the other hand, they are also relatively wealthy travellers from an economically developed country in Western Europe. This unstable positioning can result in encounters that are fraught with ethical dilemmas for Irish-language writers when they travel. By looking at the travel writing of four Irish-language writers – Alex Hijmans, Manchán Magan, Gabriel Rosenstock and Cathal Ó Searcaigh – this article explores the encounters between Irish-language travel writers and foreign peoples and cultures. It investigates the attempts made by these writers to distance themselves from cultural, political and economic hegemony of Western powers but also highlights the often ambivalent positioning of Irish-language travel writers and demonstrates the barriers to encounter and the asymmetrical power structures that economic inequality can create.

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From the 1990s onwards, Irish-language travel literature has witnessed a significant boom, with the publication of travel narratives documenting the journeys of Irish-language speakers to countries around the world. Given that Ireland has a long history of emigration, travel has always been an important theme in Irish-language literature (Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin 31). The *Gaeltacht* regions, or Irish-speaking areas, which are largely located on the west coast of Ireland, were particularly disadvantaged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and so travel undertaken by most Irish-language speakers at this time was motivated by financial hardship – as Nic Eoin and Ni Dhonnchadha note, it was “an unavoidable part of life for many young people in these regions” (31). Travel was rarely undertaken for pleasure. Thus, the evolution of travel literature in the Irish language is rather different to the evolution of the genre in major world languages, such as English or French, and does not have the same tradition of travel accounts written by explorers to newly ‘discovered’ lands, a tradition of scientific or anthropological reports on the peoples they found there. Nor is there a tradition of travel accounts in Irish of the Grand Tour, which resulted in the production of countless travel accounts internationally.¹

In the late twentieth century, however, as the economic climate in Ireland began to change and international mobility became easier, there was a notable shift from emigration literature in the Irish-language to ‘travel literature’. Yet the growth of travel literature in recent years has highlighted that Irish-language travel writers have a unique background and perspective. Although Irish is the first official language of the Republic of Ireland and has been an official language of the European Union since 2007, Irish is, in fact, a minoritized language. So, these writers are speakers of a minoritized language and they come, by and large, from Ireland, a country that has never held a dominant political position in the world and does not appear to have a long tradition of hierarchical relationships with the ‘cultural Other’ such as that which is presented by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). It is vital to remember, however, that they are also wealthy Western travellers. The positioning of Irish-language travel writers is, then, highly ambivalent and the encounter between Irish-language travel writers and, as a result, the ‘Other’ remains far from straightforward.

In many ways, Irish-language travel writers occupy a marginal position. Ireland itself is on the periphery of Western Europe; the writers are writing in a minoritized language and Irish-language literature is on the margins of Irish literature more generally: even within Ireland itself, Irish-language travel writers have a limited readership, reflecting the ongoing linguistic struggle between Irish and English. Coming from a country that has first-hand experience of colonization, we see that Irish-language travel writers often criticize Western hegemony and identify with other cultures that have been in the position of the subaltern, identifying with peoples who have lost elements of their culture or language as a result of their encounter with dominant world powers. Yet globally, the categorization of Ireland as a postcolonial society is not accepted and remains a topic of debate among scholars, with some arguing that, given the political and economic position of Ireland, it cannot be compared to other former colonies, those that remain economically underdeveloped in the twenty-first century. Ireland has, in general, seen steady economic growth and, as Liam Kennedy points out, “[o]n every significant economic and social indicator Ireland – North and South – is positioned among the richest countries in the world. It is part of the First World” (119).² These conflicting outlooks on the categorization of Ireland further emphasize the complex and unstable positioning of Irish-language travel writers as they travel in non-Western (and largely economically underprivileged) locations. While they may

1 Buzard describes the Grand Tour as “an ideological exercise” and states that “[i]ts leading purpose was to round out the education of young men of the ruling classes by exposing them to the treasured artefacts and ennobling society of the Continent” (38), while Holland and Huggan describe it as “a formative journey for young Englishmen of means – a kind of peripatetic finishing-school for the comparative study of social graces” (50).

