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The travel writer in the 21st century

Abstract:

What is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel? Who are the 21st century travelers and how will they record their travels? Some of them are as well-heeled as any traveler in the past, but some of them are refugees. With a shocking resurgence of nationalism the world over, are the citizens of the world, particularly the dispossessed, the responsibility of the traveler? What is the value of uncertainty and ambiguity for the travel writer of the 21st century?

Biographical Note:

Robin Hemley has published twelve books of fiction and nonfiction and has won many awards for his work, including three Pushcart Prizes in Fiction and Nonfiction and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He was the Director of the Nonfiction Writing Program at The University of Iowa for nine years and is the Founder and President of NonfictioNOW, a biennial conference of over five hundred practitioners from around the world (NonfictioNOW.org). He is currently Director of the Writing Program and Writer-in-Residence at Yale-NUS College in Singapore and is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at RMIT University. He is also a Professor Emeritus at The University of Iowa. His website is Robinhemley.com

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In light of the rise of nationalism in my birthplace, the United States, and around the world, I've been mulling over the role of the travel writer in the 21st century. And by travel writing, I don't mean the kind of writing one reads on a plane about the most unusual hotels in the Maldives. Even if the world is going to hell, perhaps especially then, we will still want to know what the best hotels in the Maldives are. But that's not what concerns me here. My approach to travel writing is perhaps the same as my approach to national identity, to what it means to belong to a nation, and what it means to go outside of the borders of that nation. My approach to travel writing is to ask questions, but to sometimes answer those questions with silence. My approach to travel writing is to start with a travel narrative:

The plane from St. Petersburg was in a holding pattern over Moscow, reducing my already short connection time. I could *not* afford to miss my flight to Hong Kong because my Russian visa expired at midnight and it was already past seven in the evening. I'd read horror stories of travelers who'd overstayed their Russian visas by only a couple of hours, and who wound up not only greatly inconvenienced but in trouble. My plane to Hong Kong was due to depart at 8:15 pm and, in my state of panic and exasperation at 7:30 pm when the plane finally landed, I took every further delay as a personal affront on the part of Aeroflot and whatever bureaucratic under-demon in hell handles the flight itineraries of mortals such as myself. Another fifteen minutes passed as we filed in slow motion out of the plane and onto waiting busses to take us to the terminal. From there, I ran through a hallway that seemed to have been styled after a pneumatic tube, but with none of a pneumatic tube's advantages of propulsion. Huffing along with a fellow passenger to the third floor and passport control – 8pm by this time – he remarked as we stepped on the elevator, 'This always happens to me.' And I had thought it only happened to me.

After passport control, another mile from terminal D to F through another human-scale pneumatic tube and acreage of duty free shops and restaurants. By the time I reached my gate, it was 8:20 pm, my mouth parched, my heart racing, my clothes soaked in perspiration. The door to my gate was closed, a woman on a phone chatting away as though all was right with the world. If one can *forlornly brandish*, then that's how I showed her my ticket. She shrugged and pointed to her left. Behold, an open door and attendants taking such tickets, brandished by my fellow passengers in anything but a forlorn manner. The first attendant who greeted me as I stumbled aboard looked at me as though I were the last survivor of a desert caravan that had been caught in a windstorm, and brought me a glass of water.

I collapsed in my seat and thought that my leave-taking of Russia felt under the circumstances more like an escape. Coincidentally, as I was making my way to Hong Kong and then to my new home of Singapore, where I'd recently accepted a new job that would take me away from my homeland, Edward Snowden was heading to Moscow from Hong Kong. Perhaps we'd pass within miles of one another in the air. Snowden, the infamous at times celebrated former NSA employee who had embarrassed the US with allegations of mass spying by the US on millions of Americans as well as allied world leaders, was truly escaping the US. He'd spent the last several weeks hiding out in Hong Kong, trying to find a country to take him in while the US pressured China and Hong Kong to hand him over. Public sentiment in China strongly favored Snowden and so he made good his escape.

Well, Snowden had his life to live and I had mine. We were headed in opposite directions, but we were both turning our backs on our country, though he more

dramatically than myself. Putin didn't really want him, and kept him holed up in a waiting area of the Moscow airport for weeks before finally welcoming him with folded arms.

The man seated beside me on the plane to Hong Kong, muscular and compactly built, noticed my passport, which I had placed for a moment on my food tray.

