

Sam KNOWLES, *Travel Writing and The Transnational Author*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, ISBN 978-1-349-46174-5, IX, 244 pages, 2014.

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Sam Knowles set out to investigate the ways in which racial identity influence literary reviews and canon formation by examining different types of travel (physical/geographical, narrative, and authorial) and travelling (linguistic, generic, syntactic). In other words, Sam Knowles explores the presence of travel (at various levels: geopolitical, semantic, and linguistic) by showing “the degree to which the experience of travel, and authors’ own writing about this experience, informs their work as a whole” (Michael Ondaatje, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie). A question quickly arises: what exactly are the literary effects of traveling experiences on the work of these four authors?

In the process of reinstating their works of travel-writing in semantically and linguistically foundational positions within their work as a whole, his “boundless appetite for the written word” shows off and, most importantly, pays off. In reconsidering the centrality of travel to the study of contemporary literature, on the one hand, and re-evaluating travelogues as worthy of academic investigation, on the other (usually dismissed as literary digressions), Knowles condemns the ways in which the travel-elements of the work are always subsumed beneath other aspects. Consequently, travelogues are subject to little or no critical scrutiny. When travelogues are indeed the subject of serious critical enquiry, they are generally subsumed within a postcolonial reading of the text (academics typically believe that travel writing could be efficiently separated off from a corpus of more serious literature).

Sam Knowles questions the relationship between travel writing and postcolonial literature by analysing and contextualizing the phenomenon of travel writing. He then moves on to discussing the postcolonial condition of these texts and authors by examining their canonical position. Avoiding well-trodden critical paths, he is, in short, fighting against received ideas. As already stated, his focus - or *close-reading instances* - on the travel writing of these authors seeks to re-establish the significance of travel writing within the work of these authors as a whole. Borrowing Stephen Clingman’s definition and

characteristics of “transnational fiction” (the late works of postcolonial writers), his intention is to ultimately unify two fields of critical study (he examines travel writing, on the one hand, and postcolonial literature or transnational fiction, on the other). The convergence, however, of travel writing studies (through the lens of postcolonialism) and global or cosmopolitan literature (they’ve both flourished in the late 1980s and early 1990s) has seriously failed in unpacking the important roles played by travelogues as formative elements of postcolonial literature and authorship. These travel-inflected works of fiction, as Knowles calls them, show the political implications of travelogues understood as literary representations of journeys across the globe (see Debbie Lisle’s definition).

Consequently, the travelogue has social and political significance through its depiction of interactions with other peoples and cultures. They express political commitments with respect to the travelling identities of their authors. Transnational fiction is structurally and thematically depended on travel. This mixed and ambivalent origin of transnational fiction calls into question the authors’ statuses as individuals with previously colonised origins. Knowles argues that the work of an author is not a reflection of his or her postcolonial condition, but rather an interrogation of the relationship between the idea of travel and the concept of transnational identity. *The transnational author* repudiates the authoritative inequities of postcolonial critique while, at the same time, integrating the concern for travel writing as one of the key elements of his or her work.

Khachig Tololyan described the communities of the transnational moment as those in which the question of borders is essential in defining the relationship between the self (“us) and the other (“them”). The transnational moment is thus a moment when the modern nation-state makes way for ideas such as diaspora or hybridity. Travel writing and transnational literature, more generally, have both explored this process of cultural erosion. Transnationalism - like travel - works on various levels (personal, textual, and geopolitical) by expressing fundamental concerns about belonging, movement, or identity. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake write: “the transnational imaginary enlivens and molests the textures of everyday life and spaces of subjectivity and reshapes those contemporary structures of feeling some culture critics consecrate as postcolonial resistance [...] the national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped” at the macropolitical and micropolitical levels of everyday existence.

The book under review here is concerned with the stylistic and structural dependences of certain works of transnational literature on these authors' travelogues: "I am interested in the ways in which certain writers have adopted and adapted their own interpretations of the experience of travel into millennial works of literature". Knowles further acknowledges that Lisle is the first critic to draw an explicit comparison between the differing impacts on world politics of the quasi-fictional genre of travel writing and other documents in an international context. She is particularly adept, Knowles claims, at explaining the inter-relation of politics and literature in the arena of travel writing. In spite of this, travelogues have been largely side-lined by the critical establishment:

To reassert the importance of the travelogue, it is essential to study contemporary travel writing in terms of its production by those authors who originate in countries which have, in the main, traditionally been the object of travel - and, thus, of travel writing - rather than the source of travellers.

The author puts forward an analysis of the literary and political structures of travel writing as they are manifested in and with respect to transnational literature: "a new way of looking at how the complexities, ambiguities, and dichotomies of the writing and identity of authors are influenced by the experience of travel". In short, transnational literature is both a reshaping of the national (and postcolonial) canon and a response to the idea of aesthetic modernity.

