INTRODUCTION

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One of the most important questions that have been concerning me for some time now is how far should one go in sophistry; more specifically, I am bothered towards a justice that the subject of my present sophistry deserves. This subject is travel. Since I, for one, am the most untravelled of people, living in almost pure fear of travelling, I have at least found the simple answer to the reason for my object. Sophistry must be the practice of s/he who considers the work or sport of another to be full of deficiencies, and even callousness. So, the sophist is also the great cynic, the latter that I definitely am, while the former I only propose to the reader to become, in this supposedly new methodology of travel, as I would like to often perceive it. I have a fear of class, any class, and to me any class travels. It travels objectively from place to place and leaves the onlookers in dismay. The crowd is never a class that moves because its movements are so imperceptible. So often, I reject class by naming it as the crowd, the infinite realm of only too finite practices and laughable codes of popular subjectivity. My proposed travel has always been the solitary one whose irredeemable pathos brings the traveller to such an ignoble rank in my eyes that I have nothing to fear from, and I even start to care for his motives, although ideological, his motifs although useless, and his poetics although very artificial. There is always a consciousness in the solitary traveller or non-traveller of the incredible, for throughout history travel has been wrought upon the unbelievable monstrous allure of spaces. I wonder if we all went together would we ever be able to see that monster as it was: the fearsome, ungraspable, and mortalising Cerberus.

In 1997, Sofia, or as Inger J. Birkeland calls her in his Making Place, Making Self, was reported for the first time in the Norwegian media as the woman who walked 2100 km from Oslo to the North Cape, in Norway. Her reason for doing so was to reclaim her north which she appeared to have lost along with her youth. The North Cape which was quite well known as a...
popular destination, since Thomas Cook introduced tourism there in 1874, was not the same place she ended at; the place she made for herself in pursuit of her north is not accessible without a severity of purpose instead of a mere velocity of travel which has been so often imposed on us that we forgot to worry about the former. Sofia explained: “the north is the most important point of reference for the travellers. When people want to know where, they are they use a compass, since the needle always points to the north” (in Birkeland, 2). This loss and rediscovery was rather interesting: to begin with it was the loss of the most common intentionality of travel, not even an object, but the mere representation of a northerly direction. What is the significance of the North Star for us? I wondered how important this celestial reference was for me, for instance, when I conceived Shakespeare’s Caesar in the following, about twelve years ago:

I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fix’d and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament (61)

It is well possible I had only begun thinking about the North Star not much before this time. Of course, Caesar falls from his fixity, and so the North is vulnerable at least, since Shakespeare, but that is beside the point. I am embarrassed at something far simpler: that the North Star is not only losable but also forgettable. There are these representations therefore, even the most mythical ones, which feature too largely in our lives to be noticed afresh. They are located somewhere too palpable to be always perceptible. In the example of Sofia we find a travel to a very predictable space. The means of travel chosen for this purpose was even commoner, but the final execution, and the experience thereof, very sophisticated. The process rebuilds the North, objectively for Sofia, and even her own body; it redefines the architecture of both. In Sofia’s words:

To find myself I had to use my own rhythm, and this is in walking. I walk inside myself to be inside myself, to look for myself, to use my natural rhythm. This is also walking outside of myself. I have to use the physical world because I am here on earth, and I have to use the ground and water and other physical things I can touch. To do that
– to travel outside – I had to walk. That is a direct expression of my inside walking (in Birkeland, 3)

The emphasis on an (internal) rhythm and the purpose of establishing its symbiosis with the rhythm of the external geography or atmosphere is what the discipline of architecture is based on. More interesting than Sofia’s travel is the sensitive treatment it receives at the hand of Birkeland. The travel en-genders a new North altogether, which according to Birkeland is a sexualized (therefore revitalized) space containing the life vigour that Sofia had lost prior to her pilgrimage. And at this point Birkeland begins simplifying by broadly referring to Sofia’s experiences as non-dualist, and adding brief observations from the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. The basic understanding of the human body as a cosmic manifestation of the earth, in what Eric Dardel called geographicality (Birkeland, 9) – although his usage was based more on material and objective realities – is found even in the Baul philosophy of deha tattva which can be defined as:

…the reflection of the cosmic truth within the human body. To achieve inner pureness it is necessary to direct one’s outward attentiveness towards the inside so as to open the inner sight for the Infinite Reality that indwells the microcosm contained in the human body. Inward attentiveness is therefore the quintessence of deha tattva… (Pūrṇadāsa and Thielemann, 11).

