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THE ROLE OF THE TRAVEL WRITER

by

Phil Voysey*

Abstract

Phil Voysey takes us on a journey through the world of travel-writing, demonstrating how the culture of the writer impacts on her or his perspectives and judgments, the limitations inevitably imposed by fleeting acquaintance with the subject, and a failure to question preconceptions and prejudices. Voysey argues that the travel writer has an obligation to do more than merely entertain or focus on the exotic, and to open the minds of readers to both the complexities and the commonalities of the world.

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Series Editor: Ian Kelly (iankelly@picknowl.com.au)

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** Phil Voysey has worked and travelled widely in Africa, Latin America and Asia, and these experiences have inspired his writings in travel, journalism and fiction. He has Masters Degrees in journalism and creative writing and currently works as an English teacher and cross-cultural communication trainer. He is also working on a number of writing projects, and presents his stories and original songs in Sydney and Blue Mountains venues.*

THE ROLE OF THE TRAVEL WRITER

Phil Voysey

Introduction

Good travel writing should be “fatal to bigotry, racism and narrow mindedness” (Mark Twain).

A condor rides the back of bull in a remote village in the Peruvian Andes. Locals with no bullfighting skills but too much courage or alcohol rush out to confront the beasts and flee at the first hint of danger. It is the defining moment of the Yawar Fiesta - The Festival of Blood. Indigenous culture represented by the condor dominating the Spanish invader, the bull, while locals look on with a mixture of dread and hysteria. The condor will ultimately be set free to glide towards the mountains and disappear into infinity signifying that Quechua culture still lives in the land of the Incas.

The scene has all the elements of a good travel story: an exotic location, weirdness and brutality, comedy, beauty, pathos, historical symbolism. Travel writing thrives on these elements and has done since colonial times when the writings of travellers, traders, explorers and colonial bureaucrats were a principal means of ‘knowing the world’. (‘Knowing’ often meant demeaning and patronising of non-Western cultures, portraying them as primitive and inferior, a theme I’ll return to later.) However, with the advent of air travel, mass tourism and television there are few undiscovered places, only unexplored angles on old stories and exotic destinations.

Clearly travel writers have a responsibility to inform and entertain their readers. Good travel writing - and here I’m talking about literary travel writing rather than the advertorial style of travel writing that appears in travel supplements of newspapers - will take readers on the journey with the writer, it will inspire a spirit of inquiry and adventure, will stimulate their imaginations. I would argue, though, that travel writers should go further than this and aim to promote an understanding of the deeper political, historical and cultural realities of a country and its people. Adopting the words of Mark Twain, good travel writing should be “fatal to bigotry, racism and narrow mindedness”.

Before exploring this issue it is worth presenting an overview of why people travel, and write about travel, and how travel literature historically has portrayed other cultures, specifically non-Western cultures.

Motivations and bias

Much travel writing has been demeaning and patronising to non-Western cultures.

The motivations for travel and writing about the experience are as varied as the individuals who travel. Nevertheless, writers have identified several key motivations.

Australian travel writer, John Borthwick depicts the journey as ‘the creation myth of each individual, who in travelling and writing, affirms their existence or being and the essential marginality of that experience’(1991:82). American writer David Plante talking about one of the most celebrated contemporary travellers, Bruce Chatwin, said, ‘I think Bruce was an English innocent longing for strange experiences, with the hope that the strangeness, like a secret disclosed, might contain a revelation’ (cited in Borthwick, 1991:81). And it was Susan Sontag who posited the spiritual and intellectual malaise of Western society as being at the heart of what takes the traveller to exotic places.

Most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness. The felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change has led every sensitive modern mind to the recording of some kind of nausea, of intellectual vertigo. And the only way to cure this spiritual nausea seems to be, at least initially, to exacerbate it. Modern thought is pledged to a kind of Hegelianism: seeking itself in its Other. Europe seeks itself in the exotic - in Asia, in the Middle East among pre-literate peoples, in a mythic America The Other is experienced as a harsh purification of the self (Borthwick, 1991:80).

This search for the other has taken many forms: diary, reportage, historical narrative, essays, autobiography, even using fictional characters, and often combining these genres. Although modern twentieth century travel writing tends to consist of first person narratives of ordinary and extraordinary journeys, the ways in which these journeys can be rendered are as variable as the novel. Travel writing can be light and comical (Bill Bryson), gritty and pointed (V.S.Naipaul’s ‘Indian Civilisation’), fragmented (Bruce Chatwin’s ‘In Patagonia’), poetic and mystical (Peter Matthiessen’s ‘The Snow Leopard’) or plain ridiculous, what Michael Palin calls the “crossing the Andes by frog” style of travel.

From a historical perspective it can be argued that much travel writing, indeed literature in general, has been demeaning and patronising to non-Western cultures. Captives of their own cultural framework Western writers have tended to seize upon the weird and the different, thereby entering into fictional worlds where reality is romanticised, trivialised, decontextualised and the mundane greys of the everyday are overwhelmed with splashes of vibrant colour, exotic scents and psychic discord.