2 Kennedy looks at factors such as GNP, life expectancy and literacy rates to compare Ireland with other former colonies such as India, African countries such as Ethiopia and Algeria and Latin American countries such as Peru, El Salvador and Brazil to support his argument that it is not a developing country. While Ireland may not have experienced the same economic prosperity as Britain, Kennedy notes that in 1913 it enjoyed similar standards of living to other European countries such as Spain, Norway, Finland and Italy (Kennedy 110). He suggests that “[t]he condition of Ireland prior to its partial breakaway from Britain bore little relationship to that of African and Asian societies at the historic moment of decolonisation in these continents. A West European comparative framework fits the Irish case far more effectively” (111).

feel a certain affinity with the travelleses they encounter, they are often at a considerable economic advantage.³ Many ethical dilemmas can, therefore, arise out of such intercultural encounters and, as Catharine Mee highlights below, instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding between people of different cultural backgrounds are not uncommon:

Travellers are, and always have been, at the forefront of intercultural contact, whether they are the explorers and navigators of past centuries, tourists on a package holiday, or immigrants arriving in a new country. Interpersonal encounter between two individuals is the most basic form of human interaction and when the two individuals concerned, like most travellers and travelleses, are from different cultural backgrounds, then it is the most basic form of multicultural relation. Interpersonal encounter across such divides can deteriorate because of clashing values, misunderstandings, disagreements and even violence [...] At the very least, travellers and travelleses often find themselves stepping on each other's toes, encroaching into each other's space: physical, psychological, metaphorical. (28)

As Mee points out, interpersonal encounters across cultural divides can lead to, at the very least, misunderstandings and, in some cases, even more serious conflict. This article explores some of those thorny issues that can arise from intercultural encounter using illustrative examples from the works of a number of Irish-language travel writers – Alex Hijmans, Manchán Magan, Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Gabriel Rosenstock – and will examine how their positioning, as wealthy Western travellers, affects their encounters with travelleses. It must be acknowledged that all of the writers discussed in this piece are white, Western, educated males and so, from the outset, without even taking their financial position into consideration, they are travelling and writing from a place of significant privilege. It is also important to note that while there are no female writers being discussed in this article, they have not been deliberately ignored. Gender is, of course, “an issue that affects and informs all travel, and all travel writing” (*Bird 100*), but female perspectives are somewhat difficult to come by in the relatively new field of Irish-language travel literature and they remain a minority in Irish-language prose writing more generally. As a result, this article will focus on how the privileged economic positioning of the abovementioned writers – Hijmans, Magan, Ó Searcaigh and Rosenstock – impacts upon their encounters with others as they travel.

The lack of economic development in a country can often be part of the attraction for Western travellers – not only will the cost of living be lower, but it also often means that the traveller's destination has not been ‘spoiled’ by modernization and overdevelopment. Yet economic disparity greatly complicates encounters between Western European travellers and non-Western travelleses, creating barriers and unequal power structures (*Mee 111*). Moreover, while the travel writer may not always make explicit references to the issue, hints of such inequalities, and the ethical dilemmas that arise from them, permeate these travel accounts. There are, for example, issues concerning the use of services provided by travelleses – if Western travellers use services offered by underprivileged travelleses, are they taking advantage of the position of power that their wealth affords them? Or, conversely, does this give travelleses a valuable opportunity to improve their own financial position?⁴ Furthermore, Catharine Mee raises the issue of how travellers respond to the “outstretched hand” (111–12). Economic disparity can also, however, leave the Western traveller vulnerable (*Mee 110–11*) and can be the cause of mistrust and suspicion between travellers and travelleses. Thus, as Alasdair Pettinger remarks, Western travel writers travelling from rich to poor countries “must find ways of negotiating economic as well as linguistic differences” (150).

While none of the travel writers being discussed here would consider themselves wealthy, Gabriel Rosenstock, a prolific Irish-language poet and translator, notes at the beginning of

3 The term ‘travellee’ was coined by Mary Louise Pratt in her much-cited work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2007 [1992]). It describes the person who inhabits the culture through which the traveller passes. Forsdick notes that the term was, in fact, only used by Pratt on three occasions in the text, but he suggests that “Pratt attempted to reanimate this passive character who is ‘travelled over’, seeing the traveller and travellee coexisting, and acknowledging what she sees as traces of their copresence” (*Forsdick in Fowler et al. 2014: 97*). It is in this sense that the term ‘travellee’ is used in this article.

