



## Introduction: Exceptions and exceptionality in travel writing

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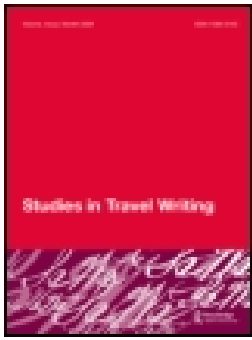
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INTRODUCTION



## Exceptions and exceptionality in travel writing

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### ABSTRACT

Some of the articles of this special issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* were presented at a session organised by SELVA (the Société d'étude de la littérature de voyage anglophone) in June 2019 at the SAES (the Société des anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur) convention on the theme of "Exceptions". This introduction presents some of the ways in which the concept of exceptionality may prove stimulating in order to shed light on travel writing and its specificity as a genre. By tackling fields as diverse as disability studies, postcolonial studies and environmental approaches, for instance, the contributors explore various ways in which travel as an experience and travel writing as a genre always push the limits of travelling as well as that of the travel genre.

### KEYWORDS

Exception; disability studies; postcolonial literature; bathos; linguistics

Carl Thompson's remark that "all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity *and* identity, difference *and* similarity" (2011, 9, emphasis in original) might be augmented with normality and exceptionality in the case of travel writing. While the tension between normality and exceptionality – in fact subsumed under that of difference and similarity – involves the travelling conditions, the environment travelled or the traveller themselves, it also intersects travelling and writing. The exceptional character of a travelogue may stem from the circumstances of its production, but it is also derived from its form, its divergence from other genres and the way it combines some of their features – a generic distinctness which may also be found in the case of subgenres within the broad genre of travel writing. This distinction entails another, between a *de facto* exceptionality and one constructed, or enhanced, as such. The articles presented in this issue explore various ways in which British, American and postcolonial travel writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries step out from previously known practices of travel and narrative discourse. They examine travelogues featuring the outstanding profile of the traveller whose journeys contribute not only to challenging the self but also to striving for the recognition of their peers (see the articles by Bouzonviller and Garnier). Other travellers push the limits of travelling and travel

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writing experience in a bid to protest against traditions and bring forth innovations in both fields (as discussed in the articles by Orestano and Burcea). Some of these travellers elaborate practical yet highly creative travelogues and highlight the power of such texts in spite of their non-literary classification (see the contributions by Ounoughi and Ferguson).

### **The traveller as the exception: from social norms to social inclusion**

The act of travelling itself sets travellers apart: they become an exception in the context of their home, as they depart from it while the vast majority of people remain. In the context of the land they travel, too: they appear as the stranger, the odd one out. And yet, when writing about their journeys, travel writers often assume the role of representatives of their home countries and of their norms. The tension between norms and exceptions thus articulates collective and individual identity. This literally “ex-centric” position is sometimes embraced, sometimes covered and minimised by travellers who want to facilitate their return to the metropole in particular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some travellers address their exceptionality while others try to tone it down, using their travel narrative as a way to contribute to the national or imperial narrative. Conversely, travel narratives can be used to subvert political definitions, open new perspectives onto other cultures and reverse dichotomous readings or hybridise identities, bridging rather than confronting a norm and an exception. In the latter case, the traveller progresses as a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) and even as a radican (Ben-Messahel 2017), growing new roots while *en route*.

The traveller is characterised even more as an exception when female, women travellers being exceptions among exceptions. Nineteenth-century women travellers appear as exceptions both in a traditionally male-dominated genre and because of the association between their gender and domesticity (Bassnett 2002, 226). Their presence in the field remained marginal and they were considered as “the exceptions that proved the rule”, when they were not “(very ordinary) wives of colonial administrators [...] compliant with [the empire’s] ideology and models” (Smethurst 2012, 8–9). Paul Smethurst draws a parallel with working-class travel writing or black travel writing in the way they similarly appeared “disorderly” (8). These considerations highlight the strongly ideological nature of travel writing and its problematic, yet dynamic, relation to the norm. The absence of models, be they of a similar gender, social class, race or sexual orientation, constitutes both an incentive to fill a gap and a deterrent from engaging in a practice that might be considered as the preserve of white men, as pointed out by black British writer Gary Younge and African American Colleen J. McElroy (Das and Youngs 2019, 15).

