



Writing the North in the Twenty-First Century: Gavin Francis and Sara Wheeler Through Arctic Europe and Beyond

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The article focuses on two books of travel writing, Gavin Francis’s *True North. Travels in Arctic Europe* (2008, 2010) and Sara Wheeler’s *The Magnetic North. Notes from the Arctic Circle* (2009, 2011), which represent journeys around the Arctic and self-consciously reflect upon received perceptions of the “old” continent’s polar regions and some northern territories beyond the physical-geographical confines of Europe. The narratives that the two authors present differ in significant ways: while Wheeler adopts a markedly gendered narratorial stance by representing herself, in her book’s opening chapter, as a parent travelling with her baby son, Francis assumes the stance of a “bookish wanderer,” following a precedent established by the noted writer, traveller, polyglot and war hero Patrick Leigh Fermor. Both texts shed light on important aspects of the travel genre in the present. They problematize colonialist patterns of portraying the places that their narrators visit and the “characters” whom they encounter in the process, and favour a perspective on travel which is sensitive to social, political, cultural and ecological issues. Wheeler, in particular, is very much concerned with the plight of indigenous populations and their struggle for survival and recognition in a changing world. While the problem of whether a total break with the ideological legacy of travel writing is possible remains unresolved in the two travel texts under consideration, they nevertheless enhance our knowledge and sense responsibility for the planet which we all inhabit, thus demonstrating the continued relevance of the travel genre to some of the key concerns of the present.

Keywords: Arctic, Europe, America, Asia, travel, travel writing, gender, politics, ethics, ecology.

Positioned in “the schizophrenic space between fact and fiction, narrative and reflection, [and] observation and aesthetics” (Kuehn 93), travel writing has gained considerable critical recognition over the last three decades or so. No longer dismissed as a minor (quasi-)literary genre, it is being studied as an important vehicle for the expression and dissemination of a variety of ideas ranging from definitions of self and other to the production of knowledge and the construction of power relations on a world scale (see Lisle 1; Youngs 1–2, 165).

This article deals with two travel books, Gavin Francis’s *True North. Travels in Arctic Europe* (2008, 2010) and Sara Wheeler’s *The Magnetic North. Notes from the Arctic Circle* (2009, 2011), which represent journeys through Arctic Europe and other northern localities situated beyond the physical-geographical confines of the “old” continent that have nevertheless experienced the impact of projects of exploration and/or political schemes devised either by Europeans or the descendants of Europeans. By examining these two texts I hope to contribute to the analysis of European perceptions of the north and shed light on aspects of latter-day Anglophone travel writing.

The north has fascinated travel writers for a very long time. Like other parts of the globe, designated by one of the four cardinal points, it can be “as much an idea as it is a place” (Huggan 331), or, more properly speaking, a number of *places* – imagined, visited and represented by travel writers in different ways. Like the

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east, the west and the south, the north, or perhaps “*the North*” as an idea, has been approached from a variety of different perspectives and has stimulated the generation of numerous narratives, ranging from accounts of “routine” travel to stories focusing on the supernatural and “other-worldly” (see Walchester 44).

Francis’s book presents the first of the two northern journeys to be considered in this article. His journey begins in the Shetland Islands, includes the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland and the Svalbard, and ends in the Norwegian part of Lapland, although the book itself concludes with an Epilogue portraying a separate trip to Cape Wrath, the most north-westerly headland of the island of Great Britain (288–289). Wheeler represents “a counterclockwise journey – Siberia to Alaska, to Canada, to Spitsbergen, to Lapland, and back to Russia, to the White Sea” (*The Magnetic* 11).

While both writers speak about traversing various *Arctic* territories, they interpret the word “Arctic” in different ways. Thus, Francis adopts what may be described as a historical-etymological definition of the word, starting with its derivation from the Greek “*arktos*,” “bear,” and going on to explain that it was “originally used to indicate those lands that lie beneath the Constellation of the Great Bear” (5). On the whole, he is not particularly concerned with the delimiting of the Arctic zone from the rest of northern Europe or, in the case of Greenland, America. Wheeler, who is by far more preoccupied with scientific knowledge throughout her narrative, speaks of the near-impossibility of defining the Arctic zone in geographical and climatological terms. For her, the Arctic is “an indistinct geographical zone,” and its southern limits in particular are “movable feasts” (*The Magnetic* 7). She remarks upon the general tendency of viewing the Arctic Circle at 66°33′ as the zone’s frontier but adds that “climatological and other factors produce divergent conditions at different points on the circle” (*The Magnetic* 7). In Canada, for instance, “swaths of typical Arctic territory ... lie well south of the Arctic circle” (*The Magnetic* 7). Wheeler further maintains that in spite of this indeterminacy, the Arctic zone has long been of paramount importance for climatological, economic and political reasons (*The Magnetic* 8).

Despite divergences in their definitions, both authors appear to be convinced that the northern localities that they have visited and have chosen to present to their readers are in many ways powerful symbolic spaces with strong cultural, economic and political resonances. Underlying the differences in their approaches to their respective “norths” is a particular type of similarity which has to do with the major problem of producing travel writing in English in the twenty-first century. Since the two texts illustrate certain significant features of that kind of writing, I will continue my discussion with an overview of what may be termed “twenty-first-century Anglophone travel writing and its discontents.”

Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Travel Writing and Its Discontents: Writers Versus Critics

Tim Youngs has drawn attention to the arbitrary character of the classification of art by century and has aptly remarked that “there is no reason why literature published early in a new century should differ significantly from that published in the late years of the old one” (177). Nevertheless he opts for “what remains a common and psychologically appealing way of defining literary and other works” (177) in his own overview of *twenty-first-century* travel writing. As the title of the present article and the heading of this section indicate, I follow his example.