4 Catharine Mee expands upon this issue, noting that “broader global inequalities directly affect the encounter between two individuals in terms of the disparity in their own personal wealth, which can create situations with ethical implications. What, for example, can the tourist or traveller buy? What should be for sale? Tourism itself is the purchase of services and experiences, but does this include the personal histories of guides” (29).

his journey to Dubai, India, Japan and South America that he meets a friend in the Emirates Tower Dubai, which he describes as “ceann de na hóstáin is galánta ar domhan” (“one of the grandest hotels in the world”; Rosenstock 18),⁵ a luxury that would not be available to many, and he remarks that it is difficult to even imagine the poverty that they will see when they travel on to India. This brief reference highlights the uneven distribution of wealth that still exists throughout the world today. As Syed Manzural Islam states,

Despite the saturation of global signs and the accelerated movement of capital the world has not flattened into a “smooth space” of uniform sameness. It is a bumpy and uneven place with huge disparities of wealth, life chances, and living conditions. (212)

These are disparities which, he argues, reflect the divide between “the West and the rest” (209). On another occasion in Dubai, we again see an example of these disparities and inequalities as Rosenstock reads about an impoverished Asian man who was found dead. Rosenstock is clearly moved by reading about the death of this stranger, as it reminds him of the fact that it is often poverty-stricken emigrants who have to do the menial tasks in order to cater for the wealthy. Despite his protestations earlier in the book that he is not a wealthy man, he acknowledges that such individuals are also there to provide services for tourists like himself. He notes that it is emigrants “a ghlanann suas inár ndiaidh” (“who clean up after us”; Rosenstock 14, emphasis added). Even though he expresses a desire elsewhere in his work to move away from the materialism and economic hegemony of the West, he must face up to the fact that, as a wealthy Western traveller, he, too, is complicit in it.

Cathal Ó Searcaigh, an Irish-language poet who wrote a travel account about his experiences in Nepal, also makes reference to the conflicting role of tourism in economically developing countries and to his own complicity in the industry. Despite at times in his narrative being critical of other tourists, he feels compelled to defend his own actions to another traveller who condemns him over his use of Sherpas to carry his bags as he treks through the region. Explaining his decision, he claims that many of the Nepalese people are depending on the money they can make from the tourist industry and from travellers like himself; this work is part of their heritage and by employing these young men he is providing them with an income that they desperately need (Ó Searcaigh 125). Thus, while at times he condemns the tourist industry and the arrogant ethnocentric attitudes of some of his fellow Western travellers, he also acknowledges that it can contribute to the economic growth of the region. Anthony Carrigan sums up this conflicting role of tourism, noting that while the industry propels environmental transformation, cultural commoditization and sexual consumption in countries that are “still grappling with the legacies of Western colonialism”, it is also “consistently welcomed across the postcolonial world as a much-needed source of job creation and foreign exchange, even if the power relations that condition these transactions are distinctly asymmetrical” (128).

It is noteworthy that Irish-language travel writers often advocate a rejection of Western influence in non-Western countries and a rejection of the materialism that they feel is associated with this. Ó Searcaigh and Rosenstock are particularly vociferous in their condemnation of Westernization and materialism, believing that they lead to a decline in local culture. Ó Searcaigh makes reference to the increasing Westernization of less-developed countries, and his disparaging tone here illustrates his disapproval at the way in which Western attitudes and influence are contaminating Nepalese culture:

Ina theannta sin is dócha go bhfuil cuid de na daoine seo somheallta ag saol an iarthair, go bhfuil siad ag iarraidh aithris a dhéanamh ar bhéasa beatha atá coimhthíoch dá ndúchas agus dá gcultúr. Chan anseo amháin atá an meon múnlaíthe sin...Chan anseo amháin atá an *westoxication* agus an *cocacolonization* imithe i bhfeidhm ar dhaoine. Tá sé curtha ina luí ar dhaoine gach áit i ndomhan na mbocht go bhfuil sé d’iachall orthu a bheith iartharach ina ndóigh agus ina ndearcadh.

