



HEMISPHERIC AND TRANSOCEANIC NARRATIVES OF AMERICAN TRAVELS

An Introduction

Out of many Early Modern narratives of the voyage to America, one text affected the European imagination—and its subsequent literary expressions—more than others: the 1493 letter of Christopher Columbus to Luis de Santángel. This document is often regarded by literary scholars as the holotype underpinning the modern genre of travel writing (Campbell 166). Echoing the narrative structures of Arthurian romance¹, and inspired by Mandeville, Marco Polo, Pierre d'Ailly, Ptolemy, and Seneca, Columbus's letter is perceived both as a herald of new times and a relic of an earlier era. The narrative conventions employed in this letter have endured through the centuries: the rhetoric of discovery, patterns of conquest, acts of possession through naming, and the dream of reaching the *locus amoenus*—the Earthly Paradise—continue to resonate strongly in the travel narratives ever since.

In Columbus's letter, blending fiction and reality, biblical metaphors materialize as the author invokes religious imagery while bearing witness to his observations. This formula allows the narrator to reinforce his authority through references to personal travel experiences and emphasis on his unique social position (Livingstone 132). As the dominant intellectual paradigms evolve throughout the Early Modern Period, travelogue and fieldwork diary—relying upon analogous concepts of authority—became the primary models for narratives that would be acknowledged as “objective” representations of the reality of “the Other,” while “being somewhere”—the physical experience of one's presence in a particular location—came to be recognized

Adam Pisarek and Barbara Orzeł
Institute of Culture Studies,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7298-3155>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9872-364X>

1 —especially with regard to the construction of its narrator's character.

as an argument attesting to the objectivity of cognition. Consequently, new perspectives on the relationship between metaphor, writing, and the world—perspectives that would increasingly eschew analogist thinking (Descola 276)—came to influence the formulas of cognitive procedures, thereby affecting the understanding of the nature of acquired knowledge (Pisarek 98).

Michel de Certeau designed a study of the intricate interplay between science, fiction, imagination, and research, demonstrating how travel and writing co-constituted modern modes of cognition (de Certeau 221–26). However, what he failed to fully address were the limitations of his project, which relied upon the accounts of a relatively narrow, albeit numerous, group of literate travelers, administrators, missionaries, merchants, and researchers—individuals, who collectively produced a naturalistic *episteme* amidst an almost infinite, multidirectional, transoceanic mobility of people, goods, and lifestyles. Accompanying this movement was the ephemeral—uncontrollable and unrecordable—circulation of stories.

Such multiplicity, impossible to reduce to a few organizing principles, defies confinement within any single explanatory framework. To meet this challenge, therefore, we open *RIAS* to this abundance, taking a step toward the decolonization of the narrative(s) of hemispheric and transoceanic American travels and of thereto related research. Embracing the non-homogeneity of the plethora of the scattered, and sometimes incoherent narratives—whose functions (and functionalizations) change, and whose perspectives vary—we emphasize the polyphony of voices. To decolonize such a multifaceted discourse, it is necessary to decentralize the conceptualization of travel narratives as necessarily bound with the idea of representation, and thereby to take a step beyond the perception of the whole genre as determined solely by the dichotomy of “truth” and “fiction” (de Certeau 221–26), which is why the articles populating this issue discuss poetry, prose, cartography, YouTuber accounts, performance arts, and other areas whose scope extends far beyond textuality. Directly or indirectly, their authors problematize the role of the medium in narrating the experience of displacement, and, sensitive to the entanglement of the accounts with colonial discourses, the scholars follow narratives that dismantle dominant forms of travel imagination regarding the Americas. By doing so, they demonstrate that a cognitively fertile field of freedom exists within—and in-between—both textual and extra-textual testimonies.

Disentangling the intertwined perspectives from which transoceanic narratives emerge is crucial to the ongoing decolonization efforts. Journeys begin in diverse places, are driven by varied motivations

and goals, and involve different bodies—bodies affected by colonial relations and entwined in a web of dominant modes of perception. The hopes and fears of those who travel vary, too. With this in mind, each article in this issue of *RIAS* brings into light marginalized stories and subjects, depicting “the journey” as “exile,” “incapacitation,” “identity transformation,” “myth-following,” or as a politically propelled movement (wartime expeditions). Hence, the reflections in this issue focus not only on journeys *from* other continents to the “world” that was not “new” at all, but also encompass land-locked journeys *within* the Americas, raising the question of how individual travel can reshape the narratives of the Americas both within and beyond the dual continent, and how it may affect the American representations of the world outside. Unsurprisingly, voices from India, Central-Eastern Europe, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas resonate in this volume.