'You American?' he asked. 'You patriot?'

This is a question that no one has ever asked me before, and I was taken aback. He saw my hesitation and answered first.

'Me, no, not patriot of Ukraine. Bad presidents, bad police, bad schools. People good. Scenery good. You patriot?' he asked again.

Truthfully and in hindsight, I don't know the answer to that question. I'm not un-American, but I'm not Jingoistic by a long shot. I'm not even sure what 'American' means anymore. It seemed to me that America and I were both undergoing prolonged identity crises, and now I was moving away, and America, too seemed to be drifting.

'I guess,' I said.

'Passport please,' he said as though he were a border guard.

I gave him my passport and asked for his Ukrainian passport. I liked its bright red cover.

'Not so interesting,' he said as he handed it over. 'Your passport, interesting. As he flipped through my passport, he started to hum 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' soon rising to a crescendo and looking up with glee from my passport, waving his finger conductor style. 'DA DA DA DA DA THAT OUR FLAG DA DA DA.'

I introduced myself in a gambit to curtail further singing, if possible. He stopped and introduced himself as Alex from Kiev. Soon, I learned more than I cared to know, in the way that you sometimes do on planes. He loved Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president who insisted the Holocaust never happened, and he disliked Obama because he was 'African, not American'. He liked Putin.

Happily, after our initial conversation, my Ukrainian friend Alex lost interest in me after he discovered that his favorite movie, *Once Upon a Time in America*, could be viewed on his personal screen. While he watched the movie, I thought about Alex's question. I loved other countries just as much, sometimes a bit more than the US. Did that make me a traitor, an ingrate or simply someone baffled by traditional notions of patriotism? When it comes to national identity, I'm an outlier. I'm married to someone from the Philippines. My daughters are Third Culture kids. I was about to move to the relatively new nation of Singapore (a mere fifty years old), but I also still owned a house in the American heartland of Iowa. I didn't want to cut my ties to America in Snowden fashion. My allegiances were complicated. My sense of belonging to a national narrative that values, above all, a clear sense of shared identity, fluctuated constantly. I didn't see myself as disloyal so much as missing the loyalty gene.

On March 11th 1882, French philosopher, Ernest Renan, delivered to a conference at the Sorbonne an essay titled, 'What is a nation?' In some ways, it seems like a simple question, but it's a question that has perplexed and intrigued people since Renan asked it. Just shy of a century later, Hugh Seton-Watson, the British historian and

political scientist wrote, 'I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists.' If we look at a world map of 1882 we see how different the nations of today look from the days of Renan. In 1882, Germany was eleven years old, Italy twenty-one years old and India was a compilation of over 600 princely states. Australia wouldn't be an independent nation for another nineteen years. Simply put, Renan saw himself ultimately as part of a larger community. 'We must not abandon this fundamental principle,' he wrote, 'that man is a reasonable and moral being before he is penned up in this or that language, a member of this or that race, or a participant in this or that culture. Before French, German, or Italian culture is the culture of mankind.'

Given that nations, as we know them today, are something rather new in history, my questions are 'What is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel? Who are the 21st century travelers and how will they record their travels? Some of them are as well-heeled as any traveler in the past, but some of them are refugees. With a shocking resurgence of nationalism the world over, are the citizens of the world, particularly the dispossessed, the responsibility of the traveler? Or are merely the lands and crumbling monuments they left behind important as something to be viewed, collected, purchased, ticked off on a bucket list?

If our identities are wrapped up in our sense of belonging to a nation, then how fragile these identities are. A single lifetime is long enough to have multiple national identities. Mohammed Ali, seventy-nine years old in 2015, has been a citizen of several countries without ever moving once. He was born in British India, and then in 1947 when India and Pakistan went their separate ways, he became a citizen of East Pakistan, an 'exclave' (or extra-territorial part of a country cut off from its mainland by another country) of Pakistan, and then in 1971, he became a citizen of Bangladesh after East Pakistan fought a war of independence against Pakistan. But for many years, he lived in a Bangladeshi exclave within India. On June 15th, 2015, he was given the rare choice of what nationality he wanted to be, along with thousands of other exclave residents on both sides of the Indian/Bangladesh border. Did he want to be Indian or Bangladeshi? June 15th was the date that the two countries swapped their holdings within the countries of the other, simplifying after many decades what had been the most complicated border in the world. At age seventy-nine, Mohammed Ali, a resident of the former Bangladeshi exclave of Bhatrigachh chose Indian citizenship. 'I was born in British India, grew up in East Pakistan and Bangladesh and will spend my old age in India,' he said. Mr. Ali is the rarest of travelers of the 21st century, a visitor to several countries without moving once. These fickle nations. These identity problems. They're not simply for the lowly born, like Mohammed Ali, but for monarchs, too.

