



What posh white men do?

Shafiq Meghji on the diversification of travel writing

Tété-Michel Kpomassie's journey from Togo to Greenland started with a snake. In the late 1950s, when he was in his early teens, the author climbed a palm tree in search of ripe coconuts only to disturb a python and tumble to the ground in fright. While recuperating from injuries that left him 'half dead', he came across a book that would change his life: Robert Gessain's *The Eskimos from Greenland to Alaska*.

Captivated by the Arctic – a snake-free land – Kpomassie left home aged 16 and worked his way across west Africa and Europe, eventually reaching Julianehåb (now Qaqortoq) in southern Greenland. There the town's Inuit residents gathered on the dock to meet his ship. 'I wondered what their first reaction would be on seeing me, a black man... As soon as they saw me, all stopped talking. So intense was the silence, you could have heard a gnat in flight... I had started on a voyage of discovery, only to find that it was I who was being discovered,' he wrote in *An African in Greenland*, which was published in French in 1977 and in English in 1981.

Travel writing – as Tim Hannigan muses in *The Travel Writing Tribe: Journeys in Search of a Genre* – sometimes feels like it is 'dominated by posh white men', but Kpomassie's engaging, insightful and under-appreciated book is a reminder there have long been authors from beyond that narrow social strata, albeit often neglected. Forty years on from *An African in Greenland* – republished this February as *Michel the Giant: An African in Greenland* – there are signs the situation is improving. Authors from a broader range of backgrounds are helping to invigorate a genre that had become increasingly calcified and formulaic, a succession of wide-eyed western-gaze exotica, mock-heroic expeditions and comedic challenges, middle-class relocations, and 'following in the footsteps of X' accounts.

Recent titles, by contrast, have focused on places, peoples

and subjects long overlooked or misunderstood, or have provided fresh perspectives on more familiar aspects of travel, free of the sweeping generalisations, stereotypes and tropes that too often characterise the genre.

Different perspectives

Noo Saro-Wiwa says she has noticed a change since her book *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* was published in 2012, with 'a greater awareness and appreciation of travel writing from a non-white perspective, particularly in Africa'. Writers from different backgrounds 'offer an alternative perspective and a different relationship with the society they are travelling in,' she adds. 'They may challenge old world-views and interact differently with "locals" (for want of a better word!) in a way that makes for an interesting story.'

Her comments are echoed by Monisha Rajesh, who says she felt a 'kind of imposter syndrome' while writing her first book, *Around India in 80 Trains*, which was published in 2012 and has since sold more than 50,000 copies. 'There was just nobody out there, that I was aware of anyway, who was brown or Black doing any kind of travel writing,' she says. 'I really did think, "This just isn't a genre that works for what I'm doing and maybe there's a reason why there's no one who looks like me doing this because there's no market for it or no one's interested in it. Maybe travel writing is just what posh white men do.'"

But Rajesh says there has been a shift over the last couple of years: 'It doesn't feel like that kind of industry now, and I think a large part of that is because the hand has been forced. They can't just gatekeep in the [same] way any more... And there are just more travel writers who are brown and Black or working class or disabled.'

Literary awards don't tell the full story, but provide a

useful snapshot. Johny Pitts' *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* – which explores African-European identity across the continent – won the Jhalak Prize and the Bread and Roses Award for Radical Publishing in 2020, and the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding in 2021. (In an article for the Penguin Random House website, Pitts wrote it was only after reading *An African in Greenland* that 'as a working-class writer with brown skin I tentatively began to imagine myself as a travel writer'.)

In 2020, the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year shortlist included Rajesh's second book *Around the World in 80 Trains* – which won the 2019 National Geographic Traveller Reader Awards travel book of the year – and Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains*, a searing account of fleeing persecution in Iran and seeking asylum in Australia only to be detained in horrific conditions on an isolated island as part of the Canberra government's cruel 'offshore processing' system. Highly commended by the judges, it expands the scope of what travel writing can be.

