The Contemporary Anglophone Travel Novel

The Aesthetics of Self-Fashioning in the Era of Globalization

Stephen M. Levin

Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory

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For Nathan Levin
1912–2007

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Preface

A Point of Entry

> Ultimately, modern oppression, as opposed to the traditional oppression, is not an encounter between the self and the enemy, the rulers and the ruled, or the gods and the demons. It is a battle between dehumanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected on to their "subjects." That is the difference between the Crusades and Auschwitz, between Hindu-Muslim riots and modern warfare. That is why the following pages speak only of victims; when they speak of victors, the victors are ultimately shown to be camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psychosocial decay.
>
> —Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*

This study focuses on authenticity as a cultural value. Although the chapters are organized around psychoanalytic categories, the book is not intended to be a moralizing critique—as some have felt Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* to be--but one that, in the spirit of Nandy's epigraph, explores a link between dehumanized selves and the objectification and oppression of others. The problem of authenticity strikes me as being an especially timely and important one: as I write this preface, the Associated Press has just issued an article describing the National Geographic Society's new "Geotourism Charter," which outlines principles of a new kind of tourism defined by "authenticity and making a place better by visiting and spending money."[1] "People are looking for things that are not homogenized," David DePetrillo, Rhode Island's tourism director, explains in the article, while a testimonial from a self-described geotourist states that he "wants to be as foreign as he can get." In critical as well as popular discourses, the concept of authenticity remains a central focus in considerations of selfhood and

cultural practice.[2] Even though no critical consensus prevails as to whether authenticity denotes a social fantasy or a "real" subjective state, the ideal of authenticity continues to motivate cultural practices and act as a cathexis of imagined communities. For this reason, it is of central importance to postcolonial and postmodern studies of contemporary culture that seek to understand the pervasive contradictions that characterize globalization and decolonization: increasingly porous borders and more open transnational cultural circuits in an era of intensified cultural ethnocentrisms; the diminishing salience of historical memory despite a proliferation of new ways to disseminate information; and a persistent faith in narratives of modernity and progress that runs parallel to nostalgic appeals to an imagined past.

The seeds of this project can be traced to two events in my undergraduate studies that produced some of the initial observations and questions central to the study. The first of these events was a reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*; the second a one-year stay in Nepal as a participant in a study abroad program. Of the many factors that influenced my decision to go to Nepal in 1991, I recall that among them was a desire to distance myself from U.S. military action in the Gulf. What interests me now, in retrospect, is how Nepal came to occupy for me a privileged role in an elaborate anti-modern fantasy and why traveling there felt, at the time, like a principled response to the war. During my stay, I found the people of Nepal to be extraordinarily hospitable. Yet my memories of that initial trip to South Asia, unlike of subsequent trips, are tinged with a sense of loss, which I now attribute to the dissolution of the initial fantasy as I gained a deeper understanding of Nepal's complex social realities: its plural histories and politics; its inescapable hybridity, or modernity, manifest in the ubiquity of non-governmental organizations; the rapidly transforming urban landscape of Kathmandu; and the omnipresence of tourism. One can make Nepal a cipher for projections of an anti-modern Shangri-la only by denying its historicity. Said, more than anyone perhaps, showed that such a representational strategy equates to a cultural effacement, and that this mode of discourse has enabled imperial praxis through the colonial and postcolonial eras.

I first read *Orientalism* just before going to Nepal. Once I returned, I began to consider the work in the context of the kind of touristic melancholia I experienced while overseas and upon my return to the U.S. Although I was persuaded that Said's critiques further refined our understanding of the collusion between representation and political domination, it still seemed to me necessary to consider the implications of viewing the

Orient as a construct of fantasy. If the discourse Said surveyed did not in fact manage to describe the actual Orient, it did indeed reflect a salient mythos of the Western imagination. To some extent, then, it seemed to me that Said was correct to argue for the monopolistic sway of this representational field. In the course of depicting the inescapability of Orientalist discourse and the inextricable link between colonial travelers and political domination, he also described a vast pathology of the West: a civilizational strategy to come to terms with a loss.

