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# On The Death of Travel Writing

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Every time I read the newest edition of *The Best American Travel Writing* anthology, I notice its corpse-like appearance. This happened one day in a coffee shop as I opened the anthology eager to read the essays that were selected from 2016. Reading the forward by series editor, Jason Wilson, I choked on my hot chocolate audibly enough to make a line of desperate coffee-consumers concerned. I read, according to Wilson, that travel writing may be on the verge of death. I put the anthology down and swatted the annoying fly that was buzzing around the anthology with my bare hand. I opened up my laptop and did some research. In 2017, *Granta* literary magazine bravely dedicated one of its issues (*Granta* 138: Journeys) to the question that many travel writers seem to be hearing on every corner: Is travel writing dead?

This question deserves exploration, since what's at stake is a kind of writing that can facilitate not only stories of trips and journeys, but ones of movement and migration – if we can expand our definition of travel, that is.

In my case, I write about my travels to explain the aftershock of movement. I can make sense of the internal urgencies that I feel inside after visiting family and friends in Latin America and Spain. Arriving in the United States, I always experience reverse culture shock, which feels like a thousand bumble-bees buzzing around my ears for thirty days straight. To me, it means re-encountering the United States as if I'd experienced it for the very first time. Everything seems out of place because I return having adopted another perspective and another routine, which makes me question everything. I often find myself confused and wondering why things are the way they are. I'll never forget the time I ordered a small popcorn at a US movie theatre after recently returning from Madrid. Without even thinking about it, the words rolled right out of my mouth, "Is this a small? Is it for a small family?"

Or when I saw my car in Fort Collins, Colorado for the first time after weeks of getting around by subways, trains, and buses in Buenos Aires. I could

feel an eerie sense of being out of touch with the natural movement of my environment. I remember thinking I'd rather just walk to the nearest Transfort bus stop with my empty green grocery bag. This way of going to the store made the most sense to me. My roommate called me crazy for not "liking" my car enough, but I was nostalgic for the community feeling that *transporte público* brought to my life in the Argentinean capital, not to mention that I also lost ten pounds by simply taking *subtes*, *trenes*, and *colectivos* while still eating heaps of empanadas and *asado argentino*. I never minded, not even once, squeezing into a subte during the city's evening rush hour packed with sweaty foreheads and a gentleman playing "Stand by Me" on his *guitarra criolla*. I have at least learned that sitting in front of the *obelisco*, I envision what my life would be like if I were to ever live there for a length of time. For me, travel means that I can find my home in multiple places.

I also write about my travels partly because it allows me to explore what migration and movement means to me. I understand what it means to arrive in the United States and what it means to go back. I am reminded about my own dual identity. That there is such a thing as being more than one thing and from more than one place. There's also such a thing as speaking more than one idioma. I can reclaim my identity within a culture that has historically told its people: *you are from this country only, English only*.

After having been asked why I travel, I often wonder if another valid question is not just *why* the writer travels, but *when* the writer travels and under what political and social contexts. Editor Jason Wilson addresses this exact point by saying, "What's important to remember about Travel writing is that it's not just about where one goes, or who makes the trip, or how they travel, or why. It's also about *when* that journey takes place." Whenever I travel these days, I've grown accustomed to my close friends wanting to discuss the latest *política* of President Trump. I'm also asked why the United States has mass shootings. I'm asked about a place like Charlottesville or what it means when a *futbolista afroamericano* takes a knee during the national anthem. I can't say I always have the answers. My friends often find that I, too, am asking the same questions. I *do* know that I've made more friends traveling in 2018 than I ever did in 2015. Part of this, I think, is because we're just trying to make sense of ourselves in a world where the only things we can be sure of these days are the beef *empanadas* we eat on Sunday afternoons in a cold, but not so cold, Buenos Aires. We can at least ask questions together and know that we're not alone in doing so. What does it mean to be educated these days? Why do I feel like an *hormiguita* in a world full of skyscrapers? Is it worth having children? Why is my *café con leche* so *espumoso*? Why is my hair *desordenado*?

While travel may not be the same thing as immigration, movement at the very least is a component of the immigrant experience. This calls for an

amplified definition of travel writing. Or as I like to call it, the Writing of Movement. As I read Gustavo Arellano's essay "The Syrian Baker Who's Bringing the Middle East's Most Famous Ice Cream to California," I can see a clear depiction of Maher Nakhal's ice cream shop, a place that reminds us about what it means to traverse borders and what it means to share a piece of a person's home with the communities of their second home. We can also be reminded that through movement, some of us gain more than one home in unexpected ways. Travel writing reminds us of this. It also teaches us that while travel might be, for some, an opportunity for relaxation, travel for others is an unanticipated necessity. For these individuals, travel might mean a chance at survival or the chance to make a decent living. A chance to breathe again.

