



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Travelling from nowhere to nowhere?: Travel writing and walking in Ethiopia

Abstract:

This essay explores how travel writing can render other places “stuck in history,” as many Western travellers to the African continent – including travel writers Pico Iyer and Dervla Murphy – describe a landscape that has been “*invented* from the outside”. For these travel writers to Ethiopia, a sense of “nowhereness” or “non-place” positions them as “observer and intellectual” distancing oneself from ordinary people. As a research traveller in Ethiopia, the essay enables (re)consideration of ways I depicted the world for both Ethiopian women and myself. Travel writing by women is often expected to be different to that of male travel writers; women are often expected to reflect on their experiences and their “inner journey”. At the same time, for many women walker-writers, walking is “a metaphor for control” and choosing your own path. Stories from travel and research experiences emphasise the importance of the ethical context of my research travel: travel on a small scale can also be writing in and from Ethiopia.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

travel writing, travel, research traveller, subjectivity, Ethiopia

I had seen empty spaces before I came to Ethiopia ... But what made these so much more rending and exalting was that there were people living amid this nothingness, walking across it, trying to eke out a living from it ... And in the midst of desolation, long lines of people, most of them rail-thin, bedraggled, barefoot; long lines of people walking, walking, walking from *nowhere to nowhere*.
 – Pico Iyer and Rob Howard, 2012 (emphasis added)

Settled or nomadic, the Ethiopians are great travelers. To find new land, go on hunting or raiding expeditions, seek fortune or royal court, escape enemies, study at a religious center, carry on trade, or make a pilgrimage, Ethiopians have long been accustomed to moving from one part of the country to another, in many cases settling there.
 – Donald Levine, 2000, pp. 44-45

The year was 2007, and I was sitting in the Chiri bus parked outside the mosque in Bonga [1]. Two women carried buckets of water from somewhere off-site to a builder who was making concrete in the mosque compound. On the other side of the road, three cafés competed for customers but only a couple of people were sipping tea and watching passers-by.

Huge fat-tailed sheep – prized in the rest of the country for their size – were lifted into the back of an Isuzu truck parked in the middle of the road. Further up the road, shops and outdoor vendors sold single spoons, plates, T-shirts and wooden crucifixes. Every week at the outdoor marketplace the same women in the same location sold lentils, split peas and spices from open sacks; the woman who sold green coffee beans was sorry she'd put the price up yet again she told me, in English and Amharic. Buying garlic and potatoes, carrots and cabbage, makes me think how different it is for people shopping in Western supermarkets: the last time I was crammed in the single “supermarket” doorway waiting to buy rice and soap I was given a *sini* (tiny cup) of coffee with a few tender leaves of *tena adam* (rue).

I'm sitting on the bus in Bonga, south-west Ethiopia, thinking about Bruce Chatwin writing about taking to the road: that wandering contributes to a sense of political and mental well-being; of walking being a poetic activity able to cure the world of its ills. Walking. Manjo women [2] walk past the bus carrying sacks of charcoal or stacks of firewood strapped to their backs. Heavy sacks. They're bent over with sweat running down their faces. When I'm walking around town or to rural *kebeles* or neighbourhoods (the smallest administrative division), conducting fieldwork in my role as a doctoral research student, my backpack weighing a kilo or two, I greet them: *Ashamasham*, the Kafficho greeting for people who are working. This acknowledgment of their labour makes *me* feel better: they express surprise, smile back or even laugh, and then I hear them talking about it with their walking companions.

People get on the bus but don't stay; they're just looking to see if they know any of the passengers. Those who get on with shopping bags leave a coat on a seat, and then, deciding there's plenty of time, go to wait elsewhere. At this rate, if the bus doesn't leave until it's full, it never will.

Eventually, the conductor emerges from the crowd outside, turns on the engine, the radio at full volume, blasts the horn a few times, and starts selling tickets. I've lost concentration by the time the bus is getting full; it seems to have happened by osmosis. Another hour goes by. The driver gets into his seat and blasts the horn again. I have a window seat near the door and next to me is a young woman with her baby. I'm given her new *jebena* (clay coffee pot) to hold. Her sister takes the woven homemade basket outside to repack. A few handfuls of dried beans have spilled out and she rewraps them in the nylon of an old *jantala* (umbrella). There are small packages of coarse rock salt, a handful of coffee beans, and *berberé*, a mixture of various spices including chilli peppers.

The driver blasts the horn again and again and all the people milling around get on the already overcrowded bus. We speed off around the corner and down the hill, stopping to pick up a couple more passengers after only a kilometre or two. As we pick up more and more people along the way, passengers pass Ethiopian *birr* and change to and from the wedged-in conductor. Now we are zigzagging up the side of hills, the old bus unable to go any faster than a walking pace. It's impossible to see out of the other windows which are firmly shut to prevent *birrd* (cold air or blowing wind that might cause sickness), but a young man quickly opens one and sticks his head out. This creates quite a kaffuffle and people quickly pull their collars up and cover their heads, mouths and noses with their *neutalas* (cotton woven shawls with embroidered edge women often use to cover their heads), towels or anything close at hand, calling for the window to be closed. A plastic bag is passed from the front of the bus and the smell of vomit overtakes the smell of sweaty bodies. There's momentary relief when the bus stops and the door is opened to pick up or let off passengers.

When we reach Chiri people push onto the bus before anyone can get off, trying to get the best seat. I feel exhausted, glad to breathe fresh air. With all the waiting, it's taken over five hours to go 23 kilometres. I could have walked it in that time. The woman sitting next to me now has a three-hour walk home to Muti. Saying goodbye, I'm not concerned, because it's almost impossible to walk alone. And I know, *no one* would walk alongside her without offering to carry her new *jebena* and shopping. There's no road and everyone walks – the first time I walked to Muti it had been tortuous because it had rained in the night, it was grey and foggy, and walking in the mud meant compensating all the time to try and keep balanced – but today it's dry and sunny.



