

Travel Writing Unbound

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Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature, by Alison Russell.
New York: Palgrave, 2000. 231 pp. \$45.

Academic interest in travel writing has never been greater. So it is inevitable that such a book as *Crossing Boundaries* appear. Postmodern travel literature? Why not? There is certainly a difference between how Paul Theroux or Jonathan Raban writes about his travel and how Roland Barthes or Bruce Chatwin does. Alison Russell does not discuss Barthes, barely mentions Theroux, and never mentions Raban. But she does discuss Chatwin (*The Songlines*), along with Kenneth Lincoln and Al Logan Slagle (*The Good Red Road*), William Least Heat-Moon (*PrairyErth*) and William T. Vollman (*The Atlas*). These worthy authors suffice for a thesis, especially when there is a first chapter on Gaddis (*The Recognitions*) and then a second on Pynchon (*V.*).

What is postmodern travel literature? Well, it has to do with “a post-tourist playfulness” as well as everything from shifting national borders and global exhaustion to the crisis of representation expressed by contemporary ethnographers and geographers, and a deep sense of placelessness felt by the rest of us. Furthermore, postmodern travel writing doesn’t worry about the difference between fiction and nonfiction, because it is far more intent on seeking out “intersections” among many fields of study and “new ways of mapping and reconceiving the space of the world.”

That is, postmodern travel literature has to do with just about anything concerning travel, which, in turn, is just about everything—depending, of course, on how you choose to restrict the term. Russell doesn’t want to restrict it at all. Too literal-minded or referential a definition of travel would only impose its own boundaries, which *Crossing Boundaries* acknowledges the better to enable each one to be crossed, or “negotiated,” or otherwise “transformed.”

Churlish, in a way, to question all this. *Crossing Boundaries* is fun to read and good to think. The chapters on Pynchon—about which more in a moment—and Vollmann are especially searching. But all the chapters suffer from being too thesis-ridden. Take merely the notion of boundaries themselves. In his introduction to a collection of the best travel writing from last year, Bill Bryson begins thus: “Write a book or

essay that might otherwise be catalogued under memoir, humor, anthropology, or natural history, and as long as you leave the property at some point, you can call it travel writing.” Arguably, in no type of writing do boundaries matter less than in travel writing. Russell never considers the possibility that the postmodern moment in travel literature may not have occurred.

Too bad an earlier study by Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan appeared too late for Russell to do more than wave at it in a footnote, for the chapter on postmodernism in *Tourists with Typewriters* seems finally more persuasive on the matter than anything Russell maintains. Postmodern “devices,” the coauthors argue, are more important for the contemporary novel than for the travel book because travelers must continue to offer both themselves and their identities as “ontologically secure.” Although this point will not alone suffice for a reading of, for example, either Vollmann’s own multiple identities or his pluralized notion of a destination, *The Atlas* would nevertheless not be comprehensible as travel literature in the first place without some ontological stability.

What would it be instead without this? Russell would say, “postmodern.” Holland and Huggan would say, and I would agree, “fiction.” They write of the “experiential depth,” or, better, “the layered, enigmatic transactions between self and place” that the travel narrative traditionally provides. These transactions are quite consistent with what Chatwin, Lincoln and Slagle, and Heat-Moon provide in their texts, metafictional strategies to the contrary notwithstanding. Russell’s lack of any skepticism about her thesis is the weakest thing about her book. Simply put, *PrairyErth* has much more in common with, say, Raban’s recent *Passage to Juneau* (equally full of arcane history as well as stray, minute descriptions of place) than she has paused to consider.

Furthermore, no reader will dispute that Heat-Moon really did spend a lot of time in Chase County, Kansas, just as Raban did in a boat on Puget Sound. The point matters. To the degree that metafictional play detracts from any particular travel book as, in the words of Holland and Huggan, “a more or less ‘authentic’ autobiographical account,” we will read the book as fiction—and our response will be different, whatever our notion of travel, from what it would be if we did not so read the book. How to understand this difference is, in a sense, what *Crossing Boundaries* is all about. Russell, alas, doesn’t try to understand it because her thesis won’t permit her to recognize the difference to begin with.