This is particularly true of travel writing of the colonial period (late eighteenth to mid twentieth century) much of which portrayed non-Western cultures as inferior. Colonial domination of the past and Western economic domination of the present are thus evident as much in the texts of writers and administrators as in the aid budgets and investment records of former colonies.

Edward Said, an American Arab intellectual renowned for his book, *Orientalism*, an analysis of the way oriental cultures have been constructed by Western literature, argues that there was (and is) a coherent aim running through much of this literature; to restructure the conceptualisation of the East in the interests of Western domination. In Said’s analysis the Orient became “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences ... (and) a tableau of living queerness” (cited in

Mills,1991:86). According to this view, the body of texts analysed by Said have operated as an ideological prop for European and, more recently, American colonialism (Knight,1997:93).

Writers such as David Spurr have modified Said's theory by arguing, not that the colonial literature was ideologically coherent, but that it consistently applied a series of ideological principles to the colonial context regardless of the writer's ideology (1993:39). Spurr argues that the colonised world is debased, trivialised, aestheticised and romanticised but rarely presented as it is.

The colonised world as the uncivilised debased 'dark void' is a common theme in writing of the colonial era. Perhaps the best example of this is Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' where Kurtz submits to his own destructive desires and 'goes native'. Chinua Achebe writing about Conrad's work comments that the representation of Africa as "a metaphysical minefield devoid of all recognisable humanity, into which Europeans enter at their peril, was and still is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination"(cited in Spurr,1993: 91). In Kipling's work, based mainly on his experiences in British controlled India, "colonial people are held in contempt for their lack of civility, loved for their willingness to acquire it and ridiculed when they have too much" (Spurr, 1993:86). Spurr argues that this ambivalence exists in modern writing where the desire among non-Western people for Western style consumption is seen as a natural aspiration towards a better life while, at the same time, being seen as a weakness. There is a certain amount of contempt for non-Western peoples who seem ready to abandon their traditions for Johnny Walker Scotch, Hollywood movies, Nike shoes and caps, blue jeans and Coca Cola T-shirts (p.86).

Robin Gerster (1996) observes a similar phenomenon in contemporary Australian writing on Asia. He argues that Australian travel writers' erstwhile exoticisation of Asia has been replaced by a paternalistic cynicism towards the region which bemoans the homogenisation of global culture and indulges in nostalgia for traditional values that have been swallowed by Western consumerism. Frustrated by their inability to find the foreign or to experience the romance of adventurers of the past, contemporary travel writers emphasise the terminal tedium and occasional horrors of travel rather than its lessons and wonders. For example India, the traveller's nirvana in the 1970s, is likely to be written off as a hellhole. The new Australian paternalism, Gerster argues, also focuses on the foibles and failures of our regional partners: human rights abuses in Indonesia; child prostitution and sex tourism in the Philippines and Thailand; polluted cities; rainforest destruction in Borneo.

The demand for 'authenticity', whatever that is, requires that the past be preserved, neatly bottled, framed or sculpted and then sold at give-away prices. This demand ignores the reality that cultures are dynamic and in a constant state of flux, both because of tensions from within and contact with other cultures. Travellers (writers) who seek the 'authentic', unblemished, uncontaminated experience are, as Claude Levi Straus wrote 30 years ago, hastening after a vanished reality located somewhere in the past (cited in Gerster, 1996: 359).

The trivialising of a culture by making it subservient to the writer's inner journey is another ideological principle. According to Spurr (1993), the writer, in playing out his own 'spiritual' drama, by focusing on the self, presents the world in which he travels as an insubstantial backdrop (1993). He argues that the complex reality of countries such as

India and Nepal become trivialised through perceiving them as enchanted, exotic lands of 'spirituality', poverty and death.

The aestheticisation of poverty, treating it as an object of beauty or idealising it as the way to human fulfilment - 'they may be poor but they are happy' - is seen as no less patronising. Native peoples are portrayed as pure, simple, governed by natural laws, living in harmony with nature, living in a state of freedom. Spurr argues that Dominique Lapierre, in his book the 'City of Joy', takes this fetishisation of poverty further. The slum dwellers of one community in Calcutta come to represent a state of beatitude in which the spirit transcends the corruption of the diseased and hungry flesh and the slum becomes a model of human community.

In these slums people actually put love and mutual support into practice. They know how to be tolerant of all creeds and castes, how to show charity towards beggars, cripples, lepers and even the insane. Here the weak are helped not trampled upon. Orphans are constantly adopted by their neighbours and old people were cared for and revered by their parents (Lapierre, cited in Spurr, 1993: 133).

Spurr sees this idealisation as a type of patronising nostalgia for Western values that have been lost, while the 'joy' of life in the slums of Calcutta serves to compensate for the great inequality between the Third World and the modernised West. A Western audience can feel compassion for the poor without having to confront the political and economic contexts which have created poverty.