King Peter the Second of Yugoslavia and his wife Alexandra of Greece faced a dilemma in the summer of 1945 as they awaited the birth of their child, the heir to the throne of Yugoslavia. As with many royals, World War Two had scattered them and the Yugoslavian king and his family had taken up residence in Suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel in London. The problem, besides living in exile: the rules of succession stipulated that the heir to the throne had to be born on Yugoslavian soil. This was at a time when the British Empire, even diminished and fraying at the seams, could draw a border or create a nation out of almost nothing. Two years later, Britain would send Sir Cyril Radcliffe to India, a place he had never been, and require that he draw a border between India and Pakistan in little over a month. I imagine Churchill barely blinking, perhaps pausing for a puff on his cigar, before declaring

that the problem of the Yugoslavian succession was an easy one. Simply declare Suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel temporary Yugoslavian territory on the day of the birth.

When it comes to countries and borders and sovereignty, little is ever that easy. Already in 1945, the communist partisans of Josip Tito had defeated the Nazis and the royalists for control of the country. Less than a month after Crown Prince Alexander's birth, the name of Yugoslavia was changed to Democratic Federal Yugoslavia. By November, the country had changed again, and by 1947, Prince Alexander and virtually his entire family were stripped of their Yugoslavian citizenship, their property confiscated. From the time of his birth until 1991 as Yugoslavia was once again breaking apart and he was finally allowed to visit the country he might have ruled in different circumstances, the only time he ever touched Yugoslavian 'soil' was upon his birth, in suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel, an exclave of Yugoslavia for one brief royal moment.

Personally, I like the way the Acadians think of national identity. The Acadians are the descendants of the French settlers in Canada who were ethnically cleansed by the British in the 1700s, the forbearers of today's Louisiana Cajuns. I met an Acadian author, Francoise Enguehard, on Bastille Day on the island of St. Pierre in the North Atlantic, France's last possession in North America. The Acadians no longer have a homeland, but they have everything else that goes with nationality. Enguehard explained to me that 'Acady is an imaginary country that you make up in your heart every day. Not a nationhood of geography and frontiers but of genealogy and common purpose. By being that way, you understand everything that's wrong with nationalism. We have a flag. We have a national anthem. We sing it and we're happy as clams. We have rallied around the symbols of nationhood but we don't have a territory to fight over. It's wonderful. It's freeing. People without a state have something to offer, the higher sense of who we are without all the bullshit.' The real 'bullshit' that Enguehard refers to is perhaps the notion that any modern state is more than something imagined every day by its inhabitants, whether in their hearts, their minds, or their land holdings. In 1982, a century after Renan, Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, wrote about the ways in which nations pretend to be ancient, looking towards antiquity for their *raison d'etre,* while actually being quite recent inventions. Nations are imagined and reimagined every day.

To me, the complexity of the relationship of the citizen to his or her own nation is the travel essay of the 21st century. Where do we travel simply by consenting to be citizens of the places of our birth? And how do these countries travel beyond us, writing their own travel narratives that bring us along or leave us behind, with or without our consent? Certainly, the United States that I was born in is no longer the United States I know. It is a country to which I travel warily now, unsure of its consent of me, and unsure of my consent of it. I enjoy celebrating other people's national holidays more than my own, in part because I'm put off by the myopia of so many in my country who use patriotism and American Exceptionalism as smokescreens for a woeful ignorance of the rest of the world. Give me Australia Day or Bastille Day or India's Republic Day, though I will never be a citizen of any of them.

Immanuel Kant, in his Treatise, 'Towards Perpetual Peace, A Philosophical Project,' attempted to convince the world of the late eighteenth century that we should replace classical law with 'cosmopolitan law,' and consider ourselves citizens of the world. Kant loved travel books, but he loathed change, and rarely traveled himself. Even at

that time, his notions seemed a tad unrealistic, and none of his friends thought he would get far, but some admired his bravery for trying. Among other far-fetched notions, Kant proposed 'universal hospitality,' the right to move freely between states.