As a result, through the pages of *Crossing Boundaries* blow such discursive eddies as the following: “Postmodern travel, whether through a landscape or a text, acknowledges shifting borders and frames of

reference. The change and process connoted by adaptation characterize and connect many innovative travel novels and travel narratives." Just so: all travel ends up sounding like postmodern travel, and all travel books so much travel literature. To say *The Atlas* warrants a new category, "the travel narrative novel," is just fudging. It is a novel, in the form of a travel narrative, and as such it has more in common with *The Recognitions* or *V.*, novels that can both be profitably considered as, in part, travel narratives—as Russell, happily, does consider them.

Regarding Pynchon, what would we expect of such a consideration? Certainly the contrast between the imperialism of Stencil's stories and the localism of Profane's, as well as the various thematizations of Baedeker land throughout the novel. Russell's chapter on *V.* is especially strong on the function of Stencil as tour guide and museum curator. On the other hand, I'm not sure Profane's activities are very helpfully characterized as "travel in a post-tourist world"; but if you're going to have a chapter on *V.*, that is the sort of claim you'll have to make.¹ More compelling, I think, is Russell's conclusion: "Pynchon is not so much concerned with our methods of travel, however, as he is with our inability to negotiate boundaries, evidenced by the novel's backdrop of war, international crises, and territorial disputes."

More's the pity, then, that such boundaries do not manifest more importance in the ensuing chapters. Exactly the backdrop of *V.* is missing in the four remaining, more contemporary books Russell goes on to discuss. Why does each of these appear more postmodern in the first place? The reason could be that postmodernism stands in for the missing political boundaries that have yet to be negotiated. It's all very well to emphasize, for example, that boundaries in *The Songlines* are "artificial constructs imposed on and around textual and geographical space." But these are not the same boundaries to which we attend in *V.* For me, one effect of reading about Pynchon in conjunction with other writers of travel is to see how distinctive he is. Another critical study that included him could have placed even his very first novel more at the center of what became travel literature during the rest of the century.

Can it still strive to keep us ontologically secure today? I would have had Russell consider one thing in this connection.² Each of her last four travel books is vitally founded on either the cultural practice or the presence of native peoples. *The Songlines*, of course, concerns Australian Aborigines. The native cast in *The Atlas* ranges from a walrus hunter in Canada to Willow Lady in the Arctic, at the end of the central novella, "The Atlas." *The Good Red Road* takes place almost wholly among Native Americans. Finally, Heat-Moon is himself a Native

American, and a native perspective informs everything in *PrairyErth*. What are we to make of all this?

Russell takes no particular note at all. The easiest way to do so would be to suggest that the existence—or persistence—of native identity constitutes the most available means through which travel writing of whatever sort continues to strive for secure ontological grounding. That the original myths or the first inscriptions have not, or not quite, disappeared is the hope offered by even the most sophisticated and historically imbricated or politically charged travel books being written today. (I am thinking in particular of Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* project.) And in this respect as well, the narrative of *V.* has proved to be prophetic. Its vision of the destruction or (back in the United States) disappearance of native peoples is as powerful and as resonant today as it was nearly forty years ago, when it might have seemed that the entire surface of the earth was only so much Baedeker land.

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Notes

¹The issue of the tourist—not the sexy “post-” species, but the same old vulgar premodern one—won't go away, despite Russell's attempt to wish it away. To take one example, she writes of the sixteen photographs that frame *The Atlas*: “Presented without captions, the photographs direct our gaze to the sites and sights omitted from glossy travel brochures.” In a sense, yes. But what about “post” travel brochures? Do such texts not exist, and, arguably, is not *The Atlas* itself, in another sense, one such? Or, if it is not, then we have a boundary that is in fact not crossed. It may not even be crossable. Must all travel brochures be “glossy” in the same way? But so it goes in much of *Crossing Boundaries*: some boundaries matter, while others don't, and one or the other kind keeps popping up after it has been banished. My point is simple: Vollmann is worried about tourism, and his pictures constitute one way to register its enduring pressure on his playfulness.

²Rather than the final chapter, or “Coda,” on women's travel writing. This is easily the most cursory, inconsequential portion of the book—perhaps the result of either a publisher's reader or a dissertation committee insisting there be “something about gender.” Interestingly, all of Russell's examples consist of travel writing rather than travel “literature.” Could the particular boundary between fact and fiction matter more when women write travel?

Works Cited

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Holland, Patrick and Graham Huggan. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998.