Elisabeth Bouzonviller’s postcolonial approach to American novelist Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003) illustrates the complex intersection of identity and politics in travel literature. With her eighteen-month-old daughter, Erdrich goes on a trip to her tribal home “in Ojibwe country”, running counter to its hegemonic mapping as she crisscrosses American and Canadian borders. In her article for this issue, “A Mother Travelling through Motherland: Louise Erdrich’s Family Trip in Ojibwe Country”, Bouzonviller explores how Erdrich uncovers and recovers an identity both individual and collective, as a daughter and a mother, and as a member of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa Indians. Diverging from the typical motif of travelling away from home, here

the travel narrative contributes to making home *home*, while disrupting non-Ojibwe readers' mapped conception of the area Erdrich travels. Bouzonviller ([forthcoming](#)) carries on the reflection on the notion of "home" she explored in the conference she organised in 2017. This exploration of the concept of "home" in the context of travel writing opens perspectives onto a generic reflection, Erdrich's example invites us to rethink the idea that "all travel-writing exists in a dialectical relationship between two distinct places – that designated by the writer and perhaps also by readers as 'home', and that designated as the cultural other" (Speake [2003](#), xi). Analysing Erdrich's deterritorialisation process and inclusion of Ojibwemowin words and names in her English travelogue, Bouzonviller argues for its consideration as "minor literature" in the Deleuzian sense, "a marginal, revolutionary literature debunking the canon from within". Erdrich's reclaiming of her Ojibwe identity is both a personal and a political process, as she recovers obliterated territories and identities, which appear to be one and the same in this "eco-autobiography" (Perreten [2003](#)).

Even now, despite the endeavour to rid the genre of its colonial heritage and despite a growing awareness of intersectionality, inclusiveness seems to remain limited or circumscribed to some defining features, as Churnjeet Mahn ([2021](#)) points out about queer travel writing remaining white and postcolonial travel writing still predominantly heterosexual. Selfhood is not monolithic and must be considered as a fluid crossroads intersecting several lines of identification. Moreover, Robert Aldrich warns academics "not to assume that a writer is fully representative of a group – an imperative travel writers themselves tend not to observe" and invites us to "be attentive to authors' backgrounds, the chronological and geographical context of their travels, political and cultural conjunctures, the circumstances of publication, and readers' reception" ([2019](#), 521), as only the intersection of these features will provide relevance. The perception of a traveller, as well as that of their journey and that of their narrative, along the lines of their gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation or disability, is a reminder that travelling is usually considered first and foremost as a bodily experience and that "[t]ravel writing [is] the most physical of all literary genres" (Forsdick [2015a](#), 68).

But what happens when someone's physical or mental condition hinders them from travelling or at least when travelling is rendered more challenging? Travelogues by "differently abled" authors (Berland [2005](#), 218) have increased both in number and publication, expanding the field of the genre and imposing itself as a field of research (Charles [2015b](#)). These travel narratives allow us to shed new light on exception by tackling it from different perspectives, primarily by inverting the norm and the exception, at last rightly imposing difference over abnormality. The traveller here strains to make travel an achievable experience. Disability thus ceases to entail immobility and becomes compatible with travelling the world (Gray and Skeesuck [2017](#); Longmire [2017](#)). Mobility however is not enough to go places and contemplate the world. In "En Route: Helen Keller's Travels", Marie-Dominique Garnier explores what travel means when written by a blind and deaf traveller, Helen Keller. While gender studies have widely explored women travellers' works (for the nineteenth century see for example Foster [1990](#); Mills [1991](#); Monicat [1996](#); Thompson [2017](#); Quaireau [2018](#)). Garnier's article on Keller's works stands out as it blends the fields of gender and disability studies. Garnier explores the autobiographies of this female traveller, writer, socialist and feminist activist who visited 36 countries on five continents and whose activism widely contributed to make "blind lives matter" as

M-D. Garnier puts it. Keller's travel writings are here explored through close readings which unveil how the poetics of Keller's text address the need to give her readers access to the world as she perceives, travels and maps it. Keller really shapes a new poetics that literally gives relief to discourse (Garnier 2016). Her exceptional perception of vibrations, movements and her hyper-developed sense of touch pervade her narratives to convey her haptic perception of the travelling experience with a liveliness that questions her sensory impairment. The rhythmical intensity and the lexical diversity that her texts are permeated with require such phrasings as lie beyond the rules of grammar. She becomes the guide for the reader to discover the world, this time mapped and arranged according to marks that the majority of her readers could not perceive. This is when the expression "differently abled" takes its full meaning.

