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Ethics – issues of:

The issue of ethical questions in travel writing can be dealt with from a number of perspectives. Here, I suggest that the primary ethical questions in travel writing stem from the ideological bases, and material consequences of the representational practices and the prescriptive qualities of much travel writing. These concerns of the material consequence of travel writing raise two central ethical questions that much travel writing, has, since its formative stages, overlooked: questions of reflectivity and reflexivity. While travel writing tends to pass judgement on the morality of people and places visited, it rarely engages in moral reflection regarding its own subject positionality as it is grounded in the situated contingency of the author. This includes an author’s personal history and experience and the role they play in the production of a knowledge of people and place and subsequent representations. The absence of reflectivity delimits the possibility of reflexivity in travel writing, including a consideration of the material effect its own production and circulation. Rarely does it engage with the implicit values and beliefs that underlie the production of knowledge of the world it represents. This is perhaps more true of colonial era travel writing than it is today but even as it references colonial predecessors, rarely does contemporary travel writing stop to seek out, confront or question the colonial ideologies and value hierarchies, grounded in racial and gender difference, that give rise to the differential and quite arbitrary treatment of people and places as they exist within the social relations that constitute travel and tourism.

In writing of the ethics of travel and exploration, it is impossible to escape the historical legacies of capitalist development and accumulation, of imperialist expansion, and of numerous forms of inequity that persist today. It is also difficult to avoid a discussion of historical and contemporary attempts to delineate the kinds of activities that constitute travel and exploration, primarily those that produce a literature of travel. Rarely included in this are forms of travel that do not leave as direct a literary trace as ‘travel for leisure’ – travels that result from or result in forced migration, immigration, employment as bearers, homelessness. Accordingly, travel and questions of representation raised by dominant practices of travel writing must consider how descriptions of people and place are bounded by the differential ability of people to travel. Certainly, financial ability provides the capacity for some to engage in travel in ways or to places that are out of reach of others simply because of the willingness to pay for exclusivity. But the difference in the capacity to travel is most marked in these places where mobility is disproportionately skewed, both legally and economically, towards those from so-called developed nations. Ironically the capacity of many people to travel to destinations in so-called poor countries exists precisely because a significant portion of the population in those countries is poor. It is the difference in purchasing power – the value of currency – that permits the extension of a localized leisure activity into the sphere of global travel. This is nothing new. Any perusal of early travel narratives will reveal that the emergence of the phenomenon of professional travelers in the 18th and 19th century was facilitated by the capacity to take advantage of wealth differentials grounded in the exploitation of difference typically on the basis of race. Indeed, travel itself is historically grounded in, and reproduced, racial typifications that served its own interest. The identification, description and categorization of particular populations from within the ideological frames of colonialism, and common in much early travel
writing, not only denigrated ‘natives’ but also detailed their usefulness in the service of travel. Despite the inequitable social relations of production engaged in travel, and their unethical reliance on arbitrary discrimination, much travel writing has historically adopted a liberal rhetoric of the moralizing effect of ‘the encounter’; an assertion that travel, particularly under the guise of colonialism was not simply a mechanism of ‘discovery’ – of unearthing and codifying facts of people and place – but a mode of capturing difference within a common language of morality. This was typically produced through a discourse of liberal humanism as it had emerged from the Enlightenment to emphasize values of freedom and self-realization. These values, when socially contextualized, however, were not free from the chains of a religious morality that saw the route to their realization as lying within a religious and educational conversion of ‘natives’ to European beliefs and values. Hence the association of travel with ‘education’ and missionary activity. Both of these activities, and travel writing associated with them, can be read as disciplining activities or vehicles through which to reorient worldviews and the bodily practices associated with them. Like many other forms of writing, travel literature has disciplinary qualities in the way that it explicitly or implicitly prescribes certain modes of behavior that have material consequences.