Whether this colonial discourse is seen as ideologically consistent (Said) or a series of ideological principles (Spurr), it implies a coherence both within a vast body of literature over a period of more than a hundred years and at the level of text. However, critics of Said argue that the notion of coherence across a diverse spectrum of travel writing is problematic. Sarah Mills (1991), in critiquing Said's theory of Orientalism, argues that a discourse that developed over two millennia cannot be seen as coherent and consistent. Furthermore, she stresses that it is important to understand the contexts in which the texts were written and to distinguish between those written during and after the colonial period. As Mills argues, the 'meaning of travel texts cannot be deduced from an analysis of the text itself, the writing has to be considered within the discursive frameworks within which it was produced and received' (p.199). Writers do not write in a vacuum. Prevailing economic, political and social thinking, as well as personal factors, all impinge on the writing process and conspire against the notion of coherence at any level.

The very nature of writing about another culture entails a heterogeneous ... discourse, marked by gaps and inconsistencies ... (T)ravel writing is itself ... subject to such a wide range of constraints and motivations that it is almost inevitable that it will not present a unified vision of a country (Porter, cited in Mills, 1993: 54).

Critics influenced by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault argue that any piece of writing will be interpreted in different ways by different readers and therefore the idea

that it has a meaning or single interpretation is fallacious. Texts are created by the unstable identity of the writer - writers are not coherent entities - and are worked on and interpreted by the unstable reader. Words have potentially multiple meanings, references and connotations. Thus, it is argued that a text, far from being coherent in its meaning, is an 'illusory textualisation of an illusory construct' (Mills, 1993: 36). This is not to say that texts do not have meaning but rather to argue that this meaning is not coherent, that it is fragmentary and shifting according to reader interpretations. Barthes captures this shifting, multi-dimensional nature of reader perception in the metaphor of the reader as someone going for a walk through a valley.

What he perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from heterogeneous disconnected substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, subtle explosions of sound, delicate birds' cries, children's voices from the other side of the valley, movements, gestures and clothing of inhabitants close by or far off; all these incidents are half identifiable; they issue from known codes, but their combination is unique and grounds the walk in a difference which cannot be repeated except as difference (cited in Knight, 1997: 198).

Just as the walker will experience the same walk differently a second time, so too the reader will interpret a text differently on a second reading. Barthes could have used the analogy of travel. No traveller will experience the same place the same way twice. Places and cultures are in a constant state of transformation. History is in a constant state of revision. Exoticism - an illusion that only exists in the mind of the outsider - is ephemeral. Stereotypes are rendered meaningless by contact with real people. The best travel writing recognises this.

Case Study: The Phil Voysey Cusco experience

I have visited Cusco, Peru, three times - the first as a traveller living with a local family and engaged in a sometimes humiliating struggle to learn Spanish, the second to work on a project for street children, and the third for a brief two-month period to research a book. The three visits spanned twelve years and a turbulent period in Peru's history, dominated by economic collapse, political upheaval and the violence of the Shining Path. My experience of Cusco has been like a difficult love affair: initial romantic infatuation giving way to frustration, confusion and moments of anger and incredulity as the complex reality of the relationship sets in, subsiding with time and distance to an easy acceptance of the place for all its virtues and faults.

This was a challenging experience, one of contrasts. There was the shock of the cold showers in the house, mitigated by the warmth of the family. The humiliation of those first months of learning Spanish when I had the linguistic age of a toddler prefacing a surge in self-esteem once a basic proficiency had been obtained. My Peruvian girlfriend at the time conformed to my fantasy of the Latin lover. She greeted me each day with love songs sung softly into my ear and demanded frequent and public demonstrations of affection, which I found difficult to meet. She would respond by calling me ugly and old,

and she would grab my moustache, my nose, my ear until I became irritated, at which point she was satisfied. Any display of emotion was better than none.

Several months after moving in I had a conversation with a traveller as we were walking down Avenida Sol towards the Post Office. 'The people here are so spiritual', she said. I remember thinking what a ridiculous comment it was. What does 'spiritual' mean? Did she mean 'religious'? Or 'mystical', as in the New Age spirituality which had been grafted on to Inca history and used to give solid blocks of granite an 'energy', a mystique, and to attribute all sorts of cosmic influences to Inca structures? Or did she mean they were friendly people?

If it were the latter, I had to disagree. The family apart, I had found Cuscenans to be reserved more than friendly. The history of invasion and conquest has taught Andean people to be wary of the outsider. Also I had found aspects of Peruvian society to be harsh. You only had to take account of the numbers of children living and working in the streets to realise this. Her comment struck me as trite and meaningless. It started me thinking that 'spiritual' had to be one of the most abused adjectives in the traveller's lexicon. Not only that, it is self-condemnatory. The spirituality of the other stands out in contrast to our seeming lack, as if we who live in wealthy, materialistic societies cannot also be spiritual beings. In romanticising other cultures, we can slip into the stereotypes others may have of us.

I left Cusco after ten months with the romance of the place dulled but still intact. I returned a year later to help an American friend set up a home for street children. This gave me a very different perspective on Cusco. My diary of the time is a litany of struggle and negativity. This was due in no small way to the nature of the work. Living with street kids thrust me into a role I was not ready for. Personal space and freedom were at a premium. Dealing with the physical and emotional problems of homeless children, in a culture I little understood, was draining, though sometimes enormously satisfying, even exhilarating.