Consent is important here. The consent of one country to receive the traveler, the consent of the traveler to return home, and the consent of his home country to allow him to return. For Renan, the members of a nation, in a metaphorical sense have a daily plebiscite in which they reaffirm belonging to the nation. Renan, too, knew he was being idealistic, when he suggested that land disputes be settled by the inhabitants of those disputed areas. Still, I'm attracted naively to this notion of a citizenry's consent. Is consent something the travel writer should consider writing about? How freely she moves between borders? How difficult it is for the people to whose country she visits to travel in the other direction?

The travel writer in the 21st century needs only to observe the swirl of history and geographies around her, needs only to consider the instability of identity to write a travel essay, like Pico Iyer staked out at the international exit of Los Angeles International Airport, observing the homecomings and first visits to the United States of the travelers pouring out the doors, in this way, traveling alongside them, if only for an instant. Granted, Pico Iyer wrote this essay before the 21st century, and perhaps the travelers he'd glimpse now would be different, more furtive, warier, more exhausted, or perhaps that's just me projecting my own furtiveness on these hypothetical 21st century travelers.

So what is the travel writer's role in this? As travelers, we see surfaces first. It's easy to exoticise, to misinterpret, nearly impossible to see something except through our own lenses. Anthropologists often throw away the first three months of their notes, but first impressions can be useful, if only as a way to begin to understand the ways in which we move from certainty to uncertainty from generalisation to the particular. The travel writer can observe vulnerably, perhaps *should* observe vulnerably, to act as a lens through which the reader can begin to understand and begin to challenge her own stereotypes and assumptions.

The travel writer still has a role in the 21st century, but a role that recognises the travel writer's subjectivity, that questions his or her own biases and prejudices, whether conscious or not, that seeks to demystify rather than exoticise, that accepts that sight is always out of focus, but clearer at least than eyes closed tightly shut. The travel writer in the 21st century might also be someone from within a culture rather than an outsider, someone who travels without moving an inch, like that wonderful French writer of the 18th century, Xavier de Maistre, who under house arrest decided to pass the time by writing a travel narrative from within his confinement, a minor classic still in print titled, *Journey Around My Room.*

I know, of course, that traveling is a privilege of the elite, that I must leave a heavy carbon footprint in my travels, but it seems to me that people who are accustomed to self-interrogation, meditative writers asking difficult questions of themselves and of the world can offer as much as they take, or at least make the effort to do so. What the travel writer meditates on is his or her business, but in my case, it's nationalism, patriotism, and the lack of comprehension that comes from mutual myopia. My own myopia is as bad as anyone's, but I battle against it as mindfully as I can. I confronted my own myopia a couple of years ago in China when I, along with several other writers and academics, were the guests of a billionaire in Guangdong. This billionaire lived in a mansion set incongruously in his ancestral village, a place of shacks and

modest houses. But his home had the look of a national treasury, its windows gleaming gold. Or a palazzo crossed with the Reichstag as imagined by a 1960's Mafioso in Vegas. Its vast grounds were filled with Italianate statues crafted out of jade, marble, granite, and other stone. Roman soldiers on horseback reared with spears from the rooftop while maidens in togas poured liquid from jugs. A statue of an American soldier, AK-47 in hand, guarded the side gate to the grounds along with a more traditional Chinese demon and a statue of a pudgy American cop.

Most of my colleagues were amused by this palace and impressed by its owner's hospitality, but, my American sense of righteous indignation was too easily triggered by his excesses, as I saw them: five enormous Paduak tree trunks, each twenty to thirty feet high, strung up behind his palace; shellacked and gleaming, inscribed with Chinese ideograms, they looked like giant slabs of beef jerky, and they dated, according to the owner, 2000 years earlier, from the era of the script he had carved into the side of the largest, which proclaimed in Qin Dynasty script, 'The King of the Paduak.' He admitted there was almost no way to preserve the forest because China wants wood from around the world and if he didn't buy it, someone else would. As he saw it, the trees had already been cut down, so he might as well buy them as a kind of aftermarket act of preservation.