Underlying the insights signaled above is the fundamental question: What does it mean to travel?—a question extending beyond how travel narratives are constructed to the nature of the travel experience itself. Is travel linked exclusively to movement to and from home, or is it a concept built upon the structures of radical identity transformation? Is it a way of navigating a mapped world, or is it a continually revised method of engaging with a world in motion? Is it, essentially, moving along a line (Ingold 45), or is it a process of constant weaving and unweaving of ties with places, beings, and things encountered? Can travel be seen as a form of protest, or would it always be a form of escape? These questions inspire our authors to seek, and provide, answers that turn out to transcend the triad of knowing—discovering—experiencing. The journey may emerge as an outcry, an uprootal, an attempt to recreate perceptions, or a method of shattering them; it may be familiar, but it may also involve exclusive engagement with strangeness.

Transoceanic travel narratives are intrinsically linked to the creation of authorial identity and involve the building of the relationship with the traveler’s body. For these reasons, attention to how the body influences the narrative—and the story—is crucial. New and old media connect bodies to places, but it is also these embodied differences that, reciprocally, influence media use. In this respect, the authors of the studies collected here allow us to understand *how* the body of a soldier and the narrative built around it will differ from those of an enslaved person or of a woman, but also explain *why* such a difference calls for different means of expression. In an attempt to account for the complexity of these phenomena, this issue of *RIAS* demonstrates how

deeply intersectional bodies resonate in transoceanic travel narratives, with the explorer's body becoming one of many.

The opening contribution to our issue, "Voyage of Paradoxes: Reconstructing Indian Indenture in the Caribbean" by Anjali Singh, scrutinizes the nearly century-long British indenture system that forcibly relocated 1.3 million Indians to Caribbean plantations. Singh focuses on the pragmatic, survival-driven transoceanic voyages across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, which starkly contrast with the romanticized myths traditionally associated with indenture. These journeys, far from being adventurous odysseys, were crucibles of communal identity formation and the genesis of diasporic narratives. Singh explores a rich tapestry of poetry, fiction and prose that reinterpret these arduous experiences, allowing subsequent generations to reclaim their forebears' intricate legacies. By bringing to light the often overlooked "his" and "her" stories, Singh's study illuminates the inherent paradoxes of the indentured experience. Significantly enriching our understanding of hemispheric and transoceanic narratives within American travel literature, Singh offers a profound, often disconcerting, insight into the socio-cultural dynamics of migration and identity formation in the Americas.

In "Where Stories Are Alive: Traveling into Wolverine's Territory in Eowyn Ivey's *To the Bright Edge of the World*," Małgorzata Poks delves into the profound moral dilemmas and conflicting duties that characterize Lieutenant Colonel Forrester's 1885 expedition into Alaska. Ivey's narrative, inspired by the historical explorations of Henry Tureman Allen, diverges from factual accounts to explore the intricacies of colonial ventures and the personal transformations of those navigating these terrains. Integrating anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's concept of Amerindian perspectivism, Poks argues that *To the Bright Edge of the World* transcends traditional travel literature norms and redefines the interaction with (and comprehension of) diverse realms, advancing the decolonization of narrative techniques. This feature seamlessly merges personal experiences with political realities, shedding light on the complexity paradoxes that enhance and define the field of American Studies.

In her insightful analysis, Beata Gontarz explores Jan Józef Szczepański's 1971 collection of reportages, *Koniec westernu* (*The End of the Western*), which chronicles his observations of America during his stay from October 1968 to June 1969. Having previously visited the US on a Harvard scholarship a decade earlier, Szczepański offers a comparative perspective on the societal shifts of the late 1960s. The title, *The End of the Western*, symbolizes the decline of the pioneer

ethos that once defined America. Szczepański examines the cultural and moral upheavals of the “kiddie revolution” and its negative impacts on American society, drawing parallels to the youth movements of 1989 in Europe, particularly in Poland. He also documents the emancipation struggles of black Americans and the passivity of Native Americans in claiming their rights, highlighting systemic injustices and marginalization. Through his perceptive lens, Szczepański predicts the decline of the “white conqueror” narrative. Gontarz’s article underscores Szczepański’s keen insights into a transformative period in American history, capturing a society on the brink of profound change as seen through the eyes of a discerning Polish writer.

