

SPECIAL SECTION ON TRAVEL WRITING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Itinerant Knowledge Production in European Travel Writing—Introduction

Florian Krobb, *National University of Ireland Maynooth*,
and Dorit Müller, *Freie Universität Berlin*

Abstract

Travel is a special form of human mobility that is subject to different historical conditions and one that, deliberately or not, always entails knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer. Travel facilitates the encounter with peoples, ideas, and material artifacts. In the age of Enlightenment, the nexus between travel and knowledge gained a new intensity, as the movement beyond the known turned into a specific scientific project with manifestations in theoretical reflection as well as literary practice. In the special section on Travel Writing and Knowledge Transfer contributors from the fields of Literary and Travel Studies investigate how human mobility gains epistemic significance in the exploration of nature and foreign cultures. The articles focus on conditions and forms of knowledge production while traveling (itinerant knowledge). They analyze how observations, experiences, and reflections made on the move are molded and transformed in fiction and nonfiction, and they discuss the impact on European cultural and intellectual horizons.

Keywords

Enlightenment, European travelogues, interculturalism, knowledge production, mobility, scientific travel, systems of representation

The Emergence of Scientific Travel

Since the early modern era, travel and knowledge have existed in a reciprocally enhancing relationship, as the field of Travel Writing Studies has shown.¹ When there was no other well-defined pragmatic aim behind travel—such as commercial ventures, pilgrimages, diplomatic missions—in the early modern



period the cultural and epistemological practice of knowledge acquisition was largely a matter of “curiosity.”² Curiosity also provided the drive behind the European expansion into and conquest of distant territories. In this broad context, a specialization and professionalization of specific travel expertise can be observed that, over time, produced a form of travel that could well be labeled “academic,” since its protagonists had academic training in both traditional and newly emerging sciences and because their main motivation as well as their activity en route consisted of intellectual pursuits, including collecting and describing natural phenomena.³ A related trend is that of the mediation of travel by way of publication of travel literature intended to guide travelers’ interactions with strange phenomena and with “The Other” in general.⁴ Increasingly, travelers were registered, their itineraries preapproved and monitored, and their movements subject to bureaucratic procedures.⁵

The development of scientific travel entered a new phase of intensity in the Enlightenment period. On “enlightened” journeys, cultural practices such as collecting, surveying, systematizing, and evaluating were employed, and subjects of observation were described, represented (in word and image), and integrated into existing knowledge systems.⁶ By the eighteenth century at the latest, “scientific” travel assumed the status of a specifically empirical scientific methodology of knowledge production.⁷ In this period, the significance of travel for the legitimization and manipulation of epistemic systems increased; henceforth, travel provided information and insight into the remotest of places, alien phenomena of the natural world, and foreign cultures.⁸ Travel also enriched and enhanced the structure of fields of knowledge. Their importance to the emergence of scientific practices and methods as well as customs of surveying, measuring, systematizing, recording, and verifying cannot be underestimated, as the mode of autopsy had now become the greatest authority in knowledge generation. As regards the critique of scientific practices, the importance of travel increased because access to previously unknown areas and phenomena pointed up the limits of established knowledge and the weaknesses of previous assumptions and interpretations.⁹ Exploratory expeditions generally transgressed the boundaries of established cultures of knowledge characterized by systems of notation and representation, semantics, and truths that had taken on the weight of tradition.¹⁰ This forced travelers to engage with puzzling observations and to foreground methods of questioning and comparing, by which familiar and strange conventions were brought into reciprocal relationships and underwent scrutiny. The result constituted an act of challenging, if not undermining, hardened power relationships and systems of knowledge.¹¹ Travel as a form of communication and cognition can function as the trigger of a deliberate negation of established regimes of knowledge,¹² as Herder emphatically claimed in his *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*. In Herder’s view, maritime travel in particular facilitates a sensual approach to experience, and thus serves as an indispensable com-

plement to purely empirical and factual knowledge and abstract theoretical scholarship.¹³

Travel Writing and the Generation of Knowledge

Since itinerant knowledge production is intricately linked to linguistic representation, it is not surprising that the connection between travel and knowledge has entered the area of literary criticism.¹⁴ The narrativization of travel may be seen to reduce the complexity of actual experiences to a communicable level and, concurrently, the “voice of the Other” might become obscured beneath genre conventions, stereotypes, and fantasies.¹⁵ Conversely, narratives of travel often function as an occasion for the incorporation of the strange and unknown into familiar aesthetic and representational frameworks. Travel and its dynamics provide a structure for any attempt at knowledge transfer, which is particularly important when it comes to the communication of phenomena (sights, experiences) the description of which has never been attempted before. Travel narratives popularize (often by incorporation into narratives of adventure) knowledge of the newly discovered. Famous journeys and notorious events could become subject to any number of narrative reenactments, which are in turn rereadings and reevaluations of the events and encounters in question. These tend to highlight or disseminate knowledge that was previously not acknowledged. Thus, verbal representations of travel experience are not only products but also producers of knowledge, as they have the potential to alter the conditions of how knowledge is framed and absorbed by the public.