[Furthermore, some of these people are probably enticed by Western life; they want to copy customs that are foreign to their own heritage and culture. It is not only here that this mind-set exists ... it is not only here that *westoxication* and *cocacolonization* have affected people. It is impressed upon people in the poor countries of the world that they must be western in their manner and in their outlook.] (123)

⁵ Throughout this article all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

His use of the phrases ‘westoxication’ and ‘cocacolonization’ have negative connotations of destruction, pollution and imperial dominance. Yet these overt criticisms of Western influence in Nepal highlight Ó Searcaigh’s own ambivalence. While he is critical of Western dominance, there is also a certain arrogance to his attitude here, as he seems to imply that less-developed countries should not give way to this progress. While he may feel that it is important that their culture is protected, he also remarks, “Ni bhíonn sé i bhfad go ngéilleann muintir na cúlchríche don nósmaireacht nua. Tá an rud deoranta, dar leo, níos fearr ná an rud dúchasach” (“Before long the people on the margins give in to this new way of life. The foreign way, according to them, is better than the native way”; Ó Searcaigh 51), which suggests that the Nepalese people themselves often feel that the new way of doing things will be beneficial. Thus, Ó Searcaigh’s remarks could be viewed as an example of Western arrogance, as he, a Western traveller from a developed country, is seeking to deny a less-developed country like Nepal the benefits of progress in spite of the people’s own willingness to accept it. On the other hand, it could be argued that Ó Searcaigh is not speaking from a position of Western arrogance but is, instead, being influenced by his own cultural background growing up in West Donegal, a region in which there is an ongoing struggle to retain elements of the local culture, the Irish language in particular.

Similarly, Rosenstock, like many Western travellers before him, journeys to India in the hope of escaping the capitalism and materialism of the West and in search of spiritual enlightenment. His ideal, it appears, would entail the rejection of globalization, industrialization and rapid economic growth that has led to the loss of spirituality in developed countries throughout the world and seems particularly keen to preserve the spirituality and supposed ‘authentic’ culture of India largely because of the decline in Irish culture that he claims to have witnessed. This fear of decline of diversity is, of course, a well-known trope in travel literature and, according to Cronin, nostalgia for what is disappearing from the world is “one of the most common preoccupations of the literature” (21). Rosenstock posits that Ireland’s increased economic and material affluence does not make up for the loss of culture and heritage that the country has experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and suggests that Ireland is, in fact, poorer than ever in spite of its rapid economic growth (46). Lamenting such losses in Ireland, he does not want India to experience similar loss. Like Ó Searcaigh, therefore, he advocates the preservation of the non-Western cultures that he encounters. Dean MacCannell observes that tourists, having lost their own perceived ‘authenticity’, seek out the ‘authenticity’ that they are denied by modernity (3). Yet this search for ‘authenticity’ is problematic and is, arguably, futile. Shepherd notes, for example, that the search for ‘authenticity’ is a “search for an alternative to ourselves, a search grounded in a belief that what we have lost can be found in Others more ‘primitive’ and therefore more natural, than ourselves” (192). He also contends that

[w]hat counts as authentic, then, depends on the cultural lens of the seeker, which in turn guides the direction in which authenticity is sought Of course, the problem is that authenticity rapidly dissolves under the most casual examination, as anyone who has traveled can attest. Yet the desire for authenticity remains. (Shepherd 191)

Similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah reflects on the fact that by their nature cultures are very rich and are made up of continuities and change, and so, “trying to find some primordial authentic culture can be like peeling an onion” (107). Hence, the idea of ‘authenticity’ is itself highly problematic, but that aside, there are further difficulties that arise from this search for ‘unspoiled’ and ‘authentic’ culture. If places such as India and Nepal are to remain ‘authentic’ and thus unspoiled by modernity, then they must reject Western capitalist principles and be denied the economic and infrastructural growth that economically developed countries of the Western world have already experienced. There is a distinct tension, therefore, in Rosenstock and Ó Searcaigh’s travel narratives between a pre-capitalist spiritual ideal and the opportunities that capitalism could provide to help them escape from poverty, and questions have been raised as to what ‘right’ Western travellers have to demand that these places remain in this ‘primitive’ state. Why should these countries remain underdeveloped so that Western travellers can continue to enjoy places of spirituality and unspoiled natural beauty if it means that the native people cannot escape from abject poverty?