While commentators on the travel genre generally agree that it currently participates in a multitude of key political, socio-economic and cultural debates about the world which we all share (see Lisle 1; Youngs 1–2), there is also a tendency among them to censure Anglophone travel writers in particular for not having completely rejected and discarded the genre’s colonialist legacy.¹ It cannot be denied that in the past a lot of Anglophone travel writing was inspired by projects of colonial expansion, which also promoted global capitalism and “laid the foundations of [the] modern globalized world” (Thompson 3). At one level, such projects engendered a variety of cross-cultural contacts as they caused colossal voluntary and involuntary relocations of people, while at another, they established “the enormous inequalities that currently exist between the different regions of the world, and especially between the developed ‘West’ and less developed ‘Rest’” (Thompson 3). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a considerable number of travel writers from Great Britain and North

¹ The tendency is most typical of critics who have adopted the postcolonial approach to travel writing. For a recent commentary on travel writing and postcolonial theory, see Claire Lindsey, “Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies” (2016).

America accepted the ideology of white supremacy, which justified colonization and contributed to the denigration of allegedly inferior “others” dwelling for the most part outside the physical-geographical confines of Europe.² Despite subsequent economic, political and cultural changes in the world, elements of the colonialist vision, inherited from the past, still structure certain Anglophone travelogues and influence what, following Debbie Lisle, we may call “the production of cultural difference in the global realm” (6). The tendency to stress the superiority of travellers’ cultural and moral values and to disparage the values and lifestyles of “travellees,” the objectified others, who are visited and represented by travellers,³ has not become extinct yet.

Travel writers have been found wanting in yet another respect: it has been claimed that, unlike writers of “pure” fiction, they have mostly refrained from the kind of formal experimentation that denotes self-reflexivity. Thus, Lisle opposes the stance of the sure-footed narrator in travelogues to unreliable narrators in literary fiction (269). She defines “authorian sureness” in travel writing as a strategy deliberately adopted by a considerable number of writers as it enables them to “avoid asking difficult questions about both the role of the travel writer (e.g. Why am I here? What am I doing here?) and the [textual] production of others (e.g. What right have I to speak for others?)” (269). Lisle adds: “Given that travelogues are supposedly based on the theme of mobility, there is a spectacular lack of reflection on the relationship between subjectivity and travel” (269).

Certain travel writers have reacted to such accusations. For instance, William Dalrymple, a noted practitioner of the genre, has expressed considerable hostility to its critics, who, in his view, are not sufficiently sensitive to the traveller’s position as *an outsider*, “setting out alone and vulnerable on the road” (xxi). Critics, he avers, ignore the traveller’s insecurity and accuse him (quintessentially *him?*) of different forms of cultural imperialism (xxi). However, despite his negative attitude to the genre’s critics, Dalrymple appears to have taken his cue from some of the criticisms that have been levelled at travel writers and their texts. Thus, both his book *Nine Lives* (2010) and the texts of other writers that he admires as, for instance, Christopher de Bellaigue’s *Rebel Land: Unravelling the Riddle of History in a Turkish Town* (2009), do their best to problematize Lisle’s concept of “authorian sureness.” Through a historically-informed focus on people and places, Dalrymple and de Bellaigue have managed to organize their texts around narratorial selves⁴ that struggle to understand the “characters” whom they encounter and the complicated historical factors that have shaped the localities in which these “characters” are positioned.

Moreover, rather than stressing the authenticity and accuracy of travel accounts, as the representatives of earlier generations of travel writers might have done, Dalrymple admits that there is no great difference between travel writing and literary fiction: “the travel writer [can] use the techniques of the novel – develop characters, select and tailor evidence” (xx).⁵ Such elements indicate that contemporary Anglophone travel writing has moved beyond some of the traditional conventions of the genre. We may link this tendency to a desire on the part of contemporary travel writers to distance themselves from the ideological legacy of the colonial era.

The two writers under consideration in this article have similarly chosen to project images of themselves as struggling to make sense of the northern localities, which they have chosen to visit, through encounters with “travellees” in the present and the reproduction of stories, and, in Wheeler’s case, stories *and* statistics from the near or more remote past. Both narratives, as will be demonstrated, are characterized by a high degree of intertextuality although each of them is structured through a preference for a particular set of references, and therein lies yet another difference between them. Can we nevertheless detect elements in them that point back to the colonialist legacy of the genre? That remains to be seen.

² On “othering” within Europe, particularly with respect to the Balkans, a region which did not experience “conventional” colonization by the West but was nevertheless repeatedly subjected to the kind of denigration one associates with colonialism, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (1997).

³ The term “travel(l)ee” was coined by Mary Louise Pratt and used in her book *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992, repr. 2008).

⁴ On the relationship between the author of the travel text and “his/her narrative figure,” see Youngs (27, 187). Throughout this text I use “narratorial self,” “narrator” and “textual identity” rather than “narrative figure.”

⁵ Tim Youngs cites an earlier interview with Dalrymple in which he apparently favours a different approach to the “techniques of the novel.” See Youngs (8).