I first travelled to Ethiopia in 1966 as a young child of missionary parents. When I wasn't attending boarding school in Addis Ababa, I was with my parents in south-west Ethiopia, in an area renowned for its montane rainforest, for being the birthplace of coffee, and now recognised as the UNESCO listed Kafa Biosphere Reserve. In 2007, I returned to Ethiopia to conduct fieldwork as a doctoral student in International Development Studies. My research focused on reproductive health, in particular Millennium Development Goal Five (Improve Maternal Health: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio). I was interested in how this international goal fitted into Ethiopia's development agenda. Since then,

I've returned to Ethiopia many times, for months on end: to conduct small research projects; to do an internship with UNICEF; to attend conferences; to take some time out from the rest of the world; and five times during a research project that took me to many districts in Afar Region, Tigray Region, Kafa Zone and Sidama Zone, visiting each place three or four times.

In much of my research I've attempted to describe how *travel* or *travelling* makes it possible – or sometimes impossible – for birthing women to be referred from the rural *kebeles* where they live, to the district (*woreda*) health centres or the zonal centre hospital, for emergency obstetric care. Employing qualitative research methods – participant observation and semi-structured interviewing – means I could simply be described as a research traveller (Clifford, 1996), basing my writing on ethnographic research.

Travel “is the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space” (Thompson, 2011, p. 9) and “travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed” (p. 10). These minimal definitions of this “protean and slippery genre” (p. 27) require the travel writer to negotiate between reporting and storytelling to maintain the reader's interest. As this can only be a selective process that prioritises some experiences over others, it offers “a partial depiction of the world and an incomplete picture of a more complex reality” (p. 62). If travel writing is about going somewhere and then writing about it, for many travellers to the African continent, their image of African land relies on its “otherness”. Thus, for many travel writers, it is this “otherness” that attracts them to the possibility of taking on this image “as a challenge to prove its stereotypical character” (Tabaszewska, 2014, p. 110).

Key themes associated with the experience of travel include “a distinct sense of home, an awareness of being estranged, the peculiarity of encounters with strangers, and upon return, a feeling of nostalgia for the foreign land visited” (Iduma, 2018). My concerns in this essay relate more to how subjectivity shapes “not knowing or not noticing” (Serpell, 2014, p. 8). Travel writers take different approaches to writing about Ethiopia but face similar problems, some of which seem specific to the romance of Ethiopia's history (Dagmawi et al., 2010), and others which could be attributed to the “authorial presence” (Serpell, 2014, p. 57). By contrasting my own research travel with the perspectives of other travel writers to Ethiopia, this essay highlights the ethical stakes of representation. In particular, I suggest that descriptions of the landscape and people in the landscape can be a way of seeing or not seeing a space that has been “*invented* from the outside” (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2018, p. 2 emphasis in original). Can stories from a deeply immersive and iterative travel and research experience in Ethiopia, over many decades, offer an alternative mode of travel writing? Can walking, as travel on a small scale, constitute writing in and from Ethiopia?

Descriptions of Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, often start with its rich and diverse cultural heritage which is often viewed by outsiders – and Ethiopians too – as exotic and forming “a rich and compelling heritage meta-narrative” (Finneran, 2013, p. 46). The “story of Ethiopia” (Finneran, 2013, p. 41) incorporates the discovery of some of the earliest stone tools and the extinct species *Australopithecus afarensis*; its Christian identity dating back to Biblical

origins (and the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba which resulted in their son David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia); being the realm of Prester John; and, the international status of Lalibela as an architectural location of a living faith (Finneran, 2009, 2013).

According to legend, King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela oversaw the carving of some of the rock-cut churches with the assistance of the angels, but it was more likely done by slave labour (Finneran, 2009; Fauvelle-Aymar, 2018). Studies of Lalibela illuminate the region's pre-Christian history and burial sites dating from the mid-11th to mid-17th century AD. The churches were chiselled out to form doors, windows, columns, floors, roofs, drainage ditches, trenches and ceremonial passages, some opening into hermit caves and catacombs.

Lalibela was built as an alternative pilgrimage site to Jerusalem, to avoid the possibility of people dying on the way because of the hostile weather in Sudan, Egypt and the Sinai desert. Lalibela is not unique in the region (Derat et al., 2021), yet it remains a major pilgrimage site for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians – and for many tourists who come across “not just a collection of old buildings and stones for archaeologists,” writes Pico Iyer, but “a breathing, pounding, chanting place with a sense of worship so powerful that it made me shake” (Iyer & Howard, 2012).

Like an intrepid travel writer venturing into an unfamiliar remote space, Iyer suggests that “Lalibela was one of the secret, undiscovered wonders of the world” (Iyer & Howard, 2012). With the exception of his English investment banker companion, he barely acknowledges the other tourists he would have encountered along the way.

In “Heaven’s Gate,” Pico Iyer dives into “otherness”, citing what might be described as quotidian and clichéd references by historians and writers on Ethiopia that “tell less about Ethiopian realities than they do about the history of the outside world” (Levine, 2015, p. 279): Edward Gibbon on the Aethiopians sleeping for a thousand years; Ryszard Kapuściński describing goats and cows on Churchill Road in the capital Addis Ababa; James Bruce searching for the Blue Nile; and Arthur Rimbaud in Harar. To prove his point, Iyer allocates considerable space to: the ancient Phoenician script on his visa; the remoteness in time that guards its traditions; Ethiopia’s prehistory or dark echoing otherworld; the notion that it belongs to a different age; that it was like being in “a landscape of ancient sparseness”; that it is like seeing the face of the world before it was born; that it’s a country wary of the modern; that the country he travelled through was like an illuminate Bible from the 13th century; that Lalibela is a medieval mystery in stone; that it must have been like this in Bethlehem two thousand years ago; and that driving there is like traveling through “some ur-terrain, archaic, ancestral, through some lost part of ourselves, almost” (Iyer & Howard, 2012).