My friend Dai Fan, who teaches at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and who introduced me to this man, is fond of saying that if you spend a day in China you can write a book. If you spend a month, you can write an article. If you spend a year, you can't write anything. The same can probably be said for America. I've lived most of my life there, but it baffles me more than ever the older I get. The people with the least experience of a country tend to have the most opinions. The same is true of individuals we don't know. The richer or more famous, the less we know them 'Fame is a form, perhaps the worst form, of incomprehension,' Jorge Luis Borges once wrote.

My sense of incomprehension drove me to return to the billionaire's palace because I knew that my first impressions could not be correct, that there had to be more to him The unavoidable comparison, clichéd as it might seem, is that this billionaire resembled in many ways *Citizen Kane* and that his spectacular climb to wealth best fit The Aspiration Formerly Known As The American Dream. His palace, tacky as it might seem to a Westerner, was no more embarrassing than the incongruous homes of the nouveau riche in America, whether in Southampton, Atlanta, Beverly Hills, or Salt Lake City. Or the assorted Orientalist fantasies that inspired Western movie theatres in the early part of the 20th century. So why not turn the tables? That this billionaire was fabulously wealthy and had kitschy taste was not in itself remarkable. What made him remarkable was that he wasn't the Jed Clampitt who moved to Beverly Hills, but the Jed Clampitt who returned home. He didn't have to do this. He could have gone to Shanghai or Beijing. He could have gone anywhere in the world. But he thought Europe was strange and he didn't like America. He could have purchased a foreign passport and moved to Australia or Canada as many others have done. A friend of his asked him to buy an Australian island with him a decade ago for development as a tourist site, but he didn't want to go to Australia. His friend bought the island and made a fortune. My billionaire host's island was his palace, floating over the toil of his ancestors.

My initial assumption, that he was simply another greedy *tuhao*, the Mandarin name for the Nouveau Riche, had started to erode slightly by the end of my first day. He

didn't have the coarseness I associated with Tuhao's, whether from Southern China or South Carolina. And while he was constantly receiving visitors and was at the center of many projects, there was a tranquility about him that my friend Dai Fan remarked on several times. 'The cloud is thin and the wind is light,' is how she termed it. In the end, I could come to no conclusions about him except that he was perhaps a patriot in a way that I was not, someone who chose not to travel, the wind so light it kept him in one place. His country was older than mine but in a sense newer, too. Renewed at least, in certain ways. But I still thought it was worth writing his portrait and checking it against the impressions of my friend who introduced me to him.

I wonder if it's conclusions we should be after, or if uncertainty is its own valid position. My editor wanted me to come to conclusions, but how could I do so? I'd spent a few days with him and there were certainly things he'd never tell me and things that I'd never know because we didn't have a language in common. Dai Fan was horrified at the thought of my editor asking for conclusions. She thought it was just right that I hadn't come to any, that I presented him and his surroundings as accurately as possible given the circumstances. Surfaces, yes, but surfaces that reflect, and distort as little as possible, and which might trigger questions about ourselves in relation to this place, this person, so that we might appreciate our differences better.

We can't avoid seeing through our cultural lenses, our biases and prejudices, but must we see the world through the lens of the nations to which we belong? How is the traveler bent to the political will of politicians? Perhaps the better question is how is she not bent to the will of politicians with their aims of solidifying borders rather than permeating them? As a virtue, loyalty to a country or any institution seems overrated and in some cases dangerous. If anything, I'm a polygamist of place. The more I travel, the more I have identity questions, starting with: how American am I? Do we carry our identities around with us, like our passports, or are our identities more mutable than that? Am I a representative of America? Is every citizen traveling abroad a representative? Almost all of my friends, from many countries, would consider themselves cosmopolitans. We do care about our national identities when we're together – it is indeed a small world, though not the kind of small world Disney envisions. If the Small World exhibit at Disneyworld had armed animatronic figures menacing one another, then maybe the song wouldn't seem so hollow. Still, a small minority of the small world would prefer to operate outside of the confines of geopolitical squabbles and national borders. As I grow older, notions of nationalism and patriotism make less and less sense to me. Travel is my form of meditation, completed when I write about my travels, when I confront the complexities of my own identity that create instability and paradoxically, a certain peace nested within that instability. This is where I travel to and from, the contradictory spaces of the world.