Gavin Francis as a “Bookish Wanderer” Through Arctic Europe and Beyond

In an attempt to outline some of the key tendencies in the development of Anglophone travel writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Dalrymple singles out the work of Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915–2011) and pronounces his two books, *A Time to Keep Silence* (1953) and *A Time of Gifts* (1977), to be “sublime masterpieces” (xvii). While extolling the excellence of Fermor’s style, he also credits him with the creation of “*the persona of the bookish wanderer* [my emphasis],” later adopted by Bruce Chatwin (1940–1989), the other famous travel writer of the post-Second World War period (xvii). Significantly, that also seems to be the “persona” or narratorial self, that Francis has chosen to adopt in *True North*. Throughout his text, he emerges as a highly reflective traveller who ponders upon the journeys of numerous predecessors from antiquity to modern and postmodern times. At the same time, like Chatwin, Pico Iyer and a few other well-known Anglophone travel writers, who produced some of their seminal work in the late twentieth century, Francis is a *wanderer*: he travels alone, and whenever possible, goes on foot or hitchhikes. He is not interested in the “benefits” that a more “touristic” approach to travel might provide and accepts whatever inexpensive or free accommodation and food are on offer.⁶ Francis’s mode of travelling might explain the book’s title: *The True North* as opposed to commodified versions of “*the North*” that might be provided to/for tourists. The narrative’s anti-touristic thrust is among its key features and a point to which I will return further on. On the other hand, it is also possible to read an ironic intent into the title of the book, as Graham Huggan has done: according to him, Francis is definitely not interested in “locating the ‘true’ north” but is rather using it “as [one of his book’s] structuring fictions” to enable “his own hyperactive forays into myths and histories of the European high north” (337).

Like a considerable number of earlier travel writers, Francis appears to view recorded travel as a symbolic site of the interaction of private and public. This would explain the numerous intertextual references with which his text is interspersed. He accesses the north through a variety of publicly available tales, ranging from the account of the voyage of St. Brendan and several Norse sagas to a somewhat biased relation of the exploits of Roald Amundsen, as well as through representations of his own personal experiences. The citing of previous texts reinforces the view of the narrator as a “*bookish wanderer* [my emphasis].”

The book’s long list of narratives about the north includes accounts by “ancient Greek mariners” for whom the lands lying “under the constellation of the Great Bear” represented “the very limits of the earth” (5). For the Greeks, the Arctic north of Europe was “a region so frozen that space itself seemed to slow down, become gelid” (5). While the ancient Greek image of a deeply frozen north has been very influential and is certainly discernible behind later European perceptions such as pre-romantic and romantic visions of the region in terms of the Burkean sublime, the “bookish wanderer” does not favour the Eurocentric tendency of privileging the Greek tradition. He remarks that “the Greeks were not the only ones who saw bears in ... constellations” but “ancient Hebrew astronomers too saw bears above the Pole,” and so did “several Native American cultures” (8). The narrator therefore concludes that “Europe has no monopoly on Arktos” (8).

Despite the abundance of previous narratives, Francis states in his Introduction to the 2010 edition that he first undertook to write his book as part of an attempt “to fill what was for me an unexpected gap in the canon of history and travel writing, that of the Arctic regions of Europe” (8). This may appear a fairly ambitious task. However, there is nothing of the arrogance of the discoverer or pioneer in Francis’s text: rather, it demonstrates his awareness of what was achieved and written by previous writers and travellers. “Literate Europeans,” he states, “discovered and wrote about the northern limits of their world in a step-wise fashion; uncovering, settling, and then reporting back on a new archipelago every few centuries; [i]t was a process of gradual revelation” (8). For this reason Francis represents the centuries-long activity of describing the north as a reflection of Europe’s own evolving awareness of itself and its understanding of its limits. The emphasis is on “limits”: the text’s narrator writes as a European but, as already remarked, is decidedly cognizant of the inadequacy of a solely European perspective.

Viewed in its totality, *True North* presents an account of early twenty-first-century travels through parts of the United Kingdom, Iceland, Greenland and Norway but also a “distilled cultural history” (8) of

⁶ On the “nomadic” mode of travelling adopted by Chatwin, Iyer and other travel writers of “the Post-Vietnam era,” see Casey Blanton (2002), especially pp. xii-xiv. On the stance of the “solo” traveller, who rejects mass tourism, see Lisle (78–85).

numerous journeys to the north, undertaken in the past, over “a period of millennia, spinning a thread from the Phoenician and Greek explorers of the North through to the twentieth century” (9). Francis himself defines his text’s organizing perspective as “shifting” between past and present. While drawing attention to the difficulty of maintaining a balance between these two temporal areas, he also highlights the multi-sided impact of the past and present upon the future of the vast Arctic region (9). Having been continually exploited for its natural resources and drawn into diverse geopolitical schemes, this part of the world is *changing* and the changes that it is currently undergoing may have fatal repercussions for Europe and the whole world. Francis’s chief ethical concern in the book is with the ecological, economic and cultural fragility of the north and the need to preserve its uniqueness.

That the region is under threat becomes clear to the narrator in the Shetlands where he starts his exploratory journey. The two core stories that he picks from people whom he meets there are to be repeated further on in his journey. One is a story of depopulation: in particular, of younger people leaving the region (18). The other core story is about individual cases of resettlement, as for instance, the resettlement of a young couple, Paul and Claire, out of Lincolnshire to the Shetlands (19). Paul has given up his factory job for self-sustaining farming and amateur painting (21). Further on Francis defines a pattern of resettlements to the north in which the desire for individual independence and self-fulfilment plays a dominant role (53). He obviously admires such aspirations but is not blind to the fact that cases of resettlement, similar to the one of Paul and Claire, are rare and that the tendency towards depopulation is the dominant one.

In the context of the book, the narrator’s concern with the fragility of the north is linked to a more general view of human life as a process shaped by ethical considerations. Francis’s ethical vision has to do with human relations, on the one hand, and human accountability to the world, which we all share, on the other. He explains in the book’s Prologue that the idea of a journey to the north came to him while he was working in a hospital in Africa. There he made the acquaintance of a woman from Iceland, who spoke about her own need of the two extremes: the tropical south and the north. The Icelander also shared her dream of working out “*a sustainable and ethical way to live with both* [my emphasis]” (11). Francis’s journey to the north is thus born out of a previous travelling experience and implies a desire to reconcile the claims of the south and the north at the level of personal ethics. Like the Icelander, he seems to be trying to work out “a sustainable and ethical way” of living. Working in Africa had to do with human relations and, more specifically, with helping people in need. It involved a series of direct confrontations with human suffering: Francis represents, in vivid detail, the case of a young boy suffering from cerebral malaria and his own shock at the child’s condition (11). Travelling through the north involves contemplation and evaluation of past and present perceptions of that part of the world but also a plea for the preservation of its “ecology, economy and culture” (11).