If Iyer had travelled on the Djibouti road out of Addis Ababa – instead of venturing into the “remote spaces” (Iyer & Howard, 2012) along what is commonly known as the Historic Route

(visiting locations such as Lalibela, Axum, Gondar and Bahir Dar) – it’s likely he would have been heading for *Ertä ’Ale*, known as the Gateway to Hell, the most active of a range of six volcanoes, as it regularly shoots out lava and vapour in the Afar Triangle. It’s here that the African Rift Valley is fracturing and widening and tearing the Eastern African continent apart. Or to the Danakil depression with its shallow salty lakes, home to the Pliocene hominid fossil nicknamed “Lucy” by archaeologists, or Dinknesh to Ethiopians.

Along the road from Addis Ababa to Djibouti, in Logyia, there’s a modest sign that reads: AGIP HOTEL in English and አገፕ ሆቴል in Amharic. The sign is so often blocked by trucks, semitrailers or road trains it’s likely you’ll miss it. Logyia is a town in Afar Region that supplies trucks with fuel and spare parts, air for soft tyres, and food, soft drink or alcohol for the drivers, some who choose to stay overnight. Rooms at the Agip Hotel have a table and a chair, a bed that’s comfortable, electricity that runs a (very dim) light, a ceiling fan and at night, an air conditioner. There’s a shower with donkey-carted Awash River water: at the end of the day the unheated water temperature from the tank is just right. Meals are in the Ballroom (the dining room has extra high ceilings and a chandelier). Don’t expect good coffee from the coffee machine at the Agip Hotel: it’s impossible to determine what the macchiato is made from. Possibly chicory powder and powdered milk. The best *machine buna* or coffee in Logyia is at the Mekdi Coffee House about three minutes’ walk away although it can take ten minutes to cross the highway safely.

In the early morning, in the Ballroom at the Agip Hotel, a woman prepares *jebena buna*, on a charcoal brazier for the staff. The night has passed and you can enjoy the company of still sleepy young women, the waiters, the woman who usually sits at the cash booth, and another woman whose job it was difficult to determine, even though she always appeared busy. All the women have travelled to Logyia from other parts of Ethiopia for work. I was here to work too – even if it’s only for a few weeks.

And if you walk out the back gate of the Agip Hotel on a Sunday morning and turn left, the three-metre-wide dirt road has been swept clean in front of the stalls where women sell tomatoes and potatoes and men sell small household items. There are as many goats as people so it’s hard to keep the road clean. Not far down the road is the government health centre, and further along is the Afar Pastoralist Development Association’s (APDA) compound.

Around the time that Pico Iyer published “Heaven’s Gate” [3], I had travelled to Logyia for a research project that looked at ways to improve the use of maternal, neonatal and child health services in rural and pastoralist Ethiopia. I say “looked at” because, as with much of my research in Ethiopia – from looking at how women are taken for granted as naturally caring and self-sacrificing, to looking at how, even with improvements in women’s health services, there’s been little change in the social structures that gives rise to their disadvantage – there is still much I will never understand. However, what I do understand, is that as a *ferengi*, or foreigner, I can cross certain cultural barriers: in the morning I can interview a woman in her home and ask about her experiences giving birth; and then later, in the afternoon, the medical

director of a hospital or the head of a government department. Perhaps what makes me different from others though – including Ethiopian researchers and health professionals I’ve met – is that I walk to interviews as often as possible, including interviews with women who live many hours’ walk to a health facility.

In Logyia, I met a small group of APDA Women Extension Workers who had been trained to teach their communities about hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, safe motherhood, HIV prevention and how to address harmful practices for women and girls. Before their training, these women were traditional birth attendants who also performed female genital cutting.

The Afar people in north-east Ethiopia are nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists who depend on their livestock of camels, cows, goats, sheep and donkeys. Both people and animals are increasingly susceptible to drought and climate change. Women often walk for five to eight hours to collect water, always travelling in a group with other women. Though the traditional cultural constraints for women in Ethiopia are not central to this essay, women in Ethiopia are not expected to travel outside the home alone (Central Statistical Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] & ICF, 2016). One of the APDA Women Extension Workers described how she was now able to travel to other parts of Afar Region with other health workers because of her new role [4]. Meeting other groups of people for the first time, she would ask, “Where is your Woman Extension Worker?” Then, she told me, she would be taken in as a sister, given love and respect in the community of strangers, as if she was in the compound of her own community. “Now,” she said, “I am able to be anywhere in the whole of Afar” (Jackson et al., 2019). Being able to move outside the home – even being restricted to travelling in a group – prompted me to examine assumptions about gender as a research traveller.

One of the advantages of walking – to interview women in rural neighbourhoods, or staff in government offices or health facilities, in rural or urban settings; to the Saturday market or to roadside coffee shops; to visit friends; or just to stretch my legs – is that over time I began to appreciate how long it takes people to travel from place to place. Walking became a structured and unstructured activity of my days as I often had no other way to get around. By the time I understood walking as “participant observation,” I’d begun to understand that walking is a normal way for women I met to get around, too. It helps maintain social networks: women walk together to visit neighbours and friends, and they walk together to church, to the market or to a health facility. Not only is walking an opportunity to get out of the house, to gossip, and to catch up with friends and neighbours along the way, but it’s also a way for women to “get around” the rules and take control of their lives: for example, by taking a detour to a health facility to access contraception on the way to the market, or by stopping for a drink at a favourite *tej* or *tella bet* [5] before the long walk home (Jackson, 2019). So for the APDA Woman Extension Workers I met, travelling “anywhere” in Afar Region was empowering and a source of pride and satisfaction.