I think about my father from Mexico, who travels almost every day along Colorado's Interstate 25 transporting cars from city to city. What might his Travel Essay tell us? Or my grandfather, whose father died when he was a young boy during the Mexican Revolution. As a ten-year-old child in the 1930s, he had no choice but to find work to help his mother out. Taking his donkey, he traversed towns selling coal to the people of Nayarit. He was disparaged by almost all his cousins because the coal often left him very dirty. They were ashamed of being related to him. When he met my grandmother in the 1940s (or during World War II), he decided to travel to the United States to obtain a higher income for his family. He had no other option. In an age of urban city development where agricultural labor was abandoned, he was one of the few allowed into the country under the Bracero Program started by Franklin D. Roosevelt. My grandmother traveled to the border city of Juárez to stay with a friend. She couldn't enter with her husband. Under the program, families were separated at the border. While living in tight quarters with her girlfriend, my grandmother worked and raised an entire household of four young boys – three of them infants, including my father. She waited for my grandfather to get their paperwork through. They eventually settled in a little town in west Texas called Earth, of all places (imagine always having to tell people where you live). I often wonder what their Travel Essays might tell us.

Or how about the families currently being separated at the US southern border? Those who have traversed mountains, forests, and deserts to seek the asylum that they have the right to seek. It's reported that between October 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018, 2,700 children, at the very least, have been separated from their parents. These numbers indicate that on average, forty-five children are being separated from their parents each day upon arrival to the United States. Even though it is not a crime to seek asylum in the United States, this horror is a direct result of specific policies that have been implemented across the southern border. Travel writing might be the very thing we need right

now. If nothing else, it becomes a reminder that our world is becoming more globalized whether we like it or not.

Much of this writing is already being shared in several places. Travel writer Lindsey Hilsum says, "The accounts of such journeys–the dangers of the desert followed by the perils of the sea–are included not in anthologies of travel writing, but police and immigration authority reports. They tell of torture, rape, despair and a determination to keep going that defies the understanding of the comfortable." Travel writer Rana Dasgupta says, "Refugees–this roving one percent of our species–generate a lot of text. Travel literature, written on cracked phones and sent via intermittent Wi-Fi–and in these stuttering chronicles, the world is not a sentimental object of contemplation. This is a literature of checkpoints and fences, and the improvised gaps through which desperate people pass. It is a literature of essential tools and documents and leaving one's soul behind." I wonder then how creative nonfiction might include these stories, or actively seek them out. These individuals are the true heroes of travel writing. Their stories represent boldness in the face of danger and courage amid fear. Their stories also speak of what it means to grab adversity by its neck and fight like hell to survive.

Fortunately, the landscape of travel writing is slowly shifting away from its colonial form, the one that speaks of the privileged individual from the western country setting out to examine the "poor other" by documenting it in a travelogue. Or if *The Log of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America in the Year 1492* is readily available to a readership on Amazon, I can, at least, count on scholars like Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Leela Gandhi to blast the seeds of colonialism and racist ideologies with healthy doses of scrutiny that are long overdue. Part of the change in travel writing is the new autoethnographic emphasis on the inward self, instead of the "other". This is a basic lesson in humility. Before looking at others, I better look at myself first.

In this sense, we're starting to see a multiplicity of first-person narratives that are reflective and that go beyond a depiction of what was seen. Thanks to the mobility of our laptops and telephone gadgets, we can google our way through the streets of Bogotá and travel about the beaches of Costa Rica any time we want. What is the purpose of travel writing then? It provides a voice and a deep connection to the human experience of mobility, which is something that Google Apps can't do (not yet at least). Travel writer Morwari Zafar says, "Writing and reading on journeys is about touching your own soul to someone else's, an act of cathartic acknowledgment that, simply, they exist. In that process, we come to know ourselves and in sharing it, we come to be understood." I wonder then if one of the most significant things we can do right now is read a first-person travel narrative. Or try our hand at it.

The latest essays I've read have used a first-person travel narrative to connect us with the narrators on the page. That as we acknowledge their existence, according to Zafar, we might understand things not only about them, but about ourselves *through* them. In her essay "The Strangeness of Being a Latina Who Loves Hiking," published by *Vox*, Amanda Machado discovers her love for the outdoors upon visiting Ecuador, where her family is from. Machado examines the social barriers that exist in the United States between outdoor recreation and Latinx communities. I'm reminded, then, that the recreational outdoors hasn't always been for dominant cultures. After reading Machado's essay, the Rocky Mountains seem larger to me than I had once thought. I'm slowly reclaiming my space within nature. And as I read Shahnaz Habib's essay "India's Wild Heart" published by *AFAR* magazine I think about the storytelling traditions within my own family. Habib travels to the forests of Kerala for the first time after having grown up nearby, in the urban city of Kochi. Recalling the stories her grandmother would tell her about the forests, she learns to adopt the language of nature as part of her literacy.

I dare say, then, that the "death" of travel writing is a bit absurd. In his essay "Is Travel Writing Dead?" Pico Iyer writes, "Travel Writing isn't dead; it can no more die than curiosity or humanity or the strangeness of the world can die." Through these words, Iyer is reminding us that we are curious and strange human beings who engage in the act of movement every single day. The need to document our journeys is vital for a profound yet simple understanding of what makes us human.

Some might argue that "death" only means change, which tells us that travel writing is only doing what it knows how to do best: travel. It's not a coincidence that the sub- genre is always moving through various forms: Travel Memoir, Travel Narrative, Travel Graphic Narrative, Travel Autoethnography, to name a few. Maybe it's us who mistake its roaming identity for: oh, yeah, must be dead. I wonder then if the term "travel writing" would only morph into another term: Writing on the Move, Writing Across Borders, the Writing of Movement. I'm not sure if the name would ever change though. Whatever it's called, travel writing will continue because as long as we are and as long as we move, we will always find a way to document that experience.

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