While a number of other writers on the north are similarly concerned with defending its fragility (see Huggan 333), Francis differs from most of them in stressing the importance of the study of past history as an activity that might prepare us for the future and help us make informed choices in difficult circumstances in the present:

The ice under the Great Bear is melting, and the earth of the arctic archipelagos is warming up. There is a very real possibility that the polar bear, that ancient and most resonant symbol of the Arctic, could become extinct because of man-made climate change. We may not be able to predict what is going to happen at the negotiating table or to the climate in the next few decades, but through *a judicious sifting of history* we might be better prepared for what might happen and be better informed about the choices that are open to us for the future [my emphasis]. (10)

The “bookish wanderer” is thus not in the clutches of a neoromantic obsession with the past. Nor is he inclined to idealize it in any way: in another passage he remarks on “the stories of greed, murder and starvation” (11) which were part of it. The narrator values the past for the useful lessons that it may teach those, who are aware of the ecological, cultural and economic problems of the present and are prepared to subject past history to “a judicious sifting” (10) as part of an attempt to solve them.⁷

⁷ Graham Huggan views Francis’s approach to the past from a different perspective. According to him, the book “mischievously spins ‘north’ – and ‘northern’ myths of authenticity – into an intricate web of fables and tall tales” (338), and this expresses a general awareness, typical of latter-day travel writing, of “the impossibility of [the genre’s] own imagined acts of historical recovery” (338). While such a reading highlights the ironic element in a lot of present-day travel writing, it completely ignores Francis’s avowed narratorial strategy of the “judicious sifting” of past history.

In the context of the book, tourism is represented as an instance of human self-indulgence and ostentatious materialism. According to the narrator's "distilled cultural history," it "evolved" out of exploration around the time of the Industrial Revolution (11), and established itself as a major mode of travel and "the model of [Western] selfhood" (Kinsley 235), typical of modern and postmodern times. Francis demonstrates that the north's past can easily be turned into a tourist attraction. During his visit to the Shetlands he notes the pride that Shetlanders take in the region's Norse past. One of the manifestations of that pride, the reconstructive annual ritual of setting fire to a Viking ship (24), attracts wealthy Norwegian tourists, who sail over in their luxury yachts. The narrator remarks wryly: "the Vikings had run out here from Bergen with an easterly wind in just under two days, and these yachts could do it faster" (24).

Further on in his book, Francis presents a sea voyage on a Norwegian ship that looks, and feels, like a quality hotel but still carries low budget passengers such as himself. However, that might change in the future as some of the high-paying individuals on board apparently "complained ... at the intrusion of scruffier passengers into their holiday" (205). According to the narrator, "[i]t remained to be seen whether Norwegian tolerance and egalitarianism would win out over the tourist dollar" (205). One might detect in this a tendency to idealize the egalitarian Norse spirit which could be traced back to the Victorian period.⁸ On the other hand, Francis problematizes such a view by presenting his readers with the distinct possibility of "the tourist dollar" "winning out" and triumphing over the (imagined) Nordic tradition of egalitarianism and tolerance.

Throughout the book, Francis repeatedly demonstrates what Zoe Kinsley has defined as a "heightened awareness of the politics of writing" other places and other cultures (236). In the course of his travels he runs into various "others" and there are also the "others" from the past whose "real" or fictitious narratives he studies and weaves into his own text for the benefit of his readers. There is no sign, though, of what Lisle calls "the hierarchy of [Western] authors and others" (69). Apart from castigating tourists and their "suspiciously colonialist vision" (Huggan 333), he is tolerant of difference and stresses the relativity of values, including his own "system" of ethical and aesthetic preferences.

Interestingly, the book's Epilogue presents one last trip to the north in order to stress the relativity of spatial distinctions and draw attention to the open-endedness of latter-day narratives of travel experiences. As already remarked, Francis travels to Cape Wrath, the last headland of the island of Great Britain. In that journey he mixes past and present again, with the past coming in via the etymology of the Cape's name:

Its name has nothing to do with anger; it comes from the Old Norse *hvarf*, meaning 'the place to turn' or 'the place to reach safety'. The English word 'wharf' has the same root. Although the Vikings named Sutherland as their 'southerly land' it was only when they doubled Cape Wrath that they felt they had really arrived in the south. (273)

North and south are thus brought together again. The narrator, however, does not indulge in any metaphysical reflections on their interrelationship. The text concludes on a decidedly practical note:

I set up my tent on the cliffs, took out my stove, and sat down to make some dinner. Grey seals rolled among the waves below me, and fulmars spun and hovered on the up-draughts. My back curved neatly into the soft turf and the ocean glittered into the northern horizon. (274)

This is an unpretentious open ending. The narrator seems prepared to continue his exploration – if not of the north – then perhaps of some other symbolically designated part of the globe.