This insight may only reveal something about the tenaciousness of ideology. Orientalism not only sustains the institutions of political domination; it also functions as a mode of expression for discontent at home and, perhaps, as a means of neutralizing this discontent. The present study, then, seeks to undertake an examination of the core myths and fantasies of colonial culture. It attempts to outline a conceptual framework in which a preoccupation with the Orient emerges as a symptom of the constraints on subjective possibilities in the West.

I find it somewhat disconcerting to reminisce that my performance in Nepal as an adventure traveler adhered so closely to Dean MacCannell's conception of travel as a search for authenticity. During my stay, I never once visited the Everest base camp or trekked through Annapurna. I opted instead to spend the bulk of my time in the far western "frontier." In my view, the high mountain regions were overdetermined by an excess of markers that delimited them as tourist sights: guidebook commentary, official sponsorship, trekking hostels and, invariably, a throng of sightseers. Still, something about this willful seclusion proved troubling. I realized even at the time that this notion of the frontier emanated from the imaginative discourse of tourism. As MacCannell observes in his study of sightseeing and modernity, a sight is defined as such only by way of markers. No destination offers a path to unmediated access: even the absence of markers is interpreted by the sightseer within the representational field of tourism.

In this study I suggest that the excess of markers in contemporary culture intensifies the desire to escape and results in repetitious, and frequently self-destructive, enactments. At the same time, I argue that these enactments constitute a form of social commentary even if they fail to produce any sort of programmatic politics. Many of the narratives I examine are set against the backdrop of war, and many others portray travel as an alternative to work and materialism. Even if, in the end, these narratives affirm existing power relations, the structure of the fantasy reveals a desire to escape the rigid parameters of modern subjectivity. Just as Said portrays the episteme of

Orientalism as totalizing and wholly constitutive of modern experience, these adventure narratives allude to a sort of injunctive, patriarchal fortification that overwhelms the subject and cannot be circumvented. This sense of a subject against the backdrop of the disenchanting forces of modernity also recalls another central referent for this study: the explorations of loss and nostalgia in Frankfurt School writings on civil society, selfhood, and mass culture. In his 1962 reminiscence to *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukacs recalls the sense of foreboding among many artists and intellectuals as they witnessed the imminent fall of tsarist Russia and Hapsburg rule in Europe. "Now, who will save us from the West?" they wondered. If twentieth-century adventure narratives do not succeed in articulating concrete alternatives to the West, they do reflect the extraordinary structural constraints that both produce the desire for alternatives and work to ensure these desires are brought into the service of social reproduction.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Adventure Travel, Leisure Practice and Social Critique

> The lack of definiteness in the center of the soul drives people to seek a momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations, external activities; it is this lack which entangles us in the dizzy groundlessness and restlessness which expresses itself now as metropolitan tumult, now as a passion for travel, now as the wild hunt of competition, now as the specific modern infidelity in the realms of taste, styles, attitudes, and relationships.
>
> —Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*

> This relativizing of the exotic goes hand in hand with its banishment from reality—so that sooner or later the romantically inclined will have to agitate for the establishment of fenced-in nature preserves, isolated fairy-tale realms in which people will still be able to hope for experiences that today even Calcutta is hardly able to provide.
>
> —Siegfried Kracauer, "Travel and Dance"

> Although many types of experience go to the establishment of the capacity to be alone, there is one that is basic, and without a sufficiency of it the capacity to be alone does not come about; *this experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother*. Thus the basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present.
>
> —D.W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone"

Critical studies of travel writing have tended to underscore the presence of two opposed narrative strategies. The first strategy focuses on the intersection of travel cultures and the representational orders of imperial power and domination. It follows what we may provisionally describe as a "rationalist" aesthetic. The second strategy, sometimes presented in celebratory

terms, stresses the more modernist link between travel writing and personal expressivity. Its emphasis on interiority, confession, and individuality reflects what we may provisionally call a "romanticist" aesthetic. One narrative register inclines toward the acquisition of information, description of detail and an omniscient point of view; another favors sentiment, the minutia of human subjects and the dramas of subjective experience over the scientific certitude of informational orders.[1] This study outlines yet a third trend in a travel writing that has become particularly salient in the era marked by decolonization, mass culture, and the cultural order of late capitalism. Positioned as a kind of revolt against the prevailing traditions of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, I propose that this third current in the genre may be categorized as a literature of "negation." The subject of the literature of negation may sometimes resemble the heroic and all-knowing explorer, or the introspective searcher who, through the journey, refines and narrates a highly individualized articulation of self. Yet when examined at the level of its motivations and fantasies, this literature reflects a sustained effort to compensate for a perceived void produced by the specific conditions of modern social life.