... walking [i]s a metaphor for control in a woman's life: the chance to choose to 'walk' whatever path in life a woman might desire is essential ... for most of the women in this anthology, the ability to determine where our feet go, is the ability to decide the path our lives take. (Andrews, 2023, p. 14)

Walking to rural research locations was an important entry point to understanding women's accessibility to reproductive health care services in rural Ethiopia, as "activities and decisions are framed by time and distance" (Jackson, 2019, p. 238). I've always tried to reflect on my position as a *ferengi* or foreigner, and as a woman and to be sensitive to gender issues, even applying a gender lens on Ethiopia's Health Extension Program and the role of its female workforce who are expected to conduct outreach activities and home visits to rural households (Jackson et al., 2019). Of course, gender norms and expectations affect both how a person travels and their travel writing (Thompson, 2011), but although "women's travel writing seems to consist of similar elements to men's, it is judged and categorised [as] different. ... Certain discursive elements are shared by both male- and female-authored texts, but they are nevertheless received, commented upon and marketed differently" (Mills, 1991, p. 6). And while travel writing by women is complex and varied and derives from "differences of social class, age, religion, historical context and geographical position" (Broome Saunders, 2014, p. 1), women travel writers are often expected to reflect on their experiences as female travellers, and what might be called their "inner journey" (Hannigan, 2021; Thompson, 2011). For example, British writer Jenny Diski (1947–2016) was able to resolve issues relating to her past and her future in *Skating to Antarctica* (as described in Thompson, 2011). On the other hand, Irish author and adventurer Dervla Murphy (1931–2022) was adamant she had "no time or use for inner journeys or healings ... when there are no paved roads and you're cycling to India; you don't have time to introspect, I can assure you of that!" (Hannigan, 2021, p. 143).

If Murphy claims she had no time for introspection, she was at least fulfilling her childhood dreams of travel. A single woman who travelled by bicycle or with a pack animal for fifty years and wrote 26 books about her travels, she travelled in Ethiopia as a man (Theroux, 2011). Paul Theroux admired her for being a wanderer in the oldest tradition, for being a person who never complained, never satirised herself or the people she met, and who was always "downright, patient, truthful, reliable, never looking for comfort but always the rougher experiences of the road" (2011, p. 53).

But, as Kerri Andrews writes in *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (2020), women walker-writers have found walking essential to their sense of selves in a way that is "markedly different" (p. 32) to that of male walker-writers. The ability to determine where their feet go is declared in the title: the Oxford English Dictionary defines to "wander" as persons or animals moving hither or thither without fixed course or certain aim ... to roam, ramble, go idly or restlessly about. Women writers who found walking essential to their sense of self include Virginia Woolf who often wrote about the centrality of walking to her writing and to her identity: "walking underpinned how she understood her place in the world" (Andrews, 2020, p. 27). Simone de Beauvoir walked alone in the valleys and gorges outside Marseille every Thursday and Sunday to stave off boredom, regret and depression (Abbs, 2021; de Beauvoir,

1960). In *Way Makers: An Anthology of Women's Writing about Walking*, Andrews (2023) notes that only a fraction of writing about women and walking from the Anglophone world is represented. Let me add two African American writers who travelled to Africa: Juanita Harrison and Merze Tate. Harrison's travel narratives or journal entries published as *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (Harrison, 1936) included plans to take the Sudan Government steamer up the Nile and into Abyssinia (the Ethiopian empire that historically encompassed modern day Ethiopia and Eritrea): "it would have been a little hard to travel through 2 deserts but what would I care as long as I was getting my moneys [sic] worth" (p. 94). Without a permit from the Sudan Government in Cairo, and being unwilling to part with her passport, she decided to sail to Port Said instead. In 1973, Tate travelled to northern Ethiopia visiting eight historic and sacred sites, calling it "the grand climax of her journey" (Savage, 2023, p 205).

But the contemporary woman writer-walker whose work I am most familiar with is Vivian Gornick, who writes about walking the streets of New York with her mother in *Fierce Attachments* (2005a), about friendship and how to exist while walking the streets in *The Odd Woman and the City* (2015a), and about living alone and the need to go outside for a walk when loneliness becomes too much in her essay 'On Living Alone' in *Approaching Eye Level* (1997). It is Gornick who introduced me to memoir writing – the sort of writing where the writer looks beneath the surface of their life and anxieties to make sense of things – and it is Gornick whose daily walks heal her "sore and angry heart" (Gornick, 2015b) as she recalls the woman she thought she knew on Eighth Avenue, the couple quarrelling on Ninth Avenue, the man lying spread-eagled on Forty-second Street, the angry woman and the miserable woman and three children at a hot dog counter at Forty-second Street.

In trying to write about my travel in Ethiopia, I recognise that travel writing can lock a place in time and idealise it. I may not have managed to free myself from stereotypical attitudes about women and travel writing or travel writing in Ethiopia, but travelling in Ethiopia is fundamental to my sense of self and my understanding of my place in the world. And it gave me a new way to pay attention to the Health Extension Workers I've met who are expected to map the households in their rural *kebeles*, to visit those households – mostly on foot – and to provide outreach activities to women and children who live there.



The year was 2014 and I was in conversation with a Health Extension Worker to discuss the results of the interviews she had done with women in her rural *kebele*. During this research project, Health Extension Workers [6] in four different locations – south from Addis Ababa, south-west, north, and north-east – were trained to interview women they knew about their experiences giving birth. One of my memories of this Health Extension Worker – I will call her Tsige here – is replicated in a photograph where she sits with her back straight, her hands clasped and resting on the desk in front of her. She was both confident and stressed, but definitely not nervous.