The author of the next article, Sabina Sweta Sen-Podstawska, investigates the dynamic relationship between Indigenous spatial practices and counter-mapping as expressions of cultural identity and sovereignty across North America, often referred to as Turtle Island in Indigenous creation stories. Gwilym Lucas Eades’s research underscores how Indigenous communities utilize spatial imagination, maps, and digital media not only to navigate but also to reclaim land, assert sovereignty, and transmit cultural knowledge while challenging colonial impositions through counter-mapping. This approach, defined as activism against dominant power structures, restores Indigenous voices and perspectives, questioning Western notions of space and boundaries. By integrating decolonial cartographic methodologies and Indigenous perspectives on land and mapping, these acts of walking and performing are theorized as powerful counter-mapping practices that contribute to the decolonization of Turtle Island and facilitate embodied healing.

The resurgence of Indigenous theatre in Canada exemplifies a similar, powerful movement of anticolonial resistance, cultural reclamation, and intellectual sovereignty. Eugenia Sojka examines the contributions of Floyd Favel (Cree), Monique Mojica (Kuna/Rappahannock), and Kim Senklip Harvey (Syilx/Tsilhqot’in/Ktunaxa/Dakelh), whose land-based and community-engaged practices redefine Indigenous theatrical sovereignty. Drawing on frameworks by Ric Knowles, Lindsay Lachance, and Jill Carter, the study highlights their use of Indigenous philosophies, relational worldviews, and ceremonial traditions. The article posits Indigenous theatre as a vital knowledge-building practice that bridges ancestral and contemporary worlds, offering profound insights into decolonization, community-making, and environmental ethics. As these artists engage with the land as collaborators and archives, they generate a uniquely sovereign theatre that reanimates Indigenous ontologies while addressing global crises

of alienation and ecological disconnection. Sojka's study situates their work as an urgent call for re-indigenization—an embrace of pluriversal perspectives and relational ethics essential for the cultural and spiritual resurgence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike.

In “País de las Amazonas: Una Delimitación Imaginada en la Cartografía Francesa Colonial del Siglo XVIII,” Daniel Esteban Unigarro examines the portrayal of the Amazon River in 18th-century French colonial maps. Unigarro traces the cartographic evolution from the initially accepted labels (like Santa María de la Mar Dulce and Río de Orellana, postulated after Francisco de Orellana's 1542 expedition), to the eventual dominance of the mythical appellation of the “River of the Amazons.” This name not only reshaped the river's identity but also redefined its vast basin in the collective geographical consciousness of Europe. Unigarro proposes that the maps under study represented the area as the “Country of the Amazons” as a deliberate act, one rooted in colonial imagination, and aligning more with French territorial aspirations than with any recognized administrative reality. No European power of the time acknowledged “Amazon” as a formal jurisdiction in America, highlighting how these cartographic exercises were less about accuracy and more about asserting dominance in a region fiercely contested by Spanish and Portuguese interests. His examination eloquently reveals how myth and colonial aspirations intertwined in the cartographic crafting of the New World, particularly in the strategic and symbolic carving out of the Amazon basin.

In “New American Grand Tours and Travel Narratives of Video Bloggers: Leisure, Cultural Myths and Crisis Management in Visual Storytelling,” Anna Maj inquires into the digital reinvention of the Grand Tour through the work of Polish video bloggers. Equipped with cameras and with YouTube channels at their disposal, these modern explorers present the Americas as both familiar and foreign. Their journeys challenge both media-shaped myths of America and their own preconceptions. Maj's analysis goes beyond geographical exploration and focuses on cultural repositioning, where bloggers act as narrators and connectors, creating cohesive virtual communities. By examining audiovisual content and conducting a netnographic analysis of popular Polish travel vlogs, Maj reveals how these narratives manage crises, debunk myths, and invite viewers to see the “real America.” Her study highlights how digital storytellers transform leisurely journeys into acts of cultural myth-making, offering a wry commentary on the new lore of a continent.

The article “Visualizing the Other: Media Representations of Nina Khrushcheva During Khrushchev's State Visit to the United States

in 1959,” authored by Mariya Doğan, explores the pivotal role of the gender discourse during the Cold War. She examines how American media portrayed Soviet women as both symbols of the communist threat and as a means to alleviate America’s post-war gender anxieties. Focusing on the Khrushchev Thaw and the Soviet leader’s 1959 visit to the US, Doğan highlights how Nina P. Khrushcheva’s presence allowed the American press to humanize Soviet women, easing international tensions. This reconfiguration shifted the portrayal of Soviet femininity, creating a lasting change in the American public sphere. The study shows how media representations can reflect—and influence—international relations, contextualizing these changes within a broader historical framework.