Sara Wheeler's Counterclockwise Journey: From Chukotka to Alaska, Canada, Spitsbergen, Lapland and Solovki

While Wheeler's book shares a number of similarities with Francis's, there are also certain significant differences. Thus, Wheeler, who has repeatedly written about the gender aspects of travel and its representations (see Foster and Mills 3; Youngs 131, 136), opens her narrative with a vignette of herself and her baby son Reginald in the midst of a group of Lapps or Sámi, whom she identifies as "the last nomadic people in Europe" (*The Magnetic* 4). Nor is *The Magnetic North* the only travel text in which she represents herself as travelling with one – or both – of her children (see *Access* 247–58, 260–263, 264–273). Wheeler maintains that this

⁸ On Victorian attitudes to the "Viking North" and specifically on William Morris, see Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (147).

mode of travelling is an exception rather than a general rule for travel writers: “[t]he history of travel writing reveals few mothers” (*Access* 259). She attributes this meaningful absence to the fact that travel writing has traditionally been a male preserve and “the famous fathers of the genre” were privileged insofar as they “usually had that most valuable accessory, a wife who stayed at home minding the brood” (*Access* 259). Youngs concurs that “[m]ost travel writers do not travel (*or write about travelling*) with their children [my emphasis]” (136). In his view, travel writers may refrain from mentioning their children because of readerly expectations: since the genre has long been associated with travellers’ ventures into “the vast unknown,” the presence of children may be interpreted as “dulling with domesticity the author’s adventures abroad” (136). Wheeler has evidently taken this readerly predilection into account: she does open her narrative with the vignette mentioned above but chooses to portray herself as a solo traveller for the rest of the book.

Like Francis, Wheeler appears to be rather suspicious of the “benefits” of commercial tourism, although elsewhere she has declared that in her opinion, mass travel does not pose any threat to travel writing as a culturally significant form of self-expression (*Access* xv). We find that her contacts with the Arctic were also predated by a previous travelling experience: she travelled to Antarctica and spent some time there:

Fifteen years earlier I had spent some time in Antarctica. Its geographical unity and unownedness attracted the younger me, as did the lack of an indigenous human presence, and the inability to sustain terrestrial life. It was a metaphor for a *terra incognita*, an image of an alternate and better world. I was prejudiced against the complicated, life-infested North. Time passed, and in 2002 I travelled briefly with the Sōmi and their reindeer. I started thinking about the collar of lands around the Arctic Ocean. Fragmentation, disputed ownership, indigenous populations immobilized on the threshold of change – those very things Antarctica lacked appealed to the older me. (*The Magnetic* 3)

Like Francis, Wheeler is preoccupied with the ecological, cultural and economic fragility of the north; however, her stories about its threatened condition are much more politically engaged. She remarks:

The Arctic has been the locus for Armageddon two generations in a row now. It was the front line of the Cold War, with both sides pouring money into long-range nuclear bomber installations and lone figures crouching on floes straining to hear enemy subs (or was that a ringed seal scratching its back?). Nuclear holocaust, then apocalyptic climate change: something about the region attracts millennial anxiety. (*The Magnetic* 7)

Francis, as we saw, recounts stories about earlier journeys to the north. Wheeler is definitely familiar with a wide range of accounts of such journeys but she also prefers to buttress her narrative with statistics rather than to simply situate it within an intertextual maze of previous writers’ tales. Besides, whereas Francis’s perspective is predominantly shaped by Mediterranean, Celtic and Norse accounts of journeys to the north, Wheeler also dwells on Russian engagements with it.

Francis appears to be particularly fascinated by Viking explorations of the Arctic, or as Huggan has put it, “Francis’s north is Norse” (337). He pays relatively little attention to the north’s indigenous inhabitants such as the Inuit of Greenland, for instance. Wheeler, on the other hand, takes a keen interest in the indigenous populations of the circumpolar localities which she visits. One of her main politico-ethical concern is with relations between such populations and settler societies, predominantly made up of Europeans or their descendants. Halfway through her travelogue she recounts the history of the Viking colony in Greenland. Apparently, this settler colony survived and even flourished for 450 years, but it also “lit the way to its own demise” insofar as the colonists borrowed little from the Inuit with whom they shared the island (*The Magnetic* 184). They cut down all trees because “unlike the Inuit they never used [whale] blubber for heat and light” (*The Magnetic* 184). The colonists did not even eat fish, which meant that they eventually “starved in the presence of abundant food resources” (*The Magnetic* 184). Changing climatic conditions in Greenland were also a factor which led to the collapse of the settler colony but things could have been different if the descendants of the Vikings had adapted to their environment and followed some of the good practices of their Inuit neighbours.

Apart from Europeans exhibiting contempt for indigenous customs, there is also the problem of the exploitation of the north’s natural resources by incidental settlers in the past and nation states in the present. For Wheeler the fact that the native inhabitants, who have lived in the circumpolar north for countless generations, are mostly deprived of access to its natural wealth is deeply disturbing. She remarks: “the issue of how native peoples should or could benefit from mineral extraction was to pursue me around the sub-Arctic” (*The Magnetic*

26). Added to indigenes' dispossession of their respective countries' natural resources is the issue of the change of their traditional lifestyles and mental attitudes. What Wheeler calls "the collision between old and new" (*The Magnetic* 21) is of paramount importance in her representation of the northern localities that she visits.

Significantly, Chukotka, situated at the north eastern extremity of Asia but visible to people in the American state of Alaska,⁹ is the starting point of Wheeler's journey in *The Magnetic North*. One of the reasons for the narrator's choice is that Chukotka is part of the Russian Federation which "has more Arctic territory than any other country... and a wilderness of tundra in which everything has evolved in response to cold" (*The Magnetic* 5). "Chukotka also [seems] the ideal sub-Arctic environment in which to observe *the collision between old and new* [my emphasis]" (*The Magnetic* 21) insofar as the region's indigenous population experienced Russian imperial domination first, Sovietization next, and at the time of Wheeler's visit, is going through the chaos of de-Sovietization. For the narrator, the Chukchi are "among *the most brutally dispossessed* of circumpolar peoples [my emphasis]" (*The Magnetic* 21). Their original economy of deer herding and whale hunting was disrupted and made obsolete by Sovietization, but as the Soviet order itself collapsed in the 1990s, the Chukchi found it impossible to recover various old habits and practices which had enabled their ancestors to survive in the harsh northern climate. Thus, Wheeler is told that scurvy is one of the serious health problems of the local people because the supply of foods rich in vitamin C was interrupted after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Dealing with the problem on their own is impossible for the Chukchi: they "had forgotten which berries or whale organs to eat to fulfil their vitamin C requirements" (*The Magnetic* 29).