Women in this rural *kebele* travel from their homes to collect firewood, to fetch water and cut grass for the cows. Their husbands do their own thing, without helping their wives. Tsige listed the other things women can do without their husbands' permission or involvement: cleaning the house, food preparation, washing clothes, looking after the children, washing the children, breastfeeding, and taking the children for vaccinations. Women can decide how to do their own hair.

And then, Tsige asked quietly, "Why don't you interview me, and ask how things are for me as a woman?"

A few days earlier Tsige had had a very hard day, she told me, visiting women in a distant part of the *kebele*. After walking all day she was drained and exhausted when she came home:

I asked my husband – who only has to walk a short distance to go to work [she pointed to the school across the field] – if he could make me a cup of tea. "No," he told me, "making tea is women's work".

During focus groups and interviews with many of the Health Extension Workers I'd met over the previous two years or so (2012–2015) we met to discuss issues of personal safety, stress, autonomy, self-esteem, family and other social relationships (Jackson et al., 2019). I learned that many of them had started their training feeling joy and happiness because they would be helping their communities. Now, most of them did not feel this way. For those who were unable to get a promotion or to move to another location, the work meant living apart from their husband and children. In Kafa Zone, a Health Extension Worker explained how much she loved her job and how much she loved her husband and child who lived ten kilometres away where his job was based and where there was a school. "How do I choose between them?" she implored.



One of the key drivers behind this essay has been a desire to (re)consider how I depicted the world for both Ethiopian women, and myself. When I first travelled to meet women in their homes and wrote about my encounters with them, I was on two parallel journeys: that of researcher who travelled to research locations and that of writer, keeping a literary journey, as I wrote about the people I met. But over time, I realised that the process of learning how to do research had also become my story: I had learned a new way to live by travelling to Addis Ababa or Bonga, Aleta Wondo or Logyia, Adwa or Axum for more than a day or two and then staying in those places for weeks or months. If I wasn't walking to interviews, I would make time to walk from wherever I was staying, often without a destination, deliberately getting "lost" knowing I was not really "lost" as I could always ask directions of a passing stranger.

There's an abundance of literature on the benefits of walking for health or leisure and the benefits for inspiration and creative thinking. For example, Rebecca Solnit writes that:

the rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. (Solnit, 2014, 5-6)

Or, as Frédéric Gros explains in an interview for *The Guardian*, walking is "exploring the mystery of presence. Presence to the world, to others and to yourself" (Cadwalladr, 2014). In working on this essay and when doing research – as I've tried to be both "participant" and "observer" – perhaps I've learned that this presence can be achieved by deliberately conflating walking with travelling.

Following Levine (2000), I too have observed that Ethiopians – the rural Ethiopians I meet – are great travellers. Walking as travelling is a normal way for people in rural Ethiopia to get from place to place: from strangers who have met as they walk in single file to make a pilgrimage to Axum or Gondar or Lalibela; to women walking together to the market, to church, to visit family; to groups of people walking to a health facility even if it is two, three, four or even more hours' walk away. I harp on this because walking and making new connections between parallel events – learning how to do ethnography and learning "how to live" – also coincided with the long-overdue end of a relationship in 2012. No longer being criticised about how I dressed, how I walked, how I functioned in the world and so on, I started feeling a new sense of life's pleasures and obligations. Staying in the guest house not far from my childhood home in Bonga for a number of weeks after a monitoring and evaluation visit for a small project funded by the Australian Government (Jackson, 2014), I walked to the same coffee shop outside the bank every morning, and began to feel joy at being alone in Ethiopia. this feeling has stayed with me since then, wherever I am. Dealing with the hard questions about the inner self and the struggle to become oneself – as Vivian Gornick writes in her memoir and essays, in the search for "inner clarity that quickly becomes the very thing one can no longer live without" (Gornick, 2005b, p. 27) – I felt I was being afforded a new clarity.



... it seemed that the valley below Lalibela must surely be a thousand miles away. (Murphy, 1984 [1968], p. 235)

Inspired by her childhood reading about Prester John, Rasselas, the Queen of Sheba and the Lion of Judah, Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy undertook a three-month trek in the highlands of northern Ethiopia in late 1966 and early 1967. Research before the trip had led her beyond Edward Gibbon's line about the Aethiopians sleeping near a thousand years – Murphy reminds the reader that during those thousand years Ethiopians could not have been sleeping because they were busy producing original literature, their finest paintings and illuminated manuscripts, and building rock churches including those in Lalibela – to the few published histories of Ethiopia, and then to *Wax and Gold* by Donald Levine (1965), without which she "would have gone wandering through the highlands in a permanent daze of incomprehension" (Murphy, 1984 [1968], p. 8).

Out of Lalibela, Murphy describes how she followed a barely discernible jeep track and “descended to a wide, hot, arid valley” that was still inhabited: the fields were neglected and unploughed since the last harvest as most of the population appeared to be near “to death and were sitting dully in their *tukuls*, not trying any more. Deserted, uninhabited landscapes delight me but the memory of that still, suffering valley will haunt me for a long time to come” (Murphy, 1984 [1968], p. 233).

Both Iyer and Murphy’s descriptions of the landscape in the same region of Ethiopia are a way of seeing, or not seeing. I suggest it’s the sort of travel writing – travel writing that renders others or other places as stuck in history – that commonly describes Africa as the birthplace of civilization, as a place “always in need of discovery” (Iduma, 2018), and as “a space of knowledge [that] was repeatedly *invented* from the outside” (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2018, p. 2 emphasis in original), as it was discovered, explored, exploited, missionised, colonised, and transformed postindependence [7].