This study by no means seeks to dispute the historical entanglement between travel, tourism and imperial power—a relationship that has received much critical attention since Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978 and elegantly outlined the manifold interpenetrations of narrative expression and political domination. At the same time, this study does aim to shift the focus somewhat away from the analytic parameters of *Orientalism*. Whereas Said and his interpreters have tended to explore the relational dynamic between metropole and periphery, I wish to examine the bond between the metropole and the self—to the extent that these entities are defined and elaborated in narratives of travel. In so doing, I aim to consider modernity as a cultural system that informs narrative expressions of selfhood. My specific focus will be on narratives of adventure travel that illustrate a decidedly unstable and self-destructive orientation to selfhood. Such narratives by no means make up the totality of late twentieth-century travel literature, but they do, I argue, index a subculture that emerges with the evolution of global modernity and that resonates with recent theory on late capitalism and postmodernity. A study of the aesthetics of this subculture offers an opportunity to explore a dimension of decolonization that represents a significant, but perhaps more empirically elusive, aspect of the legacy of colonial confrontations: the colonization of the subjectivity of the colonizers.[2] This study, then, seeks to explore the ways that decolonization permeates the subjectivity of everyday life. It views as intrinsic to decolonization a conception of modernity that

valorizes authenticity as a cultural value but imposes strict limitations on expressive possibilities.

In short, I wish to take seriously the kind of "revolt" embodied in the adventure travel narrative, even if this revolt, in the end, reproduces existing power relations. The value of this approach, I hope, will be to focus attention on the strategies subjects employ to manage alienation in commercial societies, and to identify an idiom of travel that is undertaken not as an act of nation building, nor merely for pleasure, nor to cultivate civility and cultural credentials. The expression of alienation in mass culture by no means equates to the fraternal social movement envisioned in classical Marxist theory, but it may point to the presence of a more prosaic "everyday form of peasant resistance," to borrow James Scott's phrase, in commercial societies.[3] This observation is intended not to romanticize popular culture or leisure practice, but rather to highlight the potential for mass culture to have a diagnostic function in cultural studies of modernity. Such an approach to mass culture underscores that modern societies must provide for the remediation of alienation in order to survive, and affirms the central role that leisure and consumerism play in social reproduction—for example, as strategies to keep alienation at bay. Yet even as leisure practice serves this function in preserving the social order, it offers its own coded commentary on the constraints of modern social life, and on the pronounced difficulties of self-fashioning in the era of globalization. For the specific subculture of adventure travel I wish to address, this critique assumes the form of an attack on what we might call the paternal order, or what Lacan refers to as "the law." Instead of a direct political commentary, these travel narratives portray a failed identification. Ernesto Laclau draws on recent social and political theory to demonstrate that subjects are never fully incorporated as citizens, that an irreducible gap separates them from the constellation of sources of social authority (Laclau 1994). The adventure narratives I discuss do not depict a subject eager to internalize the social order, as was the case, for example, for participants in the Grand Tour who sought to fashion themselves as products of a specific national history and geneaology, but rather portray a subject who enacts a dramatic negation of the social field of signification. In so doing, these narratives illustrate the unique limitations the modern era poses for the fashioning of selfhood, and reveal a subculture of travel in which self-annihilation emerges as a viable alternative to re-incorporation into the social order.[4]

The conceptual framework of this research owes much to the early twentieth-century efforts of the Frankfurt School to describe the nexus of mass culture, ideology, and modern political consciousness. It also draws from more recent examinations of tourism and leisure practice by Caren Kaplan,