Last year's Stanford Dolman shortlist featured *Wanderland: A Search for Magic in the Landscape* by Jini Reddy, a London journalist and author with multicultural roots who writes evocatively about connecting 'with the magical in the landscape' in Britain, and *Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move* by Nanjala Nyabola, a writer and political analyst from Kenya whose book examines issues such as how it feels to 'move through a world designed to limit and exclude you'. The winner was *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* by Indian journalist Taran Khan, an illuminating – and prescient – portrait of life in the Afghan capital, a 'fragile city in a state of flux'. The trend continued in the 2022 Stanford Dolman shortlist, which features Tharik Hussain's *Minarets in the Mountains: A Journey into Muslim Europe* and Nina Mingya Powles' essay collection *Small Bodies of Water*, which 'explores the bodies of water that separate and connect us', as well as issues such as migration, food and family.

Decolonising the genre

This diversification is not some happy accident: a genre with tangible colonial roots, travel writing – in newspapers, magazines and online, as well as in publishing – has been forced to broaden its horizons. In recent years, increasing debates about representation and racism, discrimination and decolonisation have taken place among authors, journalists and editors, on social media, and in travel sections. Saro-Wiwa, Rajesh, Hussain and Hannigan took part in the British Guild of Travel Writers' 'decolonising travel writing' panel discussions in 2020, which emphasised the need for writers to reconsider the nature of their gaze and move beyond lazy stereotypes, colonial nostalgia and outdated language, as well as calling for a greater diversity of authors.

Hussain, whose book was also longlisted for the 2021 Baillie Gifford Prize, argues that the Black Lives Matter movement and wider decolonisation efforts have led to actions for diversification in literature and travel writing 'in a way we have not witnessed or experienced before, and the growing power of social media has seen them gather momentum quicker than we might have in the past'. At the same time, the expanding array of 'platforms upon which

writers can publish their work has allowed niche voices that may have not normally found a platform to emerge more readily.'

Greater opportunities for travel writers from diverse backgrounds isn't just an issue of fairness or giving readers a wider range of stories, according to Hussain. The genre is a key way 'we as a society represent the foreign, the alien, the other'. If travel writers are 'all from the same narrow demographic' we are more likely to 'see the world through a very narrow prism,' he adds. This can result in us inheriting 'dangerous stereotypes... without consciously realising it. Even diverse voices are susceptible to this because often those voices have also emerged from the same literary heritage.'

Slow progress

Despite positive steps, progress has been slow, uneven and remains incomplete. Travel writing in the UK still has a long way to go before it reflects society at large, and not merely in terms of race, ethnicity and religion: women, LGBTI+, disabled and working-class writers – among others – are all under-represented. There are concerns about tokenism and pigeon-holing, as well as the often-prohibitive costs of financing research trips in the first place. 'Certain parts of the publishing world still seem a bit risk-averse,' adds Saro-Wiwa. 'For example, they are still willing to publish books by white authors who travel in obscure parts of Africa, but when Black authors suggest something similar, the idea is considered too "niche".'

There are also fears the growing diversification may not last. Rajesh, who is working on a new book, *Midnight Express*, says she has wondered whether it is just 'a trend', but ultimately believes the pressure from authors and the quality of the books are too great for the process to be set back: 'It's not just that people are there for optics: they're good and their books are selling and winning prizes... I don't feel like it's going to go backwards... I think there are enough people for other younger brown and Black writers to say, "Well, I can see there's space and if I've got a good story there's a place for it and it could get published."'

Kpomassie spent two years in Greenland, immersing himself in the culture to such an extent he was tempted to stay permanently. But he was eventually drawn home: 'After the degradation of colonisation and the struggle for independence, wasn't it the task of educators to open their continent to fresh horizons?' he wrote. 'Should I not play my small part in that task and help the youth of Africa open their minds to the outside world?'

Hopefully, in the future more travel writers like Kpomassie will emerge – perhaps even a Greenlander who journeys to Togo. ●



Shafik Meghji is an award-winning travel writer, journalist, and co-author of more than 40 guidebooks for Rough Guides and DK Eyewitness. Specialising in Latin America and South Asia, he writes for BBC Travel, Wanderlust, Lonely Planet and Atlas Obscura, among others. His new book, *Crossed off the Map: Travels in Bolivia*, was published in March 2022.

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