The so-called *transnational fiction* constantly explores navigational and transitional states (like the boundary - its protocols and obligations): the syntactic progression of linkage and association is accompanied by the disruption of time; spaces are also disrupted, gapped, and synaptic; one frequently encounters unmarked narrative transitions (Stephen Clingman). Sam Knowles uses historical, geographical, and anthropological instruments in order to study the transnational identities of the authors under consideration by looking at the specific textualities of the authors' literary works. In other words, he is looking for transnational markers or features in syntactical and narrative forms (he is specifically attentive to ideas about belonging, home, and identity). Each one of the four chapters of *Travel Writing and the Transnational Author* begins by focusing on the relevant author's travel writing, placing their later work in its cultural and historical context:

The four author-focused chapters are divided into two sections. Those authors whose travel writing occupies a position from relatively early in their novel-writing careers, Ondaatje and Seth, are addressed in the first section, ‘Travelling Out’ (Ondaatje’s travelogue, *Running in the Family*, pre-dates his first publication in the novel genre by five years; Seth’s *From Heaven Lake* was released three years before his debut novel-in-verse, and ten years before his first prose novel). The second section, ‘Travelling On’, deals with authors – Ghosh and Rushdie – whose travel writing is located mid-career (Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* and Rushdie’s *The Jaguar Smile* were released six and twelve years after the publications of the authors’ respective first novels). This division into two sections, as well as contributing to the overall narrative sense of the monograph, provide a link between form and content: the compartmentalised structure is itself a part of the thesis that the transnationally inflected travel writing of these authors should be recognised as an integral part of their travelling, writing lives”.

Focusing on the textual transnationalism in the authors’ travelogues and literary fiction, the researcher demonstrates how the turn of the century precipitated both a “reaching-back for earlier works of travel writing and a looking-forward towards” a time of transnational popularity (each chronological step forward also involves a certain degree of revisiting past work). The very textualities, identities, and geographies of literature produced by these transnational authors enables their writing to affect thousands of people. He also argues that the intersections of travel writing and transnational literature in the work of these authors affect postcolonial studies. Exploring the travel-focused foundations of the transnational literary project of these postcolonial authors at the turn of the twenty-first century, Sam Knowles argues that the strength of this relationship between travel writing and transnational literature is based on the ability to be on the move in both a personal and a literary sense (a social privilege): “there is an intertextual web of relationships between certain writers’ travelogues and their other work, regardless of chronological position, that indicates the all-pervasive influence of travel writing on all transnational authorship”. The critical concern of postcolonial studies has in large part been focused on the question of cultural representation, but studying the influence of travelogues on the political, travel-inflected writing of transnational authors represents a way of rethinking the ways in which transnational authors are located within the postcolonial canon: “the inclusive, intertextual links between travel writing and transnational literature ensures that these authors’ works – and ‘postcolonial literature’

more generally – require a constant process of reconsideration, reconstruction, and re-evaluation”.

Employing some sort of etymological criticism, Knowles investigates the degrees in which these four authors not only explore certain ideas (like the boundary), but, more importantly, how they subvert and re-present them: “we have an author, and a set of characters, struggling with the very real difficulties of transnational belonging”. A professional analyst of literary ambivalence, he is constantly concerned with the relationship between transnational identity and transnational writing (which is mediated by transnational geography). Seth, Knowles indicates, engages the transnationalism of elliptic textuality in order to indicate the fragmentation of the travelling authorial self: “In the unification of three concepts central both to this text and to the authorial persona of its author – identity, textuality, and geography – the paradoxical nature of Seth’s travel writing, foundational to his work as a whole is revealed”. Moreover, “the fragmentation and disintegration at play in the narrator trigger a fundamental reconsideration of the work as a whole, and of Ghosh as a transnational author”. The critic moves away from both biographical criticism and Sarah Brouillette’s mythological examination (in Roland Barthes’ terms). However, it is true that

the shift in Rushdie’s perspective revealed in the move from ‘leftist politics sympathetic to resistance movements’ to an appreciation of the ways in which these politics ‘are incorporated into contemporary media culture and enshrined in cultural commodities’ as a part of the ‘more solipsistic interest in the status of authorship and origins’”

more or less outlines Rushdie’s political (and literary) agenda.

While lacking a serious discussion about the nature of identity itself, the monograph succeeds in capturing the essence of contemporary postcolonial fiction while offering a convincing definition of the transnational author through a series of truly exciting examinations of certain key-passages in the authors’ travelogues and novels. It certainly seems that *close-reading* “world literature” is as efficient as it was approximately 100 years ago. Who would have thought?