The examples cited thus far have considered the issues of economic disparity and tourism more broadly, yet there are also many moments in these travel narratives that highlight how economic disparity can tarnish the encounter between individuals. As was suggested earlier, economic

disparity can complicate the encounter between Western travellers and non-Western travellers when the former must make choices with regard to poor people who approach them in search of charity. When faced with such inequalities, how do these travellers react? Ó Searcaigh comments on a number of occasions that he helps the Nepalese people, whether it is giving money to young beggars who approach him on the street (17, 56, 65) or helping people in the mountain villages by giving them medical supplies that would be otherwise unavailable (56, 165). If we are to take these descriptions at face value, it could be argued that Ó Searcaigh's actions simply show that he is moved by the plights of others. As Syed Manzural Islam remarks, "forgetting the disparity and difference that exists between it [the West] and others amounts to closing the door on ethical obligation ... without being moved by the plights of the others in a divided world there is no possibility of ethics" (213). So, Ó Searcaigh's response can be read as an understandable human reaction to others' difficulties. It is particularly understandable, perhaps, considering Ó Searcaigh's upbringing in rural West Donegal. Even though he is now relatively wealthy in comparison to the Nepalese people, he says that he was raised in a similar financial situation to many of them:

Cha chreidfeadh siad é dá n-inseoinn dóibh gur tógadh mé ar phrátaí, ar bhainne agus ar shalann. Cha chreidfeadh siad nach raibh againn sa bhaile ach an beagán, a ndálta féin, go dtí gur tháinig biseach ar shaol na hÉireann sna seascaidí. Síleann na daoine bochta seo, is dócha, gur de dhaoine rachmasacha mé. Ar ndóigh, tá dóigh dhuine uasail orm i gcomórtas leis an dóigh dhearóil atá orthusan. Ach a ndálta féin, rugadh mise sa tsúiche fosta agus tógadh mé sa toit.

[They would not believe it, if I told them that I was reared on potatoes, milk and salt. They wouldn't believe that at home we didn't have much, just like them, until life in Ireland improved in the sixties. These poor people probably think that I am a wealthy person. Of course, it is as though I am from noble stock in comparison to the poor life that they have. But just like them, I was born in the soot and raised in the smoke.] (Ó Searcaigh 59–60)

Ó Searcaigh thus feels that he can empathize with the Nepalese people, even though he is, in their eyes, a wealthy Westerner. We must, however, examine the motivation for including such snippets of information in the travel narrative. While it is perhaps impossible to uncover the full motives of any travel writer, the inclusion of such information should be questioned in order to determine whether this desire to appear fair and charitable is for the benefit of the traveller or if it is simply for the benefit of the reader (Mee 111–12).⁶

Rosenstock, meanwhile, is not so overtly charitable, nor is the travel writer, journalist and broadcaster Manchán Magan on his journey through Africa. Magan highlights the dilemma that Western travellers face in these circumstances when he and his travelling companions first arrive in North Africa. He comments upon the curiosity of the local people towards them. He also, however, refers to the reluctance of his companions to engage with the local people, as they feared they might be looking for charity. In this instance, though, Magan shows that there was no need to be wary of the locals, as he jokingly remarks that if they were robbers, they were very generous ones as they offer them firewood and small gifts (Magan 17). While the tone of Magan's comment is light-hearted, this incident stresses the more serious issue of Western prejudice and suspicion towards many of the travellers they encounter when travelling in economically underprivileged countries. Similarly, Gabriel Rosenstock provides an example of such prejudice as he travels in India:

Mheasas gur ag déircínteacht a bhí sé. Maslaím é nuair a deirim nár thugas oiread is rúipí amháin liom. Geiteann sé, seasann troigh uaim siar. "Ní rúipithe atá uaim," ar sé, "níl uaim ach labhairt leat faoi chúrsaí sacair!"