In many cases, notations of observations, experiences, and insights are made on the spot, in others they are made retrospectively; mostly, however, the stages of notation and evaluation overlap and combine. Diaries and letters, learned and popular travelogues, cartographic and photographic depictions, novels and films provide contemporaries and posterity with a specific itinerant knowledge; they also provide scholars with the material for the investigation of the complex processes by which observation, impression, and experience generate knowledge, and how this knowledge is framed, expressed, and disseminated. This is linked to the question of imaginary, virtual, or fictional travel: are there categorical differences separating real and fictitious journeys, and the ways they represent the epistemological surplus?

A central epistemological concern of the investigation into any aspect of knowledge transfer in the context of travel involves the conditions in which knowledge is molded, transformed, communicated, and made into a tradition: how do the traveler’s personality, his/her circumstances and his/her cultural predispositions determine the process of knowledge acquisition? How do intellectual premises, historical and political conditions influence both the

traveler's observations and his/her communication? Do the chosen form of transport and the chosen route exert an influence on the content and mechanisms of knowledge transfer? And how do the forms of literary representation, the strategies and agendas, the anticipated impacts and the medial contexts influence itinerant knowledge? Conversely, the question arises as to whether epistemological experiences during travel alter travel practices and challenge existing concepts of mobility. Instances of "unsuccessful" travel (aborted journeys, accidents, unforeseen difficulties) may also shed light on cognition in the context of mobility.

Itinerant Knowledge Production: Four Case Studies

There is no doubt that modalities of travel and itinerant knowledge generation are determined by the interests, aims, and predispositions of the actors involved. Travelers bring their personalities to bear on their activity, but they are also always indebted to the knowledge culture that has shaped them and that they represent. Is there, however, a fundamental difference between itinerant and stationary modes of knowledge generation and knowledge transmission? Is itinerant knowledge—since it may entail encounters with the unfamiliar and the radically Other—categorically different from knowledge generated in familiar circumstances? Even knowledge produced in the familiarity of a scholar's laboratory, knowledge arising from deliberate hypotheses and conducted in controlled experimental settings, may produce the unexpected.

The articles assembled in this section are all similarly based on the assumption that there is indeed something special and distinct about itinerant knowledge production and transmission. Using travelogues and travel writing of western provenance, originating from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and encompassing journeys of discovery, exploration, education, and adventure, the contributions investigate the conditions in which itinerant knowledge is shaped, transformed, communicated, and made into a tradition through travel writing. It is understandable that the question of knowledge generation would move to the center of the cultural agenda during, and in the wake of, the Enlightenment period, as the modalities of pursuing and opportunities to acquire, order, and process knowledge from ever more distant places grew apace, but also as crucial epistemological questions began to receive attention. Hence, the four authors of the articles published in this special section tackle material from this period in their contributions.

How can ideas move from one geohistorical context to another without being simply assimilated into another culture? This is the question that intrigues Johann Gottfried Herder in his famous *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769*. Herder's text posits the association of ideas prompted by the sensation of mobility as an alternative to objective or rational knowledge. In Herder's

understanding, the mobility of the human body not only becomes the catalyst for the innate motions of the mind, it also provides the starting point for a specific formulation of knowledge. John K. Noyes demonstrates how Herder's "travelogue becomes a discursive form for testing the cultural and linguistic limits of knowledge, and it becomes a place where forms of knowledge can be imagined that transcend their own cultural location."