At the same time, the everyday realities of life in Peru were being projected in sharp focus. There were the routine blackouts and water shortages. The reams of paper work that had to be forced through a reluctant and slow-moving bureaucracy to get the project registered. The seeming indifference of most people, including the Catholic Church, to the plight of the street children. The understandable but frustrating suspicion towards us from the locals who were all too familiar with child trafficking rackets that masqueraded as child protection or adoption agencies. Inflation that climbed steadily and then soared through the roof, pushing prices up by 300 percent overnight, precipitating hoarding and long queues for basic foodstuffs such as rice, cooking oil and sugar, and leading to protests and looting. The countless stories of police brutality and government corruption. The sad stories, too, of mothers selling their children for the equivalent of \$2.50. All this against a backdrop of Shining Path violence and military atrocities being played out in another part of the country. This was very different from and more complex and challenging than the Cusco I experienced a year earlier.

The point here is that to achieve an understanding of a culture and its people needs time and patience, and a willingness to engage with the everyday, to experience the mundane as well as the exotic.

Getting closer to the truth

The best quality travel writing, regardless of the cultural background of the writer, has the potential to transform readers' perceptions

Paul Theroux eschews official travel, arguing that

Nothing in the world is more misleading than the sponsored visit, the press junket, the journalists' pool, the fact-finding mission. The subtext of the official visit is always tendentious, and it is laziness, self-importance and greed that impel the official visitor to accept the auspices and lap up the lies. The point of the red carpet is to obscure the truth (cited in Financial Review Online, May 30, 2003).

Theroux's approach is in stark contrast to that of Bill Bryson who has made his reputation as a humorist, poking fun at locals and their customs, and in so doing sometimes stirring up animosity. Of course by taking aim at his own culture and other Western cultures he is also laughing at himself.

Talking recently about a book on science he has written, Bryson refers to a new found desire to 'get it right' that he experienced while researching his book on Australia. In the interview he observes that he could have written a much funnier book about Australia had he whipped through the place in a month. Instead he took time to 'get it right', and as a result produced a book that was fairer but less humorous.

This is an astounding admission. That it is possible to travel anywhere for a month and then expect to write a book that comes close to capturing the realities of its people and culture is ludicrous. And that he has only just discovered the need to 'get it right' is equally astonishing. Not that it is possible to 'get it right', since there is no single truth or reality that can be faithfully represented, but indeed as many truths as there are writers. But a travel writer can and should apply the journalist's creed of fairness and accuracy, seeking to buttress his/her subjective observations and experiences against solid research into culture and history.

Post colonial commentators often criticise Western travel writers for writing and selecting information according to their own cultural framework. This seems unfair. How can they do otherwise? Furthermore, the clash of cultural perspectives is almost inevitable by virtue of the writing process itself. Derrida sees oppositional forces as being at the heart of all writing: 'being and nothingness, native and its Other, good and evil, innocence and perversity, consciousness and non-consciousness, liberty and servitude, life and death' (cited in Spurr, 1993:93). Writing is a series of distinctions erected across the otherwise empty space of the page (or computer screen). In this sense Derrida maintains that the writer, not just the Western writer, is the 'original and ultimate coloniser, conjuring the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representation' (Spurr, 1993:93).

If writing itself is a process of colonising the mind then questions of who is writing become less important than what is being written, than the text itself. Notions of whether the insider who has the same cultural reference point and language as the people being written about can render reality more accurately, more faithfully than the outsider become largely irrelevant.

Here it is worth making a few general points. As mentioned above, the idea that there is a reality that can be faithfully rendered is ludicrous. There are many subjective realities and as Foucault maintains, readers have at least an equal part in creating meaning. Perhaps the problem is in the quest for definitive works and in the mythical notion of cultural authenticity. In the twentieth century cultures are a hybrid mix of many different cultures. Individual world views are complex and will be influenced by a range of factors of which family background, socio-economic status, religion, and urban or rural background are just some. No writer represents a culture or people in totality.

How then do we distinguish the local writer from the foreign? For example, it is unlikely that the middle class writer from Lima, Peru is any less an outsider in the Andes than the Westerner just by virtue of being Peruvian. In fact one could argue that a Western writer with a good knowledge of Quechua culture and language but none of the baggage of Peru's history of racism towards indigenous Peruvians may be better positioned to write fairly about that culture.

But the point here is not that one viewpoint is more valid, more truthful or even fairer than another but rather that they are different. Once we accept that there are no unified perspectives or definitive truths then the Western writer can sit beside writers of other cultures with neither seeking to claim the moral high ground. Ultimately it is specious to place too much importance on who is writing but rather on the quality of what is being written. It needs to be stressed that the best quality travel writing, regardless of the cultural background of the writer, has the potential to transform readers' perceptions of other cultures and liberate them from paternalistic ways of seeing.