[I thought that he was begging. I insult him when I tell him that I don't have a single rupee with me. He steps away from me, startled. "It's not rupees that I want", he said, "all I want is to talk about soccer!"] (Rosenstock 28)

⁶ Discussing the reliability of travel writing, Holland and Huggan remark: "[i]rredeemably opinionated, travel writers avail themselves of the several licenses that are granted to a form that freely mixes fact and fable, anecdote and analysis. Not least of these is the license to exaggerate, or even to invent" (9), thus readers should be aware that the motives, reliability and verisimilitude of travel accounts must always be questioned. This will be discussed further below.

In both of these examples the Westerner wrongfully assumed that travellers were approaching them looking for handouts and neither travel writer seems willing to make a contribution. Economic inequality and the prejudice and suspicion that can accompany it, therefore, tarnish the encounter with travellers on these occasions.

The background and circumstances of the Irish-language writer Alex Hijmans differ considerably from those of Magan, Ó Searcaigh and Rosenstock, yet his work also highlights the issues that can arise from economic disparity between travel writers and travellers. Hijmans is a Dutch-born writer and fluent Irish-speaker, having come to Ireland as an adult to learn the language, who is now settled in Brazil. His narrative, *Favela*, recounts his time in the favela of Tancredo Neves in Salvador where he lived with his then husband, Nilton. Thus, his narrative is set against a backdrop of economic inequality and, undoubtedly, his time living in Tancredo Neves presents many challenges relating to economic imbalance. Hijmans also emphasizes on a number of occasions that these issues of economic disparity and imbalance of economic power in Salvador are often closely linked to racial difference. Hijmans was one of the few white people living in the area and he suggests that people were often suspicious of the motives behind his relationship with Nilton, presuming that it was formed on a financial basis:

I dtír ina bhfuil dífeár eacnamaíoch chomh mór sin idir daoine gorma agus daoine geala agus ina bhfuil an cháil ar eachtrannaigh ach go háirithe go bhfuil siad lán d'airgead, breathnaítear go hamhrasach ar chaidreamh grá idir na ciníocha éagsúla.

‘Nuair a fheiceann daoine gorma duine gorm eile ag siúl lámh ar lámh le duine geal is é an chéad rud a cheapann siad ná go bhfuil caidreamh airgid i gceist, ní caidreamh grá,’ a deir Nilton go minic.

[In a country that has such a large economic difference between black people and white people and in which foreigners have the reputation of having lots of money, relationships between the various races are looked upon with suspicion.

‘When black people see another black person walking hand in hand with a white person the first thing that they think is that it is a financial relationship, not a loving one,’ Nilton often says.] (Hijmans 38)

Hijmans’s text further highlights that the gap between rich and poor is visible through everyday encounters in Salvador when he recounts the story of he and Nilton visiting one of the largest shopping centres in Brazil:

Daoine de shliocht Afra-Bhrasaileach iad 80 faoin gcéad de dhaonra Salvador – daoine gorma. Ó tháinig mé chun cónaithe in Salvador is minic a rinne mé iontas cá mbíodh an 20 faoin gcéad eile. Ach a luaithe is a sheasaim isteach in Salvador Shopping tá an rúndiamhair sin réitithe. Is ionann doirse uathoibríocha an ionad siopadóireachta agus bealach isteach i saol eile: saol saibhir, aer-oiriúnaithe, geal.

[Eighty per cent of the population of Salvador are of Afro-Brazilian descent – black people. Since I have come to live in Salvador I have often wondered where the other twenty per cent are. But as soon as I set foot in Salvador Shopping that mystery is solved. The automatic doors of the shopping centre are like an entrance into another world: a rich, air-conditioned, white world.] (Hijmans 65)