### The textual exception: tradition v. innovation

In fact, the journey is always exceptional in itself "for any travel bears in itself something of a unique experience" (Viviès 2005) and "[o]ne may travel to the same place and follow the same circuit, yet the adventure or event remains singular" (De Botton 2002), as Samia Ounoughi reminds us in her article. Some journeys appear so more straightforward than others, on account of the harsh environment they are set in, or the mode of travelling chosen, specifically sometimes for its challenging or innovative nature. One can think of Patrick Leigh Fermor walking across Europe in *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), Dervla Murphy cycling from Dunkirk to Delhi in *Full Tilt: Ireland to India With a Bicycle* (1965), or more recently Adam Weymouth canoeing with the salmon migration in *Kings of the Yukon* (2019). The itinerary itself, though often shared by travellers, may allow for some detour, literal or literary in the form of digressions or formal innovation. As more and more places were travelled and narratives published, in particular in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the search for originality came to encapsulate this conflicting desire between belonging to a tradition and standing out (Korte 1996, 102). As travelling evolved from exploration to mass tourism, how was exceptionality introduced, foregrounded or created out of thin air in travel narratives? With the advent of tourism, travellers could be discerned from tourists by the way they departed, physically and literally, from the beaten track. And in an age when there are no blanks left on maps, when (pandemic apart) travelling has become more accessible, how to remain exceptional and worth reading? Exceptionality may therefore also be equated with originality and the exceptional with the unprecedented.

The most exceptional form of travelling might in fact be that of immobility, a concept which travel writing, as a genre in movement, explores. The Covid-19 pandemic and the constraints laid on travelling have spurred some renewed interest in texts tracing "vertical travel" (Lackey 1997, 53; Cronin 2000, 19), as can be seen from the *Astrolabe* special issue on "Le Voyage Immobile" (51, December 2020) and the forthcoming *Studies in Travel Writing* special issue "Vertical Travel: Deceleration, Microspecion, Confinement" guest edited by Charles Forsdick, Zoe Kinsley and Kate Walchester. Physical immobility brings to the fore the inner journey to which it gives a way and a voice. More than two centuries ago, Xavier de Maistre seized constrained immobility as a means to turn a quarantine into such a travel, his *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794) resulting in a meditative journey in prose. Immobility in travel writing might also develop into a form of do-nothingness or

even immobilism. Among modernist travellers, some of whom Horatiu Burcea considers in his contribution, “Bathos: the Literary Appeal of Absurdly Ordinary Travel”, there lies a feeling of despondency, and the posture of the blasé traveller with no travel experience likely to arouse their emotions questions the essence and meaning of travel and, along with it, the function of the travel writing genre itself. This approach undeniably benefited the literary genre, renewing its poetics, exploring the extremities of its object. Yet, it ran the risk of divesting travel writing of all interest in travel itself as if travel literature could endure without travel.