Two other simple examples: Morris (2003) visited Addis Ababa in the 1960s: old men loitered outside the district court as “resigned, distant, biblical” like “black nobles of legend, or the Magus at the stable door” (p. 163); a merchant sat as “lordly as any Prester John” (p. 162); and, Addis Ababa was a capital “no longer remote or mysterious” as there are other places more “backward and obscure” (p. 163) to “old hands of Empire and the Third World” (p. 164). And Henze (1977) writes that “one steps quickly from the twentieth back into the tenth or into Biblical times” (p. 21), and in the Ethiopian highlands one sees, “something of what life must have been like in early Christian Ireland, medieval France or Byzantium in its prime” (p. 39).

Levine (2015) points out that much of the research on Ethiopia has been dominated by three images: the location for a branch of Semitic studies; as an ethnographic museum because of its ethnic diversity; or as a static underdeveloped country. The picture of Ethiopia since the writings of “explorers, diplomats, geographers, and missionaries,” however, is such that by the early 20th century, research in philology, history, archaeology, anthropology, political science, sociology and economics had “developed to the point where to say that Ethiopia is unknown or unknowable is to confess a streak of obscurantism or simple laziness” (p. 281).

I can’t help thinking that Levine could also have been describing much of the travel writing about Ethiopia: obscurant or lazy. When Iyer is travelling in Ethiopia, and despite his skilful snapshots, his pronouncements about people walking in the distance reflects neocolonial blindness. When he relegates people to walking from “*nowhere to nowhere*,” why does he not bother to enquire – or even speculate – *why* they are walking, or *where* they could be walking to? This “*nowhere*” appears problematical and condescending. Ethiopia is not an unspecified, indeterminate, unknown somewhere. It is not “*nowhere*,” nor a place that could be interpreted as “no (discernible or identifiable) place; [an] absence of all place; nothingness, obscurity” (Oxford English Dictionary, Revised 2003). Nor is it an exotic place or utopia, an idea based on maps of places where the “other” lives, and where “exemplary races figure mostly in books of travel to utopia; that is, nowhere” (Sontag, 2001 [1984], p. 274).

Iyer argues that he works hard to capture good descriptions of the places he visits. He tries to “go to war zones and the poorest countries on earth” to “give a human face and voice to Yemen, Haiti, Ethiopia, Cambodia, North Korea” (Pande, 2023), calling on “wise voices” such as the Dalai Lama, Emily Dickinson and Thomas Merton to “offer clarity and guidance” (Pande, 2023). But in Ethiopia, his “wise voices” appear to be only from the long past. Elsewhere, Iyer argues that he travels because he prefers questions rather than answers; that he seeks “ambiguity” [8] and “nuance” (Iyer, 2023); that he is not just being transported to a place, but seeking out “emotional and moral challenges that you would never have to confront at home” (Iyer, 2013) centred on postmodern sensibility. His idea of “real travel” is not about authenticity or even trying to understand his surroundings, nor is it “an exercise that includes discovery and the advancement of information of an Other” (Graulund, 2011, p. 59).

I must have come across “Heaven's Gate: Pico Iyer takes a voyage of revelations in Lalibela, Ethiopia” (published in *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2012) a year or so after my last visit to Ethiopia in late 2018. I can't remember why I decided to write about travelling in Ethiopia: the first and second drafts of this essay were very different, one version starting with the etymology of the word “travel”, and another with how I avoided being dragged into a thorny tree by a mule, and ended up with my head jammed between the “V” of two rocks, my right foot in the air, still in the stirrup. Mules are preferable to horses, but I've always preferred to have my feet firmly on the ground, to walk wherever possible. Iyer's throwaway words: “... *from nowhere to nowhere*” – the impetus to write the essay in this form – gave me the opportunity to consider how travel, and writing about travel, can create a space for ethical questioning, and how brief contact with others can emphasise “our partiality, our incomplete, subjective knowledge of others” (Serpell, 2014, 151). Needless to say, I've never met an Ethiopian walking “*nowhere*”.

The tendency of Western travel writing to present “cultural difference through Western-centred taxonomies and worldviews” (Smethurst, 2004, p. 179) was not a surprise. What surprised me, however, was how few critiques there are of Iyer's writing by others who have travelled – or lived in – some of the places he has travelled to. In one example, Schueller (2009) examines Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1989) “as an Orientalist travel narrative and as a treatise on the cultural flows of globalization” as well as his “adoption of a migrant, cosmopolitan persona” (p. 29) with no home: a “nowhereian”. Describing India as a confusing and disrupting place, Iyer cites familiar colonial dichotomies that help “preserve the Westerner's sense of outsidersness” (p. 40). It appears that being an observer/travel writer distanced from the observed – “a standard colonial trope” (p. 40) – is necessary to his travel narrative. Othering India through binaries such as order/chaos, Iyer is “not simply the ‘nowhereian’ whose sense of movement through the multiple routes is weighted through history, but rather Iyer as observer and intellectual apart from the natives” (p. 42).

In a second example, Smethurst (2004) contrasts Iyer's writing to work by journalist, travel writer and historian Jan Morris's “authoritative use of history and personal responses to places” (p. 190) about the postcolonial and global city Hong Kong. Iyer appears to stand outside history searching for anomalies between East and West, even allowing the anomalies to form his

description of the city. Iyer's reporting is "often inaccurate" (p. 192) and his glib, superficial observations, his inaccurate reporting (even overlooking or not seeing details), and his serious misrepresentations of people and places miss:

entirely the real multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-cultural dimension of the place, so keen is he to dismiss the colonial past, and so keen is he to see the city as a global marketplace in which life is mediated through pop multiculturalism. (p. 194)

Should readers of travel writing have expectations of authenticity or accuracy when travel writers turn "their reportage into artistic prose by adopting a chosen narrative strategy" (Tabaszewska 2014, p. 122)? I suppose my concern about the authenticity and accuracy of "Heaven's Gate" stems from (previously) being an academic researcher: I took ethical concerns seriously; ethical research and writing is still important to me. Smethurst (2004), finds Iyer's writing unsettling and inaccurate. Does it matter if, for example, Iyer claims to have arrived in Hong Kong by walking past "the New World Centre, to Queen's Road Central"? (cited in Smethurst, 2004, p. 192). Unless Iyer can walk on water, he could not have arrived by walking across the harbour.