A similar kind of alienation from the past is typical of other parts of the Arctic north. Wheeler observes it even in the Canadian Arctic, characterized though it is by a much more benign economic and political climate. A huge supermarket servicing the small Inuit community of Coral Harbour boasts superabundance of processed foods:

It seemed to me that every processed item in the world had made its way to 63° N, up across the latitude lines and the tree line, over the tundra and the pack ice, over the wastes of Hudson Bay, through the indigenous settlements battling for dignity, down into the overheated, lino-floored, echoing corridors of a giant supermarket provisioning the eight hundred residents of Coral Harbour. (*The Magnetic* 143)

The consumption of such foods has led to obesity and a wide range of health problems among the locals who are incapable of going back to the much healthier lifestyle of their ancestors.

For Wheeler one of the worst aspects of the dispossession of an indigenous people is the complete overshadowing of its history by that of the dominant nation. Thus, Chukotka has long been linked to "the myth of Siberia" (*The Magnetic* 22), that conglomerate of stories of "penal servitude," which has turned the northern third of Asia into "a *Russian heart of darkness* [my emphasis]" (*The Magnetic* 44).¹⁰ Wheeler admits that curiosity about the "Russian heart of darkness" was another major reason for her visit. She recounts the history of Siberian exile from the time of the czars to the end of the Stalin era and wryly remarks that "the Arctic ... was ideal for prison camps" not only because it was far away from Russian seats of power such as Moscow but also because it was "a really horrible workplace" and was "too remote for viable escape" (*The Magnetic* 44). Wheeler briefly focuses attention on the Kolyma *gulag* or work camp, which became infamous for its slave workers' high mortality rate (*The Magnetic* 48) and was written about by the Nobel Prize laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the famous Russian writer and journalist Evgenia Ginzburg. However, the Kolyma camp was in Yakutia, not in Chukotka. Ironically, because of its remoteness and separation from the mainland, "Chukotka didn't even have a proper *gulag*" (*The Magnetic* 22).

Chukotka thus emerges as the most remote of circumpolar localities. Significantly, the narrator experiences difficulties in getting into it as the place is usually out of bounds to foreigners. She has to go to considerable length to convince the Russian authorities that she has a *bona fide* scientific reason for visiting. This representation of travel as an activity subject to political restrictions points to yet another major difference

⁹ Paraphrasing – and correcting – Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's 2008 remark about seeing *Russia* from her house in Alaska, Wheeler points out that "Alaskans can [in fact] see *Chukotskiy Avtonomnyy Okrug* from their kitchen windows [my emphasis]" (13).

¹⁰ On the difficulty of defining Siberia in physical-geographical terms and on its significance as a cultural-symbolic construct, see Ian Frazier, *Travels in Siberia* (2010), especially pp. 3–5.

between the two travelogues. Francis opts for northern localities through which the holder of a British passport can travel with ease. His north, unlike that of Wheeler, is a region of open borders.¹¹

The two travel writers also differ in their portrayals of communication with travellers. Communication with the locals is one of the challenges that the narrator of *The Magnetic North* faces repeatedly as she travels through Russian controlled territories. On the other hand, communication does not present any problems in Francis's *True North* as even the "non-native" speakers of English, whom the "bookish wanderer" encounters, turn out to be highly proficient in the global tongue. No attempt is made to render the peculiarities of their speech, and this reflects a wide-spread tendency in travel writing of simplifying travellers' contacts with travellers "to the extent that both ... appear to occupy the same homogeneous, monolingual space" (Pettinger 150). "The homogenizing convention" (Sternberg 232) certainly dominates representations of intercultural contacts in a lot of travel texts. Without seriously disrupting this convention, Wheeler pays more attention to language difference than Francis. She repeatedly draws attention to her own (limited) knowledge of Russian but makes no secret of the fact that she lacks the kind of proficiency that would make it possible for her to communicate with speakers of that language without the help of a bilingual intermediary. However, even that proves to be rather problematic at times: for instance, on landing at Chukotka's administrative centre of Anadyr Wheeler is addressed "in a language tantalizingly close to English" (*The Magnetic* 22) by her Chukchi guide Yuri. Further on she humorously comments on "the exciting hinterlands of syntax" into which Yuri "careers" as he tries to explain some quotidian practical matters to her (*The Magnetic* 26).

By drawing attention to the difficulty of communicating with travellers Wheeler foregrounds her own foreignness in the Russian dominated Arctic context. According to Lisle, it is essential for politically aware travel writers to "recognize the foreignness in themselves just as much as they recognize it in others" (271). On the other hand, Wheeler resorts to humour in representing her guide's performance in English and thus resuscitates the stereotype of the funny foreigner, a key item in the ideological repertoire of travellers of the colonial era. Humour implies "unequal power relations" and is often used to forge a bond between travel writers and their "assumed audience[s]" at home, a bond from which travellers are in principle excluded insofar as they are "the butt of the joke" (Lisle 105). Despite her manifest sympathy with local populations and honest indignation at their treatment, Wheeler cannot resist the temptation of utilizing the old colonialist stereotype, and this indicates how tenacious the legacy of the past is and how difficult it is even for politically aware travel writers to rise above it.