Issue in Focus: Photography

The caricature tourist is almost invariably identified by his or her camera. As Horne (1992: 112) notes, '... belief in the transcendent reality of the photograph has been as important to tourism as the transport revolution that started with the railways. How can we imagine tourism without it? The camera authenticates our journey. It proves we were there.'

Horne traces the evolution of travel illustration from sketches, lithographs and engravings of earlier times to the invention of the Kodak and its establishment as an essential element of the family holiday in the 1920s. A more recent review would have to take into account the emergence of the digital camera - smaller (and therefore less visible), relatively inexpensive, and even easier to use.

The photo stop is now a feature of all guided tours, and it is a common practice among tourists to take photographs of scenes already featured in travel brochures and literature, sometimes enlivened by incorporation of fellow travellers in the foreground. Despite the claim that 'the camera does not lie', it is clear that there is much selectivity in what is photographed, and it is now easier than ever to enhance the images and eliminate

undesired inclusions.

It all seems pretty harmless, but is it? Many travellers have experienced occasions when use of the camera has made them feel intrusive and uncomfortable, particularly when the subject is a person or persons from the local community or a private setting. Travellers are invited to consider the following:

- Rejection of the camera and concentration on intense observation and visual memory.
 - The views (and possible legalities involved) of the people being photographed. Seek their permission.
 - The ethics of using long-distance lenses to photograph people without their knowledge. This is still an intrusion into their privacy.
 - Using a local guide to identify the best photographic sites and to act as a mediator with the local people (and to allow the traveller to be photographed).
 - The disappointment which a subject might feel if a promise to forward a copy of the print is not kept.
 - The justness of a request for payment by a subject being photographed. They are contributing to the visitor experience.
 - Requests, especially by children, to be photographed or to take photographs.
 - The circumstances in which a photograph is taken. For example, people may resent being photographed from coach windows or in private household activities.
 - The extent to which photographs reflect stereotypical images. Look for differences.
- It is clear that the principle to be applied is consideration for others. Travellers should not use the camera in circumstances where they would not wish to be the focus of such attention.

'Quality' in travel writing

The travel writer has the opportunity and the responsibility to bridge the gap between cultures.

The notion of 'best quality' is highly subjective and almost impossible to define. It is perhaps more appropriate to examine the features of quality travel writing which distinguish it from that which is merely entertaining, informative and 'well-written' and look at some examples.

Firstly, quality travel writing rejects notions of cultural authenticity and sees that every society is subject to the influence of others. Travel writers have the opportunity to negotiate the border regions between what we think of as one culture and another and to be aware of their own values colouring their perceptions and judgements. In this way cultural conditioning can become an asset in understanding the spread and impact of Western consumerism on other cultures and in communicating with Western readers.

Secondly, quality writing is well researched and places people and events within a cultural, political, and historical context. It neither fixes people to an unchanging past nor an ever-present now. This means addressing the impact of colonialism and continually

questioning not only the Western tradition, but non-Western traditions and their transformations in a post colonial world.

Finally, travel writers should be participants as well as observers, capable both of emotional engagement and intellectual detachment. Their writing should reflect attempts to go beyond dehumanising stereotypes and form relationships with individuals. Though they may fall short of genuine empathy, of being able to experience the world in the same way as locals, they will attempt to convey how the world looks through non-Western eyes.

Jan Brokken's 'The Rainbird - A Central African Journey' is a good example of the three features in application. The book is a series of meticulously researched short travelogues which place the central African republic of Gabon at the centre of its French colonial past. Brokken takes the reader on a journey that spans the exploration of the Congo interior in the 1600s, the advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth century and the present, introducing the reader to a variety of individuals and perspectives from early explorers to present day locals and expatriates. By placing people and events into a historical context Brokken suggests not only that Gabon is a country shaped by its colonial past but that the colonial past still lives.

We passed the Hatton and Cookson warehouse, and even though that company currently deals in electrical equipment and televisions rather than ivory, tobacco, gunpowder and brandy, I found it just as strange as seeing a modern department store in Jakarta with a Dutch East India Company sign above the door. When we walked past a bakery a bit later and I smelled the aroma of warm croissants, I knew for a fact that Gabon couldn't quite relinquish its colonial past (p227).

One of the strengths of Brokken's book is that he does not attempt to present his own unified perspective of Gabon but rather allows a variety of characters, historical and present-day, to tell their stories, while pushing his own persona to the background. We meet expatriates such as the local beer truck driver in Djole who describes Gabonese as 'lazy, suspicious and envious by nature' and made dull by 'alcohol, inbreeding, venereal disease and a total lack of hygiene' (p144), and Alan Kapriski, a Polish miner who thinks the locals are 'O.K.' but who is struggling to come to terms with the loneliness and oppressiveness of life in the jungle. We encounter local guide, Charlie, who listens to BB King and is indifferent to his tribal history, and Ibinga and Massande, descendants of the cannibalistic Fang tribe who are passionate about their tribal heritage. Brokken balances his own stereotypical horror at the savage cannibalism of the Fang with Massande's perspective.