In “Pictures from Italy: Dickens’s Selfie and Victorian Baroque” Francesca Orestano analyses how Dickens reshuffles travel writing as a genre, defining *Pictures from Italy* as “a paradigm of ambiguity and transgression as far as its obedience to the travel writing rules”. Through a retrospective of the genre since antiquity, Orestano reminds us that travel as a practice has always undergone reshufflings and travel writing teemed with transgressions. Putting the work under study back in its epoch, Orestano explores the way in which Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*, as opposed to much travel literature about Italy and the countries of the Grand Tour during the Victorian era, focuses on the visual experience Dickens intended to share with his readers. The production of such a narrative, which Orestano deems a “selfie”, would entail a rule that admitted of no exception: doing away with guides, especially those mainly circulated during the Victorian Era (Murray and Baedeker). The only guide Dickens chose was the fully assumed subjectivity of his visual perception. Orestano explains that trusting one’s own perception emerged as a new trend. This increasing reliance on one’s own perception rendered the genre even more multimodal, as in the case of John Ruskin’s visual approach in *Letters from the Continent* (1858) (Ounoughi 2020) and later Samuel Butler’s *Alps and Sanctuaries* (1882) which, in addition to many sketches of maps and places, offers sound recollections in the shape of music scores borrowed from Handel or of Butler’s own composition (Ounoughi 2018). Orestano analyses the constant parallel Dickens draws with England and mostly with London. She construes this process as a transgression of the rule of “originality” in travel writing. She believes Victorian society and culture after 1846 is very much baroque owing to the multifarious and sharp-contrasting accumulation of aspects which Dickens’s eye seizes. He did not cleanse his text of what he saw and chose to ignore aspects that were less attractive to tourists. Refusing to omit what would disturb the readers’ horizon of expectations, Dickens, on the contrary, presents them with a wonderful yet scarred portrait of Italy.

The evolution of travel writing has led authors to explore even the most unsensational feelings that travelling might inspire. Far from seeking the extraordinary or the exotic, some modernist travel narratives elaborated on boring wanderings, among them Peter Fleming’s, Evelyn Waugh’s, Graham Greene’s or George Orwell’s. Boredom was not new to the genre of travel writing though (Auerbach 2018), as Joe Moran explains (2019). The Interwar period however featured noticeable displays of boredom and the pointlessness in travelling as it saw the emergence of modernist writers for whom the very notions of travel and life were pervaded with sheer disenchantment and trauma. Burcea analyses bathos as both a characteristic poetic feature that permeates these modernist travelogues and a symptom of the trauma that lies beyond cathartic expression. This eighteenth-century concept coined by Pope originally referred to a ridiculous overflow of sentimentality. Burcea analyses how this idiosyncrasy was turned into an intentional literary

celebration of “anti-climax, disillusionment and negativity”. Beyond mocking the sentimental clichés of travel adventures, the meaninglessness and dissolution of the plot brought about by the poetics of bathos eventually grant the discourse a higher interest that spurs excitement in the reader’s journey along Fleming’s pages, for instance. Burcea however also notes the limits to the rhetoric of bathos applied to travel writing, for the paradoxes of boredom and travel, despondency and exploration, would no doubt renew an interest in the genre, if not the genre itself, but if overused it could also spoil travelogues even from the most talented, such as Fleming and Waugh. Throughout this journey among modernist travelogues, Burcea demonstrates that modernist travel writers’ use of bathos definitely contributed to exceptional narrative shapes within the genre. Conversely, he also shows how travel writing then brought a major evolution to bathos itself.

### **An exception among genres: categorising travel writing**

Travel writing studies remained marginal for a long time (Hulme and Youngs 2002), perhaps on account of the elusiveness of their object. Until the 1970s, travel narratives were often turned to as a mere accessory to studies with a different focus, to shed light on a specific author or historical context. The challenges raised by the definition of this multifaceted genre, which borrows from many genres it combines, had tended to exclude such texts from the canon. Paradoxically enough, the very possibilities afforded by this trait (sometimes emphasised through the use of metaphors pointing to fragments and their combination, such as “mosaic”, “montage” or “patchwork” [Magri-Mourgues 2009, 67]) substantially explain the lasting attraction the genre exerts on writers, readers and critics. What are the rules, if any, of travel writing against which some narratives are excluded from the canon, when “every narrative is a travel narrative – a spatial practice” (De Certeau 1990, 171)? There seem to be very few. The defining feature of the genre might rather lie in the reading compact which the narrator sets up with their readers (Viviès 1999). It is in fact in the tension between exception and unity that the specificity of travel writing might very well lie; in how each instance is exceptional and unique and yet all shape the category they belong to:

beyond the variety of the texts, beyond the diverse modes of writing, the unity of the texts is given by the necessary presentation of these texts to a reading public that will connect to them. The necessarily individual experience of travel implies a relationship to a social group, and to a history of travel. (Tadié 2011, 183)

And how do subgenres fit in, as exceptions to the exception? How does the focus on subgenres contribute to a broader reflection on the genre of travel writing? If “all forms of travel-writing are mainly about writing and little about travel” (Tadié 2011, 182), what does it say about non-literary travelogues? And what do these exceptional forms have to contribute to the genre?