It is as though the shopping centre is a sort of sanitized bubble in which the wealthy white population distances itself from the reality of inequality in Brazil. Hijmans goes on to remark to Nilton, “‘Is tú an t-aon duine gorm san áit seo. Seachas na daoine atá ag glanadh.’ Níorbh é an rud ba dhiplomáidí a dúirt mé riamh ach tá ócáidí ann nár cheart fiacail a chur sa scéal” (“‘You’re the only black person in this place. Apart from the people who are cleaning.’ It wasn’t the most diplomatic thing I ever said but there are times when you shouldn’t mince your words”; 65–6). This imbalance evidently has a significant impact on Hijmans and his encounters with others in Tancredo Neves. He notes: “‘Ach in ainneoin gurb é seo an t-aon áit sa chathair nach seasann mo chraiceann geal féin amach sa slua chomh mór sin, ní mhothaím ar mo chompord in Salvador Shopping” (“Even though this is the only place in the city that my white skin does not so noticeably stand out in the crowd, I don’t feel comfortable in Salvador Shopping”; Hijmans 65). This serves to highlight the ambivalent positioning of Hijmans as a Western traveller in an

economically underprivileged area; there is a sense that he does not feel fully integrated in the favela where he is in the minority, nor does he feel comfortable surrounded by the great wealth of the Salvador Shopping centre. While, on the one hand, as a Western European traveller he is in the conventional position of economic power, this positioning is highly complex as his wealth and his skin colour at times single him out and marginalize him from the other residents and even members of his new family in Brazil.

Economic disparity also has a significant impact on the encounters we see in the travel narrative by Cathal Ó Searcaigh. His *Seal i Neipeal* (2004) provides some of the most striking and contentious examples of the impact that such economic disparity can have on intercultural encounter. Ó Searcaigh had been a regular visitor to Nepal for over a decade and had come to adopt Nepal as his 'spiritual home'. *Seal i Neipeal* recounts just one of these visits, but his encounters with travellers there have been the cause of great controversy in recent years and have come under much scrutiny since the broadcasting of Neasa Ní Chianáin's documentary *Fairytale of Kathmandu* in 2007. Ní Chianáin accompanied Ó Searcaigh on one of his visits and contends that, at the beginning, her documentary was intended to be a celebration of Ó Searcaigh and of the philanthropic work he did in Nepal. The documentary shows that during his visits to Nepal, he sponsored several young men, buying them gifts and helping with their education, but as the trip progressed Ní Chianáin states that she began to feel uneasy about the types of relationships Ó Searcaigh had with some of these individuals. Ní Chianáin claims in *Fairytale of Kathmandu* that Ó Searcaigh took advantage of his position as a wealthy Westerner to sexually exploit young Nepalese men who had little or no sexual knowledge or experience. Feeling that he was using these young men for his own sexual gratification, Ní Chianáin confronts Ó Searcaigh about his relations with them when they return to Ireland. Ó Searcaigh, who is openly homosexual, admits that he had sexual relationships with some of these men, but he fervently denies Ní Chianáin's allegations, claiming that they were all above the age of consent and that all of the relationships were "founded on long-established, affectionate relationships" (Mac Cormaic 7). Ó Searcaigh's textual account of his trip to Nepal, *Seal i Neipeal* (2004), certainly paints the picture of a consensual and reciprocal relationship between himself and his guide Pemba but there are, arguably, elements of self-justification in his descriptions of their relationship.⁷ We also must not forget the travel writer's ability to craft their text which, as Carl Thompson notes, allows them to be "if not exactly deceitful, certainly economical with the truth" (28). Similarly, Korte remarks that "reports of travel necessarily re-create the experience of the journey on which they are based...[t]he actual experience of a journey is reconstructed, and therefore fictionalized, in the moment of being told" (Korte 10–11, emphases added). All travel writing is therefore a reconstruction and a representation of events, and so the idea of 'truth' in the context of Ó Searcaigh's *Seal i Neipeal*, like any other text, is elusive. Peter Hansen claims that close relationships between travellers and their mountain guides or Sherpas are not uncommon and may develop because of the opportunity to "escape social hierarchies and bond in the context of shared dangers" (210). In spite of this, it seems that the economic disparity between the Western traveller and the traveller will always have a significant impact on the 'authenticity' of the relationship and can create a considerable barrier between them.⁸ Ian Littlewood argues, for example, that "the economic power of the tourist remains at the centre of the web of threads that link travel and sex. However resolutely this economic superiority is displaced into other, non-commercial kinds of assistance, its reality seeps back into the marrow of the relationship" (93). While Ó Searcaigh has always denied

7 After spending the night with his guide Pemba, Ó Searcaigh remarks: "Cha raibh náire ná ceann faoi ná aiféala ar bith air as ár gcaidreamh i gcaitheamh na hoiche. A mhálairt ar fad a bhí fíor. Bhí fonn fíochmhar air, de réir dealraimh, a mhian a shásamh arís" ("He didn't seem embarrassed or ashamed, or to regret our intimacy during the night. The opposite was true. It seemed as though he had the urge to satisfy his desire again"; 138–9).