Lisle claims that "contemporary travel writing spatializes the identity/ difference logic in such a way that simple distinctions between here and there are underscored by more problematic arrangements of West/ Rest, safety/danger, and civilized/uncivilized" (272). For the most part, Wheeler steers clear of such ideological pitfalls. That she does not privilege the ill-defined imaginative-geographical entity generally known as *the West* over the Russian dominated *East* is borne out by the parallel which she draws between the American Arctic state of Alaska and Chukotka. She remarks that rather like neighbouring Chukotka, Alaska cannot conceal the impact of the nation that appropriated it. Whereas Chukotka is still interpreted via "the myth of Siberia," Alaska "reveals the unbridled force of the entrepreneurial spirit and the open conflicts of a democratic country" (*The Magnetic* 63). In the past "the unbridled force of the entrepreneurial spirit" led to the destruction of the environment as profit was pursued. Whether the same factor will stop short of damaging the Arctic and sub-Arctic eco-systems, which still exist, remains an open question for Wheeler (*The Magnetic* 103).

Anxiety about the north's destiny in a world driven by conflicting economic and political interests characterizes the whole of *The Magnetic North*. Wheeler visits the Svalbard island of Spitsbergen which reminds her of the Antarctic as it has no indigenous population or permanent settlers. Besides, like the Antarctic, it presents biologists with unique opportunities for research. A Norwegian biologist whom Wheeler meets on the island tells her that he and his colleagues function as "watchdogs and thermometers" as they monitor changing conditions and especially the rising levels of pollution in the north (*The Magnetic* 191). He further adds: "I put evidence on the table, and the government makes decisions" (*The Magnetic* 191). Apparently, some of these decisions have been beneficial to the environment. For instance, Spitsbergen's research town of Ny-Ålesund appears like "an oasis" to Wheeler. However, not every part of the Svalbard is an "oasis." The Russian-owned coal-mining outpost of Barentsburg is the diametrical opposite of Ny-Ålesund: it is described as "a grimy human hellhole in an otherwise pristine wilderness" (*The Magnetic* 213). Like Chukotka and

¹¹ On the significance of borders, which are open to "certain sets of people," see Diener and Hagen (122).

some other Russian dominated circumpolar areas, Barentsburg is experiencing the chaos of de-Sovietization, and although technological modernization has been promised by the authorities, the machinery, which is currently in use, pollutes the environment. The prospect of post-Soviet bureaucrats overcoming chaos and adopting a more caring attitude to the environment appears to be very dim. As already remarked, Wheeler does not privilege the capitalist West over the post-communist East but she cannot conceal the fact that circumstances are by far more trying in Russian dominated Arctic localities.

The picture of the north that Wheeler presents is predominantly gloomy. In her narrative, relations between old and new are far from harmonious, and the clash between them results in irreparable losses as the human potential for adaptation to the region's harsh natural conditions is reduced. However, there are also glimmers of hope in *The Magnetic North*. For instance, the activities of human "watchdogs and thermometers," who do their best to protect the environment, are definitely a source of optimism. Besides, despite recurrent representations of the reduction of the human potential for adaptation, the book's closing chapter celebrates, albeit tentatively, human resilience as a factor which may contribute to the solution of the north's numerous problems. Entitled "The Spirit Lives," this chapter deals with the Arctic in European Russia and specifically dwells on the changing destiny of the Solovki monastic complex. According to numerous generations of Russian Orthodox Christians, Solovki "cradles the national soul" (*The Magnetic* 287), and this is a view that the book's narrator appears to share. Solovki was initially a national religious shrine, but the Bolsheviks turned it into a prison for undesirables and used it as a model for the rest of the infamous *gulag* system of forced labour (*The Magnetic* 287). It was from Solovki that, as Solzhenitsyn wrote, "a tumour spread all over Russia" (quoted in *The Magnetic* 287).

Following the fall of communism, Solovki was reinstated as a monastic complex and a pilgrimage site. Listening to the chants of Orthodox monks, Wheeler notes a major difference between it and such sites of mass extermination and suffering as Dachau and Auschwitz: in the Russian case, there is "no tone of sober repentance" (*The Magnetic* 309). The redeeming promise of "Never Again" has not been made yet and the reader is left wondering if it will ever be made. Despite its manifest absence, the narrator is convinced that "the spirit live[s] in the quiet chants and the muttered prayers" and that "they pluck[] new life out of death" (*The Magnetic* 309). Mystical identification with the renewed spirit of Russian Orthodox Christianity contrasts strongly with the narrator's earlier preference for hard facts and statistics. The contrast alerts us to the contradictions inherent in the complicated process of writing about the north, that patchwork symbolic-geographical entity, comprised of historically and politically diverse components.

However, Wheeler's text does not end with the comforting image of religious revival in Russia's Solovki archipelago. In the narrative's closing paragraph, the narrator's mind wanders into the remote past as she speculates about the possible intentions of some of the earliest explorers of the north: Bronze Age fishermen, who sailed across the White Sea to the archipelago and constructed a labyrinth there (*The Magnetic* 298). She asks: "Did they lay out the stones for their labyrinth spirals as a way of reaching toward some unobtainable transcendental truth? Or did the stones mark the edges of a Bronze Age rubbish dump?" (*The Magnetic* 309). The narrator declares that "it [is] *better not to know* [my emphasis]" (*The Magnetic* 309). The question about the putative choices of Bronze Age travellers to the north has distinct implications in the present but Wheeler prefers not to explore them at this point. Her narrative thus ends with an unanswered question and her rejection of closure suggests that the destiny of the north is by no means fixed.