An example of this resides in the ethical problems related to the production of the object of much travel - cultural authenticities. This is, in part, related to the arrogance of the tourist/traveler divide. In the popular lexicon of much travel and exploration writing, it is the ‘true’ traveler who seeks to find the ‘real’ and the tourist who corrupts it, seeking only to satisfy base desire. Ironically, ‘the real’ is itself produced through the ideological norms of early travel writing which assumed as a primary function the production of ‘objective’ descriptions of the world - descriptions of people and place that Mary Louise Pratt and Edward Said, among others, have described as the ‘customs and manners’ trope of travel writing. This ‘knowledge’ is subsequently reproduced through the social norms and practices that govern travel writing: the reference of authority - itself produced within a delimited economy of meaning that relies on the act of travel as the basis for the production of legitimate meaning - and the adherence to institutional sanction. ‘Travel’ and the accounts of ‘travelers’ then, are sanctioned within and through power relations that arbitrarily promote the accounts of those who serve the ideological interests of dominant institutions. In the past, these were frequently colonial institutions or institutions of the state. Increasingly, as the ideology of adventure has become more pervasive in western society, these have become the institutions of capital. Through the process of the arbitrary institutional sanction of ‘legitimate travel’, another ethical thorn emerges; inquiries into the points of view of those who have been ‘visited’ are rarely offered in travel accounts, nor are the accounts of those who have accompanied sanctioned travelers in the role of employees or servants. Even in the case of exceptions, accounts of ‘natives’ are commonly heavily edited by institutional hands and emerge at political moments when they can be of use to the institutions of travel. A notable exception is Jamaica Kincaid’s “A Small Place”

A concern with authenticity and the historical textual reproduction of ‘manners and customs’ representations exposes ethical concerns regarding the encounter between traveler and the ‘travelled’. Among these is the manufacture of a performative authenticity through which the textual production of ‘the real’ generates a material expectation on the part of the tourist/traveler. It also provides guidelines for action, as the textual representation of authenticity in travel writing assumes a prescriptive dimension and encourages the reproduction
of oppressive conditions of interaction through particularized forms of cultural exploitation. The
construction of authenticity, for example, implies pressure for the reproduction of cultural
practice as performance and raises ethical concerns related to the devaluation of meaning in such
geographically and socially contextualized practices. Of course, there is the response that those
performing the cultural practice, often rituals, recognize the manufactured context and engage in
a particular form of performance for the travel market while reserving separate spaces for their
own meaningful performances. This, however, can be counter-productive as these new sites
become ‘the authentic spaces of cultural performance’ and, as such, are sought out by travelers
seeking to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Even in cases where a ‘community’
sanctions cultural performance for a travel market, that community is rarely inclusive or
homogeneous and decisions can be made by a selective group that is not necessarily
representative of the interests of all community members. A differential in power relations
within communities often facilitates exploitation on the basis of gender and social status, and can
generate new sources of tension within communities as some members try to capture the benefits
flowing from a travel market. These concerns are directly related to the discursive authority
assumed by travel literature which relies on an appeal to wisdom and social superiority to discern
the ‘real’ or the essence in any cultural encounter and to represent it to potential travelers.

The role of travel writing in the production of desire, the demarcation of possibility, and
as a signifier of class and social status carries with it some specific ethical concerns. Perhaps
most obvious of late are environmental concerns associated with the representation of particular
locales as attractive destinations. The onslaught of tourists in Niagara Falls during the late 19th
century makes it clear that the material environmental effects of travel writing’s seductive power
are not new. But the stakes have become higher. An expanding global leisure class combined
with a vastly expanded spatial reach made feasible through jet travel (and the associated
environmental hazards associated with airports and fuel consumption) has not been accompanied
by an associated shift in practice to minimize the environmental impacts of tourism. Even the
advent of so-called “eco-tourism”, now the subject of a new genre of travel writing, simply relies
upon a continued process whereby a discursively produced “environment” is commodified,
consumed as spectacle, all the while remaining subject to the whims of fairly fickle free market.
Ultimately, travel writing, then, can not be held apart from the material consequences of the act
of travel. It is one element in an economy of meaning that underpins travel and exploration.
Travel writing brings the objects of tourism into being. It creates desire through the social status
accorded to travel and the markers of class distinction inserted into a hierarchy of travel manifest
in the distinction between traveler and tourist, provides people with the conceptual apparatus
through which to interpret their experiences and quite often structures their experience by
creating iconic objects associated with particular places. Travel writing, in other words, provides
a textual map to navigate the material experience of place. It brings people and place into being
through its own discursive mechanisms that cannot be dissociated from the prior ideological
representations grounded in the value hierarchies of colonialism, value hierarchies that continue
to maintain inequitable social and environmental relations.