8 As noted above, authenticity is a very broad and complex term and is often much debated among scholars when it comes to defining it in the context of travel and tourism. With regard to the authenticity of encounters, however, Catharine Mee provides an adequate definition on this occasion: "Authenticity in the encounter between two people implies that the relation is based on genuine, spontaneous sentiments, requiring that each be true or genuine to him/herself and to the other. Therefore the traveller's perception that his/her interlocutor is being genuine is of importance in creating the impression of an authentic encounter. Trust is a key element, since one of the major factors interfering with the authenticity of travel encounters is the suspicion of ulterior motives. Many of the encounters between tourists and travellers are bound by financial relationships determined by the tourist industry, where tourists pay for services carried out by travellers. This contributes significantly to the perceived inauthenticity of such relationships, especially when tourists know that part of the service is a semblance of friendship. An authentic relationship is therefore one that either does not have a financial basis or where this is transcended through the authentic expression of honesty and friendship" (Mee 26).

that he was involved in sex tourism, there certainly still remains a link between travel and sex in his travelogue and, as Littlewood notes, it is difficult to escape the financial basis on which relationships such as his with Pemba are formed. It seems from his ongoing denials of any wrongdoing that Ó Searcaigh does not fully realize the power that Westerners have when they travel in economically underdeveloped countries nor does he recognize the potential asymmetrical nature of relationships that are formed there.

What emerges from this discussion above all else is the way in which encounters between Western travellers and non-Western travellers are complicated by economic disparities. As Syed Manzural Islam noted above, the world “is a bumpy and uneven place with huge disparities of wealth, life chances, and living conditions” (212) – disparities that create numerous ethical dilemmas for Western travellers. This has also highlighted that the positioning of Irish-language travel writers is extremely ambivalent. While they may feel that they can relate to the subaltern, they are actually in a very different position and their financial situation affords them a certain degree of power, including the freedom to travel for pleasure, to encounter other cultures and, at times, even to commodify these cultures. Furthermore, these writers can be critical of the tourist industry and of what they believe are its destructive features but they also acknowledge that it can be an important source of income for the local people and acknowledge that they, too, are complicit in this by using the services provided by travellers. Moreover, while they are on occasion critical of other travellers for their actions and seemingly arrogant attitudes they, too, can be guilty of cultural arrogance by wanting to restrict progress in developing countries. While they are sometimes self-conscious about their economic privilege and the impact that this can have on their encounters, at other times they appear to be much more self-centred, only realizing that their actions may have been problematic after the event – if they realize at all, that is. Debbie Lisle coined the term ‘cosmopolitan travellers’ to describe those who seemingly promote and celebrate cultural difference and the Irish-language travel writers discussed here may consider themselves to be among this group, given their desire to celebrate and preserve the cultures they encounter. Lisle goes on to emphasize, however, that we must be very cautious of those travellers who enact a cosmopolitan vision as they often “smuggle in equally judgemental accounts of otherness *under the guise of equality, tolerance and respect for difference*” (10). Thus, while these Irish-language travel writers may hope to have overcome many of the unethical features, such as ‘othering’, that travel literature was accused of in the past (Fowler 91), this discussion has shown that Irish-language travel writers often unwittingly take part in the actions they condemn and that factors such as economic inequality make it much more difficult to escape asymmetrical power relations than we may have ever imagined. While travel writers may not be able to alter the economic imbalance, they must make greater efforts to be aware of their own privileged position and to face up to the ethical responsibilities and challenges that these present.

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Eimear Kennedy received an AHRC PhD studentship to complete her PhD research into Irish-language travel literature in Queen’s University, Belfast (2012–2016).

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