Conclusion

The two books discussed above represent the north as travelled, "lived and imagined space" (Huggan 339) while also illustrating some of the distinctive traits of twenty-first-century Anglophone travel writing and contributing to the ongoing critical debate about its political and socio-cultural role. As already remarked, they differ in a number of respects but also share certain similarities. Wheeler, as we saw, adopts a markedly gendered narratorial stance by representing herself, in her book's opening chapter, as a parent travelling with her baby son. Francis, on the other hand, assumes the textual identity of a "bookish wanderer," subjecting past history to a process of "judicious sifting" (10) in the hope of contributing to the solution of present-day and future problems. His stance can also be described as *gendered* insofar as gender is "a factor which affects men's as well as women's travel writing" (Bird 44). The precedent, provided by a noted writer, traveller,

polyglot and war hero such as Patrick Leigh Fermor, links the narrator of *The True North* to a long tradition of travel as (masculine) adventure. Francis might thus appear to be the more *conservative* of the two writers: after all, both travel and its representations have traditionally been associated with active and adventurous men whereas women have been mostly “related to [the] affective dimension [of journeying] – the centripetal dimension which leads home” (Fortunati, Monticelli and Ascari 8). However, there is nothing particularly adventurous about Francis’s approach to travel: as already remarked, he does not pose as a discoverer or a pioneer but projects an image of himself as a well-read wanderer struggling to negotiate the problematic “space” between past, present and future.

Motion is a key concept in both travelogues. Francis and Wheeler define their textual identities through it: attention was already drawn to their accounts of earlier travelling experiences preceding their journeys to the north. An important trait that their narratives also share is the disavowal of the notion of a *homeland* as a privileged locus and a basis of comparison. The open endings that both writers favour may also be linked to their preference for motion over the stasis inherent in a final *homecoming*. Predictably, the latter element is conspicuously absent from the two narratives, and as each book comes to a formal close, we are left with a promise of more journeys that may result in more texts. The present-day travel writer thus emerges as a *nomad*,¹² who is continually on the move and frequently generates stories about his/her journeys. Following Huggan, we can highlight the *ironic* character of this process of textual production and its results: contemporary travel writers represent journeys to and through various *places* (in the broadest possible sense of the word “place”) but are indeed aware of the impossibility of “pinning down the ‘essence’ of place [my emphasis]” (339), in the sense of “possessing” a foreign culture through comprehensive knowledge of its distinctive features. This awareness may be seen as one of the signs of the emancipation of present-day travel writing from the burden of the colonial past in which claims to the “possession” of foreign cultures through “absolute” knowledge of their “peculiarities” were made fairly frequently.¹³

Another sign of the distancing of contemporary travel writing from the genre’s ideological legacy is the preoccupation of a fair number of its practitioners with ethical issues (see Youngs 183). As we saw, both *The True North* and *The Magnetic North* share a concern with the ecological, economic and cultural fragility of the north and the need to preserve its uniqueness. Added to this is Wheeler’s focus on the plight of indigenous populations and particularly “the collision between old and new” (*The Magnetic* 21) as the native peoples of the north struggle for survival and recognition in a changing world. Such concerns should in principle engender, in travel writers and their readers, a sense of shared responsibility for human and planetary well-being (see Youngs 183).

While travelogues such as the ones discussed above illustrate some of the significant differences between present-day and previous travel writing, they also shed light on the difficulties connected with the genre’s transformation. The desire of contemporary travel writers to distance themselves from the genre’s past and promote a more ethical attitude to the localities and “travellers” that they represent is understandable. However, the problem of whether a total break with the legacy of travel writing is really possible remains unresolved. As Wheeler’s use of humour demonstrates, even politically and ethically engaged travel writing can be “haunted” by stereotypes from the colonial era (see Youngs 183).

Lisle (76) and Youngs (183–4) have drawn attention to a more fundamental problem which is at the heart of travel writing: the total or partial *domestication* of difference which is inherent in the genre. According to Youngs, the assimilation of difference to the expectations of home audiences occurs, despite attempts to “respect it” and even “to facilitate its self-representation” (184). He therefore concludes that twenty-first-century travel writers will continue to “work[] within the constraints of the genre”: they may “stretch[] and tease[] them, but [will] find[] it hard to break them out of shape [my emphasis]” (184).

But if “the hegemonic discourses of difference that arose during colonial rule continue to anchor contemporary narratives about travel” (Lisle 277), can there be any hope for the genre and can Anglophone

¹² On the nomadic mode of travelling, see the reference provided in Note 6.

¹³ On different forms of the assertion and legitimation of authority through acquired cultural knowledge, see Pratt (28–40). We may also consider cases of “cross-dressing” and “passing” from Richard Burton to Kipling’s *Kim* as examples of possession through acquired cultural knowledge. On colonial “passing” in *Kim* as a form of surveillance, see Anne P. McClintock (69–71). See also Blanton’s commentary on Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* (109–111) and specifically on the debunking of “the Western myth of what foreign cultures are all about” (110).

travel writing in particular have a viable political and socio-cultural role in the present? Youngs discerns hope in the genetic connection between travel texts and travel. He quotes Dalrymple who reiterates “the familiar notion that travel broadens the mind” but elaborates it further by opposing the positive effects of travel to parochialism and nationalism among those of his own “contemporaries who have remained rooted in their Englishness and have never seen the wider world” (quoted in Youngs 188). Anglophone travel writing does have an uneasy relationship with the past and some of it remains linked to power and privilege even in the present. However, at a time when English is *the* global tongue and travel writers’ audiences are all over the world, it can enhance our knowledge and can contribute, through the ethical concerns of a growing number of its practitioners, to our sense of shared responsibility for the planet which we all inhabit. It can also function as “a relativist vehicle for the reassessment and potential critique of [our] domestic culture[s]” (Holland and Huggan 48). At a time when populism and nationalism are on the rise, a lot of twenty-first-century Anglophone travel writing, including the two texts discussed above, can sensitize us to the deleterious effects of isolationism and xenophobia and stimulate us to widen our political horizons.

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