Samia Ounoughi follows up on the article she published in the previous issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* (2020) in which she analyses the intricacies of such a process as naming (toponymation) or mapping by analysing the linguistically creative metadiscourse used by the authors of these exploration travelogues. In her article for the current issue, “Climbing Summits: When Exception Becomes the Rule. A Linguistic Approach”, she shines a



light on a subgenre with its own rules, mountain travel writing, and its singularity within the broader category of travel writing. She mines a large corpus made up of the reports that members of the Alpine Club of London had to write on their return, more specifically the Club's periodical issues published from 1858 to 1899. Combining discourse analysis with geographical and historical contextualisation, Ounoughi makes use of such a large corpus to trace significantly shared practices, both in alpinism and writing, and evinces that in the Alpine context, "exception becomes the sole rule". In spite of the variability intrinsic to the mountain's fluid space, the corpus analysis reveals recurring linguistic trends. The specificity of the subgenre related to that of the environment doubles with that of the accounts. Mountain ascents are exceptional in themselves, but the narratives enhance this exceptionality through the use of similar linguistic devices which Samia Ounoughi analyses in detail, such as the use of the present tense in a past-tense narrative. This linguistic practice "stands by no means as an exception in discourse but rather [as] a means to express the discourse of exception". Her analysis thus foregrounds the contextual feature of exceptionality, as well as its discursive dimension, and the specificity of mountain travel writing.

In "Frederick Law Olmsted: A pragmatic exception to Transcendental writing", Benjamin Ferguson revisits Frederick Law Olmsted's career through his travel writing, more particularly his writings about the American South, later gathered and published in an abridged version as *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom* (1861). An instance of "intranational writing" (Cox 2010, 2), Olmsted's travelogue in an Antebellum South that appears American and alien at the same time illustrates an ambivalence to place that calls to mind that explored by Bouzonviller in her article which also bears on an "intranational" journey. Ferguson calls for a reconsideration of Olmsted's writings as literary. His article aims to underline the specificity of Olmsted's technical approach to nature at a time of booming industrialisation. Ferguson draws a comparison between the transcendentalists' comprehensive and spiritual contemplation of nature and Olmsted's pragmatic attitude towards the preservation and cultivation of the land. Olmsted's travel writings stem from his experience as a farmer in the South, seeking labour and agricultural efficiency. Olmsted's non-academic profile influences his travelogues, which he wrote in a very plain style that rendered them easy to read. His writings promote ground experience as the best way to propose sound agricultural and landscape management solutions. Travel writers are indeed not always writers in the first place, and Ferguson shows how Olmsted's particular training as a landscape architect permeates his writing of travel, just as the specialised knowledge of the alpinists coloured the reports which Ounoughi analyses in her article. Olmsted's travel writings reach even beyond agricultural productivity, for his technical yet insightful vision of land cultivation and preservation led him to stand against slavery.

Considering and noting exceptions might betray an endeavour in generalisation, in the identification of general rules inferred from the study of specific cases, but travel writing keeps resisting such generalisation. However, as generalising is a process rather than a fixed observation, a reflection on exceptions and their nature still has a lot to bring to light, in the way it evinces trends and how they are departed from. Travel writing is an exceptionally heterogeneous, if not fluid, genre, as the diverse articles presented here illustrate. The quest for novelty, elsewhere, estrangement, otherness, other mores and uses, constitutes the bedrock of the genre which therefore excludes no type of

experience. Exceptionality may thus emerge from journeys to a very ordinary farm or from writings that explore boredom or immobility.

Some of the following articles were presented at a session organised by SELVA (the Société d'étude de la littérature de voyage du monde anglophone) in June 2019 at the SAES (the Société des anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur) convention on the theme of "Exceptions". We are delighted that this publication brought SELVA and *Studies in Travel Writing* together as both aim to promote and disseminate research works on travel writing on an international scale, beyond frontiers, which takes its full meaning with the genre under study.

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