By contrast, Morris presents herself as a wanderer, "meeting the reflection of herself as an exile from time" (p. 191), seeking "connections between places, between herself and place, and between past and present" (p. 189), compared to Iyer's restless "and airy existence" (p. 189). Morris's self-conscious reflections suggest that globalisation is forcing new meanings on travel, "not relating the experience of the place ... but rather with other internal sources, such as memories, retained images and other representations" (p. 191).

My hope for my own research travel writing practice is to find a way to describe travel that offers some sort of connection to place, and to pay attention to "knowing" and "noticing" (Serpell, 2014, p. 8) and to ethical deliberation. Can the considered use of ethics encourage questions about travel, if only as questions in the mind of the travel writer as they write?



Around the time I read "Heaven's Gate" – when I was trying to turn to creative nonfiction writing instead of academic writing – I read Teju Cole's piece 'In Dark Times I Sought Out the Turmoil of Caravaggio's Paintings' (Cole, 2020). Cole travelled to Italy to explore the paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, followed the route the artist took on his travels in exile, and tries to connect this to the refugee crisis in contemporary Italy in the piece.

"In the summer of 2016, I had plans to be in Rome and Milan for work," Cole writes. He knew he would revisit Caravaggio's paintings in Rome and Milan, to find some "truth about doom" in "dark times". Longing for the feeling of turmoil he would experience in front of the paintings, and wanting to see what was happening at the same time outside the museum and church walls, here Cole is refusing to be stuck in history. Caravaggio – "a murderer, a slaveholder, a terror, and a pest" (Cole, 2020) – was also an artist who painted fruit, ripe and

beginning to rot, and human flesh, both seductive and injured. And here, centuries later, is Cole, wanting to know what Caravaggio knew, wanting “knowledge of all the pain, loneliness, beauty, fear, and awful vulnerability our bodies have in common” (Cole, 2020).

“How do we enjoy, benefit from, and remain awake to the world at large without cannibalizing the world of others?” (Cole, n.d.). If *The New York Times* is a weapon of imperialism as Cole suggests, and its travel pieces serve that role too, he is grappling with what it means to be looking at Caravaggio’s work while engaging with the people he meets. Cole is grappling with what sort of responsibilities we have to those closest to us and those beyond “our immediate household or circle of friends” (Cole, n.d.).

Consider how Cole was awe-struck by how a painting that someone made hundreds of years ago is able:

to call *you* — to attention in the present, to drive you to confusion by drawing from you both a sense of alarm and a feeling of consolation, to bring you to an awareness of your own self in the act of experiencing something that is well beyond the grasp of language, something that you wouldn’t wish to live without. (Cole, 2020)

Consider how Cole wanted to connect Caravaggio to the refugee crisis, somehow, and how the first draft took so long that he was “disgusted by it because it read like a pleasant travel piece” (Cole, n.d.).

Consider that it took him another three years to get it right because he realised that writing something:

that simply flatters the art historical interests of a presumed middle and upper middle class white audience is not what I want to do with my time. It’s not how I want to expend my emotional treasure. What I tried to do in the piece was grapple with: What does it even mean to be out here looking at this thing, looking at this man’s work? What does it mean to be engaging these other people? (Cole, n.d.)



When I travelled “back” to Ethiopia as an adult in 2007, I did not want to follow in my missionary parent’s footsteps but to wrestle with the question of why we had been in Ethiopia, and “to research how birthing women could be ‘saved’ from death or disability” (Jackson, 2022, p. 11). I was also wrestling with how the concept of “international development” conveyed ideas of progress and growth that urge “us to protect and better others less fortunate than ourselves” (Duffield, 2007, p. 227). I soon learned I was only seeing “an incomplete picture of a more complex reality” (Thompson, 2011, p. 62).

In Ethiopia, I don’t feel Iyer’s “nowhereness” or “non-place” as a wanderer for whom “home is everywhere and nowhere” (Iyer, 1997). “Going nowhere ... isn’t about turning your back on the world” Iyer writes, “it’s about stepping away now and then so that you can see the world

more clearly and love it more deeply” (2014, p. 13). Well, yes, maybe it is, but in Ethiopia, as stated earlier, Iyer’s approach to travel writing appears to be based on first impressions and distancing himself as “observer and intellectual” (Schueller, 2009, p. 42). Does he have any real interest in the people he observes or meets, even fleetingly? How might he grapple with what he wants to write compared to what he thinks he actually sees?

I’m an outsider like Pico Iyer, Dervla Murphy and Jan Morris, but like Morris, the experience of travel has become far more than recognising everyday conversations: after walking to the Saturday morning market in Bonga I hang out with friends at the “grain house” trying to help pick out tiny stones from the grain before it is milled; when I walk to an interview and give a woman a small gift of green coffee beans so she can prepare a coffee ceremony, I’m happy to hear her say, “How did she know how much I like coffee?”; or when I’m walking to the hospital to conduct an interview and catch up to a group of around forty people who have walked for four days, I’m heartbroken to learn that the young woman on a stretcher tried to have an abortion at home and now needs medical attention. We may be walking for different reasons, but we are still walking together.