Sara Mills, Inderpal Grewal, Mary Louise Pratt, Chris Rojek, John Urry, and Dean MacCannell, and from work that explores the aesthetic features of globalization, late capitalism, and postmodernity by Arjun Appadurai, Frederic Jameson, and John Tomlinson. The embattled subject depicted in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* also provides a critical point of reference. All of these inquiries offer substantive commentary on the connection between modernity and alienation and suggest links between global culture and specific political and expressive forms. The remainder of this introduction seeks to situate the present study in the context of this earlier research and, at the same time, to draw a distinction between travel practices in the era of globalization and leisure travel during the colonial era. Since I contend that one may make inferences about "actual" tourist cultures from readings of literary character types, I will consider also the connection between literary and cultural presentations of travel and tourism. Finally, as the three chapters that follow each attempt to outline a schematic of a particular character type, I will survey some of the antecedents for this sort of approach and assess the value of mapping out the character systems that structure modern travel texts. I hope that this discussion will serve two purposes: to further schematize the genre of contemporary adventure travel literature and the subcultural literature that depicts a decisive failure of self-realization through travel; and to situate the methodological approach of this study within a larger body of social and cultural theory.

FRANKFURT SCHOOL ORIGINS: THE METROPOLIS AND THE CRISIS OF THE BOURGEOIS SUBJECT

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that a recidivist tendency within the Enlightenment threatens to destroy the defining feature of Enlightenment thought: the capacity for "reflection." Writing against the backdrop of the consolidation of fascism in Europe, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that industrialism has not strengthened the capacity for reflection but rather has facilitated a "retreat from enlightenment into mythology" (xiii). This retreat takes place due to the emergence of a vast technical apparatus to administer economic productivity, which reduces the social arena to an abstraction—to "apprehension, classification, and calculation" (27). Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment thought, the authors state, in fact share a similar propensity toward forms of mystification, though they introvert the terms: "animism spiritualized the object, whereas industrialism objectifies the spirits of men" (28). As

social relations come to be perceived with the solidity of myth, the modern world "abandons" thought; thought survives only in the "reified form of mathematics, machine, and organization" (41). The work of the Frankfurt School on the whole examined how this mythic fixity of thought—its transmutation into ideology rather than its deployment as a practice of critical reflection—enabled the rise of totalitarian regimes and assigned the "autonomous" realm of art the special function of critique. Yet the root of these insights entails a complex formulation—one which holds particular relevance to the study of modern travel—concerning the crisis of selfhood that unfolds in the age of Enlightenment.

To Horkheimer and Adorno, one may find evidence for this crisis in the transformation of sacrifice. Whereas premodern societies engaged in sacrifice as a means to appease the spirits that maintained cosmic order, modern societies present no clear means of "binding" subjects to the social arena. The system of industrial production secures the consensual participation of modern subjects only through the reward of individuation. The rationalization of nature leads to the decline of the animistic spirits once thought to hold together the cosmos. But just as nature becomes rationalized, so does the self. The self becomes despiritualized and, in the place of spirits, structured in accordance with an all-encompassing rationality. Mimesis, once associated with the old order, now becomes "mimesis unto death" as the self and nature are subject to the same rigidified conceptual schema. This dialectic creates the conditions for the crisis of the bourgeois self: the self becomes an abstraction in the service of productive relations, but through this very process acquires the status of "selfhood." The development of subjectivity thus runs parallel to the evolution of modernity. In psychoanalytic terms, the rationalization of nature necessarily brings about the consolidation of ego. Adorno struggled over whether this structuration of the self, which emerges only through rigid socialization, indeed embodies in some regard a new form of "freedom." He asserts, for instance, that in the age of industrialism "the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere." Yet the true emancipatory potential of this individualized sphere—of selfhood—proved to be a central, and unresolved, concern of critical theory (Adorno 17–18; see also Whitebrook 132–40).

Horkheimer and Adorno turn to the Odysseus myth in order to illustrate how the "birth" of subjectivity in fact equates to a renunciation of one's internal nature. As they argue, only the "cunning of reason" allows Odysseus the illusion that the law has somehow been circumvented. Odysseus's separation from home over the course of his ten-year journey enables him to elude