Christopher E. Koy examines Saul Bellow’s literary depiction of the Eastern Bloc, shaped by his 1978 trip to Ceaușescu’s Romania to support his ailing mother-in-law. Direct exposure to the repressive Securitate influenced his narrative in *The Dean’s December* (1982), where Bellow’s anxiety-induced self-censorship softened his critique of the Romanian regime. Revisiting these themes in *Ravelstein* (2000), Bellow adopted a sharper tone, weaving in the fascist past of his colleague Mircea Eliade and the murder of Professor Ioan Culianu. This shift from reserved observations to a pointed critique emphasizes the significant influence of geopolitical and personal experiences on a writer’s work, as Koy illustrates how Bellow’s perspectives evolved into a profound moral censure of the conditions he encountered.

The thematic section of the issue closes with Angelo Arminio’s “Geographies of Terror: Homecoming and Displacement in GWOT Literature,” which delves into contemporary War on Terror literature, showcased by Elliot Ackerman’s *Places and Names* (2019) and Phil Klay’s *Missionaries* (2020). Arminio scrutinizes the spatial dynamics, cultural encounters, and dislocations engendered by the interwoven conflicts defining the early 21st century. These narratives underscore the nebulous and perpetual nature of the Global War on Terror, depicting soldiers not as returning heroes but as nomadic figures endlessly seeking a semblance of home in successive conflicts. Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s concepts of contemporary warfare and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of war machines, Arminio illustrates how war zones are depicted as economically pivotal, self-replicating hubs of global power and violence. The characters in these narratives are portrayed as itinerant beings, forever bound to the war machine, perpetually traversing global conflict zones. This portrayal weaves a complex tapestry of ceaseless, interconnected skirmishes, reflecting the relentless cycle of modern warfare.

The features included in this issue offer inspiring insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of migration, identity formation, and the issues of physical and mental nomadism, exploring a variety of problem areas, ranging from Indigenous spatial practices to the contemporary media conquest of new territories. Analyses offered by the authors guide the reader through experiences concentrated in diverse types of narratives, encompassing text and image, history and memories, the rediscovered past and the flickering present. Drawing new paths in the interpretation of travel, the scholars participating in this issue redefine space as unlimited and fluid, thus setting new directions in the understanding of real and virtual travel, and thereby profoundly enriching the field of hemispheric and transoceanic American Studies.

Abstract: Hemispheric and transoceanic narratives of American travels originated amidst an almost infinite, multidirectional, transoceanic mobility of people, goods, and lifestyles. Such multiplicity, impossible to reduce to a few organizing principles, defies confinement within any single explanatory framework. To meet this challenge, therefore, we open *RIAS* to this abundance, taking a step toward the decolonization of the narrative(s) of hemispheric and transoceanic American travels and of thereto related research. Embracing the non-homogeneity of the plethora of the scattered, and sometimes incoherent narratives—whose functions (and functionalizations) change, and whose perspectives vary—we emphasize the polyphony of voices. To decolonize such a multifaceted discourse, in this issue of *RIAS* we gathered articles which decentralize the conceptualization of travel narratives as necessarily bound with the idea of representation, disentangle the intertwined perspectives from which transoceanic narratives emerge and answer again to the question what it means to travel.

Keywords: *Review of International American Studies*, introduction, travel narratives, decolonial studies, socio-cultural dynamics of migration, narrative history

Bios:

Barbara Orzeł is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Cultural Studies of the University of Silesia in Katowice. She holds a PhD in cultural studies. Her broad research and teaching interests include digital humanities, media anthropology, sociology of fashion, sociology of consumption, media linguistics, and public relations. She is the author of *Crises, Media and Emotions. Modelling Public Moods in the Age of Fake News and Artificial Intelligence* (will be published in 2025), *Cultural and Social Contexts of The Covid-19 Pandemic* (Katowice 2021), *Mobile Application as a Cultural Phenomenon* (Katowice 2017), and *The Appleization of Culture. Changing Communication Behavior in the Context of New Media* (Katowice 2014). She was also the editor of the volume *What Is New in New Media? Transformations, Perspectives, Expectations* (Katowice 2019). Adam Pisarek is an Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is the author of *Polish Hospitality. On Materiality*

of an Idea (University of Silesia Press, 2014) and co-author of *To Salvage. Zofia Rydet and Vernacular Photography* (University of Lodz, 2020). His recent research and writings are concerned with ecology of knowledges and relational patterns of more-than-human waterworlds.

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