Listen and try to understand what I'm saying. The old people fought their way through the jungle. Their lives consisted of fear, and they were always on the lookout for ways to keep that fear within bounds. They did that in thousands of different ways. It's not fair to take one of those traditions and take it out of context. When you look at it as a whole my ancestors deserve respect. They survived under unduly hostile conditions. Along with famines, influenza and smallpox epidemics sometimes wiped out a third of

the tribe. Sure, they occasionally turned a blind eye (to incest) to keep the tribe going, and they stole women from other tribes too. You can condemn that, but you would have to ignore how terrible life in the jungle really was. To me, the important thing is that once their migration was over, the old people swore off the 'evus', the magic power that prompted them to commit acts of cannibalism. There was no longer any reason for that kind of brutality (pp257-258).

By exploring different viewpoints across a span of 400 years, Brokken brings depth and complexity to the Gabon that he presents to the reader. It is a place of many stories and often conflicting realities. For example, the terror of the jungle that creates loneliness in the European is precisely what creates intimacy among Africans. Ibinga tells him:

There are two Africas: one in the daytime, the other at night. When the moon comes out the people huddle close together and talk, to forget the ominous rustling of the leaves; that nocturnal Africa is ruled by the shiver of fear, and that is precisely what makes for a deep sense of intimacy (p254).

It is these contrasting perspectives and the depth of research which balance the writer's occasional lapses into overgeneralisation. He writes about Africa as if it were a single entity, not 52 countries with thousands of tribal groups, all with distinct histories.

This Africa in no way resembles the Africa I knew from earlier trips: it was not frenzied, magnanimous, or exuberant, nor was it grim, hideous or defiant; it was silent, subdued, mysterious and above all lonely (p117).

And he evokes stereotypical fears of the jungle:

From the people you have nothing to fear: the Gabonese wouldn't dream of bothering you, they're too busy averting their own misfortune with their own matchless rituals; it's the jungle you hear moving in close with a cry. The scream of a monkey, the screech of a nightbird cuts through you like a knife, and then the silence comes back hissing in your ear (p123).

But at least we know that these are only the writer's views in a book of many truths. A breadth and depth of perspective is precisely what is missing from Dervla Murphy's 'Eight Feet in the Andes'. Murphy sets out with her nine-year-old daughter and a donkey to retrace the steps of the Spanish Conquistadors' 1300 kilometres through the Andes from Cajamarca in the north of Peru to Cusco in the south. It is a trek of physical endurance and self-discovery, and Murphy is constantly able to laugh at herself plodding through the vastness of the Andes at over 3000 metres, often without adequate provisions, sometimes getting lost and with only passable Spanish and no Quechua - the indigenous language of the Andes - and reflect on her privileged position as outsider.

Our treks are just playing with hardship. When we go hungry for a few days, or endure extremes of heat or cold or exhaustion, these are no more than Interesting Experiences. The certainty of plenty of comfort lies before us and we cannot begin to imagine what it feels like to go hungry and cold for a lifetime (p241).

While we can admire Murphy's courage as virtually a lone woman traveller in a harsh environment, and be charmed by her self-mocking humour and honesty, her perspectives on Andean culture are shallow at best. She observes this culture from a distance, or more accurately looks down from the mountain peaks, but never goes down into the valleys to attempt to explain the historical or cultural context in which she finds herself. Though she does interweave her narrative with the story of the Spanish conquest, this throws no light on modern day Quechua culture. Her daughter makes the astute observation that, 'If you want to find out what Peru is like you can't spend all your time where there aren't any people' (p159). *Touché*.

Her wish to keep to the trails and avoid the world of roads and cars further underlines her unwillingness to engage with modern Andean life. As a result, while she is lyrical, at times rapturous, in her descriptions of Andean landscape, she lapses into stereotypes when describing her brief encounters with Andean people. Quechua Indians are described as elusive, introverted and gloomy. Murphy is constantly disconcerted by their aloofness and lack of hospitality. She comments that Indian people take them in and feed and clothe them but are not interested in who they are. 'Why were we not invited into the kitchen?' she asks more than once. Contrast this with Henry Shukman's observations of Quechuan hospitality in his book, 'Sons of the Moon': 'Quechua hospitality to strangers is so customary that it comes with no sense of obligation. It is an obligation' (1990; 168).

The reader can't help but wonder why Murphy's hosts should be interested in her or why they should bother to try and communicate, given Murphy's limited Spanish and lack of Quechua. It is no wonder she is viewed with suspicion. The closest she gets to an Indian perspective are the views of a European teacher living in the Andes.

In her view a problem common to all Andean countries is an obsessional mutual mistrust which prevents communities (not to mention the various regions and races) from working together and makes it almost impossible to run the Co-ops efficiently ... (T)he lack of hospitality (is seen as) an extension of this mistrust: campesinos won't admit unknown gringos to their homes lest we might steal. A shattering thought; I would never have arrived at that explanation (p253).

One European view is used to justify another. However, in the absence of the sort of varied and researched perspective that Brokken provides, many of Murphy's judgments are stereotypical and at times racist. She states that 'one is rarely impressed by the Indians' IQ' and quotes a Bolivian mestizo, Frank Tamayo, a passionate defender of Andean Indians: 'Historically the Indian must be judged a small intelligence and a powerful will' (p121). In contrast, mestizos (of mixed Spanish Indian blood) are 'more outgoing, alert, well-mannered, well-built, well dressed and well organised' (p56).