If I don’t feel Iyer’s “nowhereness,” and if I’m not interested in picking and choosing locations to visit for the purpose of giving them a “human face and voice” (Pande, 2023), nor in the notion that anywhere in the world can be home, perhaps I relate more to Jan Morris’s “nowhereness”. It may be that Ethiopia has the same sort of effect on me that Trieste had on Morris. In *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* – a work that was “partly of introspection—or self-indulgence” (Morris, 2001, p. 8) – revisiting Trieste stirred memories and feelings that for more than half a century “remained the same, and in those moments of sudden stillness I am not still revisiting the place, I am re-examining myself too” (Morris, 2001, p. 3). For Morris, Trieste illustrates both the past and her “lifelong preoccupations” – the “Trieste effect” is what summons her so that she is transported there – “as though she has “been taken, for a brief sententious glimpse, out of time to nowhere” (p. 4). If I have experienced an “Ethiopia effect,” it is partly because of the sharp distinctions between my childhood and my adult research experiences. I too have been taken to a liminal space “out of time to nowhere” as I walk the streets of Addis Ababa, the backroads in Bonga, or other places where I’m staying. And as a research traveller, I learned how the topography and lack of transportation can contribute to delays for birthing women to reach a health facility – especially in the rainy season – the mountainous paths and roads are muddy and slippery and sometimes there are rivers that are impossible to cross.

This past year, as I’ve edited this essay – and developed two others based on different iterations of my experiences in Ethiopia – I’ve stopped worrying about whether I was supposed to write about this recurrent or even repetitive theme that has enabled a life whereby “[l]iving consciously is the business of our lives” (Gornick, 1997, p. 144). These essays are attempts to remind us that people’s lives are not “stuck in history” or fixed in time. Writing or essaying about the “other” – even being moved and impressed by Teju Cole’s attempt to link Caravaggio and the refugee crisis – should make us question what it means to be a witness, to question the limits of our position as witness and how this can change over time. Perhaps this essay is simply

an attempt to explore what travel writing – writing about encounters with others in other places – can do. If I seek to grapple with connections – as Morris seeks connections between “past and present” (Smethurst, 2004, p. 189) – to those close to and those beyond my immediate circle of friends, is there any reason that travel writing should not include women for whom walking is travel on a daily scale?

The last time I was in Ethiopia – six years ago now – I accompanied friends on a long walk to Sheyka, a place I’d visited years earlier, because one of my “de facto” daughters was sharecropping with a farmer there. Much of the walking was up steep hills. Very steep. At least it hadn’t rained for a few days, so we weren’t going to slip around in the mud. We picked a lot of maize. The better cobs went into sacks to carry home, while the rest was stacked in a wooden frame off the ground next to the farmers’ *tukul* to dry. In the middle of day – it was hot and there was no shade – we sat in the maize field to drink coffee and eat *nifro*, a snack of boiled maize kernels and kidney beans that the farmer’s wife prepared for us. But this *ferengi* didn’t pick as much maize as her Ethiopian friends. She was too busy watching and listening as twenty men chanted *whoaooooaa*, *whoaooooaa*, *whoaooooaa* and *hiyehaha*, *hiyehaha*, *hiyehaha* as they dragged a tree trunk four times taller than them along flat ground and then, finally, up a steep hill on the other side of the valley. They rested and then lifted the pole into the centre of a clearing where a new *tukul* would soon be built around it.

Notes

[1] During my doctoral fieldwork I travelled from Bonga to Chiri a number of times so I could accompany Chiri health centre staff on their monthly outreach vaccination clinics – on foot – to various rural health posts (Jackson, 2010).

[2] The Manjo, who make up five to ten percent of the total population in Kafa Zone, are the largest minority class still facing prejudice and discrimination. Former hunters deriving subsistence from wild animals such as Colobus monkeys, baboons, antelopes, porcupine and wild pig, their main source of income nowadays is supplying and selling firewood and charcoal from door to door as they are not allowed to sell at the market. The Manjo are also expert bee keepers and tree climbers (Jackson, 2010).

[3] “Heaven’s Gate” was published in 2012, yet from details in the piece (e.g. the age of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi), it appears he must have travelled to Ethiopia in 1994.

[4] Afar Pastoralist Development Association’s Woman Extension Workers do not provide the same services as government trained Health Extension Workers, but both groups play a large role in increasing women’s health-seeking behaviour. By design, both APDA and government health programs recognise “women’s traditional role as care providers and as health care seekers” and use “a culturally acceptable approach to facilitate health services access through women health providers to every household” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Health, 2013).

[5] *Tej* is a mild alcoholic drink made from honey and *gesho*, *Rhamnus prinoides*, which has the same function as hops. *Tej* is normally served in a *tej bet* or house. *Tella* is also a mild alcoholic drink made from maize, barley or *tef* and *gesho*. A *tella bet* will often be in the front room or living room of a local house. In Kafa, women put a pole with a bunch of white trumpet-like flowers attached on the top outside the house to indicate a *tella bet*. In my experience, running a *tella bet* provides income for female-led households.

[6] Two Health Extension Workers are assigned to each rural local neighbourhood or *kebele* health post to deliver 18 health packages including hygiene and sanitation, prevention and control of major communicable diseases, family health services, and health education. In 2015, there were 43,935 government employed Health Extension Workers – almost all female – who accounted for almost fifty percent of the entire health workforce in Ethiopia (Jackson et al., 2019).

[7] Even though Ethiopia prides itself on defeating a European colonial power and maintaining its independence, one of the “axioms of Ethiopian exceptionalism—i.e., the first nation to adopt Christianity, the custodian of the Arc of the Covenant, the only African country with its own alphabet” (Dagmawi Woubshet, 2010, p. 200), it is ironic that “some of its self-representations reflect Europe’s long-standing image of Africa as a static site of primitivism against which one hones definitions of progress and modernity” (p. 199).

[8] For more on ambiguity and ambiguous modes of expressions that are rooted in language and thought in Ethiopia see Levine (2015, 1965).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to TM who commented on an earlier draft of this essay, and to the anonymous reviewers at *TEXT Journal* for their insights and valuable suggestions throughout the editorial process.

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Note: All Ethiopian names are entered, as is traditional practice, in alphabetical order of the author’s first name followed by the father’s name.

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