Another example of Enlightenment travel writing investigates a concrete travel experience (the crossing of the equator) as a site for the generation of knowledge on the move, its modalities, limitations, and potential. The limits of knowledge, the conditions of knowing and transmitting, reflections on the nature, contextuality, contingency, and validity of knowledge are sometimes conflated with reports and descriptions, and need to be brought to light from beneath a seemingly conventional surface. Similarly, the transmission of knowledge is determined by conditions that need to be examined for their influence on the actual knowledge transmitted and its outcomes. In this vein, Sebastian Kaufmann traces the transformation of ethnological knowledge in John Hawkesworth's well-known account of James Cook's first voyage (1768–1771). Kaufmann's comparison of Hawkesworth's report, saturated with fictitious elements, with Cook's and Joseph Banks's *Endeavour Journals* reveals that the travel accounts are not only means of knowledge transfer but also of knowledge construction. The ethnological knowledge acquired on the journey is not simply relayed to readers in Hawkesworth's account; instead, it is arranged in an evocative way, integrated into a narrative progression, and molded to suit its aesthetic purposes. As a figure of knowledge, mobility features here on three different levels: as scientific travel during which data are produced; as the movement of said data from agents of knowledge generation to editor of knowledge presentation; and then the process of transformation that knowledge undergoes in the texts themselves and in the relay to readers.

Rituals—that is, the "staging" of experience—can occasionally substitute for explicit verbalization of knowledge content, while at the same time instilling in readers certain views about the things described that assume the status of knowledge. The article by Michael Bies investigates descriptions of equator crossings since the sixteenth century, and addresses the relationship between travel and knowledge since each description refers to a distinct epistemological approach to the New World. His contribution shows the knowledge-generating power of this imaginary boundary that has not only stimulated the imagination but has also been a trigger for the articulation of epistemological questions and problems. Renditions of equator crossings expose the actual knowledge of travelers and writers, and anticipate on the level of narration what on the level of experience still lies ahead for them. In particular, they are expressions of "liminal knowledge," a knowledge of passing into the unknown.

As Tracey Reimann-Dawe argues, an often underestimated yet extremely significant aspect of the generation and transmission of knowledge lies in

the temporal construction of travel narratives. The ways German travelers in Africa integrate their experiences into a linear, measurable passage of time reveals their desire to assert their own Western mindset above that of the so-called primitive Other and points up the cognitive limits of these travelers from the late nineteenth century.

The contributions assembled in this special section are intended as an invitation to extend Mobility Studies into an area that has so far received relatively little attention—namely, the question of how human mobility gains epistemic significance, what demands are made and forms of knowledge forged, how these are expressed in literature of fictitious and factual varieties, and what that means for the cultural and intellectual horizons of the actors involved (producers and recipients alike). Such an undertaking requires both theoretical and historical expertise as well as deployment of methodologies commensurate with the specific cultural, textual, medial, and epistemological qualities of the materials. Finally, this approach demands intercultural awareness, in particular an understanding of the specific form and substance of the cultural contexts of the knowledge that informs the travel texts in question. Hence along these lines our special section can be also regarded as a substantial contribution to the Travel Writing Portfolio of *Transfers*, inviting submissions to investigate the entanglements between mobility and their written representations. This needs to be explored further within Mobility Studies, since no matter how we approach the modes of human mobility and their political, social, cultural, or epistemic consequences—we always have to deal with texts and their specific forms, strategies, narratives, and images shaping the way we perceive movement and mobilization. All the contributions in this collection deal with materials that stem from a Western cultural environment. A productive continuation of the investigations attempted here will have to incorporate sources that extend the spectrum of aspects addressed in this section, and must include perspectives from culturally different origins that reverse the paradigm of the Western traveler in the New World.

Florian Krobb is Professor of German at National University of Ireland Maynooth, and Extraordinary Professor in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He has served as editor of the yearbooks *Germanistik in Ireland* (2005–2009), *Austrian Studies* (2010–2017), and the *Jahrbuch der Raabe-Gesellschaft* (2011–2015). E-mail: Florian.Krobb@nuim.ie

Dorit Müller is a literary historian working at the Peter Szondi Institute of Comparative Literature at Freie Universität Berlin. Her research interests include travel writing, literature and mobility, spatial theory, history of knowledge, literature and film. Her current research project concerns Polar Travel in Literature and Visual Media. E-mail: dorit.mueller@fu-berlin.de

Notes

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 13. Johann Gottfried Herder, "Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769" [Journal of my travels in the year 1769], in *Werke*, ed. Rainer Wisbert, vol. 9/2 (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997), 9–126, here: 15; cf. also Stefan Hermes, "[W]as gibt ein Schiff, das zwischen Himmel und Meer schwebt, nicht für weite Sphäre zu denken! Seefahrt und (Nicht-)Wissen in Herders 'Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769'" ["Doesn't a ship between the ocean and the sky provide cause for spheric contemplation!"] Marine travel and (non-)knowledge in Herder's *Journal of my travels in the year 1769*, in *Versteckt, Verirrt, Verschollen: Reisen und Nicht-Wissen* [Hidden and lost: Travel and ignorance], 329–345.
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