Spanish efficiency is contrasted with Indian inefficiency. Neat, straight Spanish streets are compared to campesino yards which are 'conspicuously uncared for'. She observes that farms were better managed in colonial days and modern Indian cooperative farms are a wasteful shambles. Finally she concludes that 'Andean Indians have reached the end of the evolutionary road and are a race without a future' (p170).

In Murphy's book she opens many doors without going through them and so only allows us to peer in through smoky windows at Andean culture, which is at no stage given a cultural or historical context. She hints at the role of Europe in impoverishing Peru but closes the door very quickly on this line of thinking. Part of the problem is with the linear structure of the book and its diary form. The reader has a sense of a journey that is lacking in meanderings, lacking in different perspectives, lacking in careful research.

Contrast this with Peter Matthiessen's 'The Snow Leopard' where the author takes a similar trek through the Himalayas. The book is written in diary form, similar to Murphy's, but the difference is that Matthiessen gives his account depth and breadth by meandering at will through the world of Buddhism and the ecology of the Himalayas, describing the wildlife and vegetation in remarkable detail, and introducing his family life, in particular the recent death of his wife, giving the narrative emotional potency. And this is what brings it alive. Unlike Murphy he does not trek alone, and is dependent on local sherpas through two months of difficult trekking. One of the team, Tutken Sherpa, who bears all manner of hardships with calmness and equanimity, has, the author observes, by the end of the journey become the author's spiritual guide. Murphy however, sticks far too vigorously to the trail and her own perspective, and the reader is left hoping that she would get lost, or at least lose herself in the experience. By the end of the book we get a sense that the values she started the trek with are still intact. Matthiessen on the other hand has been profoundly changed.

A change is taking place, some painful growth, as in a snake during the shedding of its skin - dull, irritable, without appetite, dragging about the stale shreds of a former life, near blinded by the old dead scale in the new eye. It is difficult to adjust because I do not know who is adjusting; I am no longer that old person and not yet the new (p273).

It is Robyn Davidson's willingness (*Desert Places*, 1997) to have her soul laid bare that makes her account of her travels in Rajasthan with a tribe of nomads so compelling. She does not so much engage the culture as plunge naked and head first into it. Romantic notions of desert travel are quickly obliterated by the harsh realities of nomadic life: the ever present heat and exhaustion of desert travel, a diet of camel's milk and chapatis, a lack of water, hours of boredom, a lack of privacy, all exacerbated by her inability to communicate effectively with her hosts. She feels deeply about what she experiences lurching from love to hate, from one conflicting emotion to another. She is distressed by the poverty, disgusted by the widespread corruption, angered by the violence of everyday life, despairing of things ever changing, yet full of admiration for many of the people she meets.

Here I had met the best people, the best kinds of people I had ever known. People whose depth, warmth and dignity, whose spread and reach, made westerners seem pinched by comparison (pinched between the finger of God and the thumb of Satan). The capacity for joy here, the gratitude to life no matter what hand it had dealt you. The openness to and respect for the beingness of another as if all the souls of the world had met many times before. In that sense I felt more at home here, more in love with life than I ever had in England. Whatever I thought about India I would find myself, a minute later thinking the opposite with equal conviction. Not for a moment did it allow relief from the discomforts of paradox. Not for a moment did it allow indifference (p203).

Davidson's lapse into stereotype here - the warm dignified Indians versus pinched shallow westerners - is balanced in other parts of her book by her honest reactions to other people she meets. She doesn't mind expressing dislike, especially for the patronising manner of camel driver Chutra, but is full of admiration for the 'magnanimous', 'noble' Narendra, the local politician who has organised her trip and lends support along the way.

One of the strengths of Davidson's writing is her constant awareness of her limitations as an outsider - 'Real travel would be to see the world, for even an instant with another's eyes' (p152). Some of her judgments, though clichéd - 'India taught you passivity or it drove you mad' (p175), India as disorder, hopelessness, unchanging - are balanced against honest self reflection:

Where does cultural relativity stop? What morality could be universally applied? When I felt outrage was I simply a cipher for cultural prejudice? At what point would I be allowed to move from the role of uncritical guest to participant with a right to speak, the right to express anger? (p200).

Davidson's struggle with her foreignness and the very purpose of the journey remain unresolved at the end of the book.

Everything I had done here was fraudulent and absurd. I knew nothing about the Rabari and, even if I did, it would mean nothing to them, make no difference to them. I had understood nothing of where I was. And I would perpetuate the fraudulence by producing yet another useless artefact for western consumption, another bit of noise for a culture drowning in noise - an article for a glossy magazine with beautiful photos of beautiful India, beautiful noble Rabari people so that people could sit in comfort in their homes or doctor's waiting rooms and not see (p272).

Davidson's revelation is a grasp of reality that is more truthful than her initial romanticism. But in her attempts to straddle the cultural gap the reader can't help but wonder why she doesn't attempt to place her experience in a broader historical and political context. There is no mention of the impact of colonialism in creating the India she loves and hates or how India has come to terms with its place in the Western world

since independence in 1947. And so the reader is sometimes left with tasty but unsatisfying morsels of moral indignation.

The disgust I felt, the rage, was not at India but with humanity. If India was so terrible, so was where I came from. Worse, because it was so spoilt, so comfortable, so oblivious and that comfort purchased at the expense of countries like this one. Each country leeching another and, with all the countries, groups of humans leeching other groups of humans down the pyramid, until you got to the very bottom, the little toy Rabari men. Fucked. (p271).

This passage does more than frustrate the reader. In describing the ‘little toy Rabari men’ as ‘fucked’, Davidson turns them into powerless victims who have no future. Murphy does the same in consigning Andean Indians to the scrap heap of history. In trying to accentuate the voraciousness of Western consumerism and demonstrate sympathy for the affected cultures both writers deny these cultures their inherent resilience and adaptability and fail to examine the ways in which they are transforming themselves in a post colonial, post cold war world. Sympathy is a poor substitute for understanding and to concede the triumph of Western culture is to enter into a similar conceit to the ideological pronouncement of the ‘end of history’ and ignore the fundamental dynamism of culture.

That both Davidson and Murphy enter into such a conceit is not so much a confirmation of any ideological position on their part but merely to emphasise the tension that exists between the acknowledgement of inequality and the affirmation of difference. Both writers can reflect on the glaring inequalities between their own cultures and those in which they find themselves but do not explore how the Rabari and Andean people might be able to absorb the impact of Western culture, both positive and negative - in the two books the impact is almost totally negative - within their own cultural framework. And so the two writers are locked into a way of seeing these cultures which is defined by structures of inequality, and which makes these cultures subjects of victimisation.

To achieve new ways of seeing the non-Western world, Western travel writers must combine emotional involvement with the detachment of the scholar. They must be participants who are willing, like Davidson, to be vulnerable, to feel joy and wonderment, to get angry, frustrated, distressed, disgusted, and yet be able to place their judgments and perceptions beside those of others and within the broader framework of history as Brokken so skillfully does. At a time of globalisation and mass tourism, and at a time when terrorism has cast a pall of fear over travel and reinforced old stereotypes about the developing world, the Islamic world in particular, as being dangerous, the travel writer has the opportunity and the responsibility to bridge the gap between cultures, to continually question not only the Western tradition but also learn about non-Western traditions and their transformations in a post-colonial world.

Perhaps the entry point as travel writers into what Derrida calls that ‘indeterminate space where meaning has yet to be decided’ is in forgetting who we are and where we come from, in unlearning much of what we know and being comfortable with not knowing, in dispensing with the arrogance of thinking we can ‘get it right’, while placing the highest value on balance, fairness and accuracy. Only then might we rediscover the

wonders in cultures that are supposedly 'in decline'. Only then might a vision of the world be achieved in which difference is celebrated rather than used as a motivation for fear and prejudice.

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Action Agenda: The traveller as witness

Many travellers keep a record of their experiences, but most of these are seen only by friends and relatives. However, on occasion, traveller reports have a more serious purpose.

An example of this is given by Schwartz (1991), who describes efforts by groups of travellers to ensure that events in Tibet in the late 1980s did not remain hidden from the rest of the world. The program commenced with travellers present in Lhasa during the nationalist demonstrations of 1987 and the imposition of order by armed police. There were some fatalities among the Tibetans, arrests, and confiscation of film and photographs taken by foreign observers. A number of these observers decided to prepare an accurate account of the event, to be passed on to Western journalists. Although the participants changed, these efforts continued until the declaration of martial law in Lhasa in 1989.

Those involved were individual travellers who, unlike group travellers, were relatively free to move about and mingle with the Tibetan community. They stayed in the country for extended periods, using locally owned accommodation, made their own transport arrangements, and pursued engagement and 'grassroots' experiences. They included some with backgrounds (mainly European) in journalism, photography, human rights, law, languages, and medicine, and often with useful contacts in their home countries. There was some disagreement over the level of activism deemed appropriate, the desire for perceived objectivity and the need to protect the identities of Tibetan dissidents. Nonetheless, specific tasks were allocated and channels developed for delivery of the reports to foreign correspondents in other countries.

Schwartz identifies a number of factors contributing to involvement. These include:

- a view that status as foreigners provided some protection from the excesses of the security forces;
- attributes such as self-confidence and independence;
- the desire to be a traveller rather than a tourist; and
- the opportunities presented to experience a 'real-life adventure'.

The author concludes by submitting that

Individual travellers may have increasingly important roles to play in closed societies that limit access to information and deal with unrest by expelling professional information gatherers such as journalists. ... These governments may find it far more difficult and costly to restrict the movements of travellers than to restrict the movement of journalists. It may turn out in the future that travellers, as a mobile international community, will once again come to play socially significant roles as

observers, witnesses, and gatherers of information (p.603).

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