This inward disciplining and almost laboratory treatment of the same under travelling conditions is what Sofia also talks about. Now, the question here is not to deflect the attention that Birkeland lays on phenomenology and the study of the sexual body with respect to the intentionality, which is a sexualized space, but to observe the deep levels of circularity in all the three discourses we have had so far: Sofia’s, Birkeland’s and mine own. There is a tendency in each to dodge a stable position, in fact a loci where the walker, the traveller, the philosopher, and even this present essay may stand. I am not merely talking about the difficulty of the language used but a circumlocution which is somewhat borrowed from a tradition of Western thought witnessed in Spinoza’s “– God is the immobile supreme mover –” (qtd. in Badiou, 143) or
Rilke’s primal circling around God.¹ In other words the body becomes the representation of something immensely powerful, something that can only be represented, such as the North Star or God. This is a rigorous path, as opposed to travels that tread on a path of class communalism. If it is the body and the treatment of the sexual, sentient and geographical self that phenomenology talks about I would consider it as ideologically closer to the sexual feminine that Sofia represents in her travels. On the other hand the concept of tourism which fosters a communal identity, that of a tourist, who is the same as all the others he might cohabit his visited space with, is correspondingly a masculine agency which annihilates the delicacy and the disciplinary study of the travelling body. The communality of the travelled spaces is often lost in tourism, and the traveller himself comes to be part of a travelling community. He reads in reviews the places he must visit, and soon he himself begins reviewing them. He is also in a constant quest for that which is hitherto unreviewed; he is always seeking the novel in the known. His job is that of detection of an affair that is ventured into by another. Indeed, his case is similar to the frustrated nowhere-to-go sleuth who the noir-obsessed world has so readily welcomed into its self-fashioning that it has smartly obliterated the way he used the blondes around.² It however, took more meticulous efforts to have an affair than to detect it; merely the latter part was shown to us. The sleuth created no human relations, he saw them terminate, or himself became a spoke in the fatalistic wheel of a larger web of lives. The blonde featured briefly or vulgarly towards the end, or intermittently when she tried to convert the sleuth, or seek reunion with her corrupt lawful keepers, the way she was

¹ “I am circling around God, around the ancient tower, and I have been circling for a thousand years, and I still don’t know if I am a falcon, or a storm, or a great song” (Rilke, in Bly, p. 76).

² In the sleuth figures of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, both played by Humphrey Bogart, and their corresponding femme fatales Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in John Huston dir. The Maltese Falcon (Warner Bros., 1941), and Carmen Sternwood (Martha Vickers) in Howard Hawks dir. The Big Sleep (Warner Bros., 1946). Also see Glen Ford as Det. Sgt. Dave Bannion, and Gloria Grahame as Debby Marsh in Fritz Lang dir. The Big Heat (Columbia Pictures, 1953)
made to feature. But the real forces of production happened at her will. Likewise in Henri Lefebvre’s masterpiece *The Production of Space*, the philosopher leaves no room for an active production of space by tourists and such ruffians, who play no more than a passive role befitting the mere onlooker:

The power of a landscape does not derive from the fact that it offers itself as a spectacle, but rather from the fact that, as mirror and mirage, it presents any susceptible viewer with an image at once true and false of a creative capacity which the subject (or Ego) is able, during a moment of marvellous self-deception, to claim as his own (189).

The more self-satisfying details and mirages one finds in travel the more touristic and travelogue-oriented one becomes, and needless to say the duller still. The one who stays not cheaply captivated but herself transformed, or at an undecidable stretch of geographicality produces space ideologically, sexually and bodily.

The boom, or what I suggest as a sort of eye-hurting cause, recently in travel writing, is born out of a Western fear of homogenization as Patrick Holland, Graham Huggan note in their *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* following the loss of diversity in easy accessibility of spaces of the earth (2). This idea that helps the “commercial ends” of tourism even though performing in strictly literary capacities, is hardly logical. Thrills are sought and the world deemed heterogeneous still, therefore. Were there an industry with which, let us say, the literature of love, or better still war, were associated what would be the “commercial ends” we might seek from such a literature and practice? It is nerve racking to think in these terms. Why then travel (only) is always about creating new spaces, away from the orthodox, where in fact the orthodox itself would like to crash in soon afterwards, maintaining this thorough entropy of space? Often the native travel industry itself plays into the hands of the tourist by capitalising on a tradition of touristic ideology that was charted across the years of colonization, now even in a postcolonial time. The rhetoric of the
preservation of the self and its body in Indian travel industry invites Elwin John’s critique in “Sketches of Health in Travel Narratives on India.”

Travel seizes the language of the travelled; the corollary is: the traveller “seizes with his language the land he crosses” (Butor, 13). The uniqueness of space is less interesting to many than its blankness. There is that primitive order of a Crusoeian name-giver in all of us who crave to redefine space by building it anew, by receiving it as a blank space where we can write the language most intelligible to us. So, we do not really look for authentic spaces to inhabit or to write about but spaces that are more inferable to our authentic imagination (Levin, 34). Spaces are being created everywhere, all the time. We cannot talk of travel autonomously as a discipline or practice but only as the necessary element for covalent bonds between all other elements of our daily lives. So, contrary to the popular understanding that travel is about bridging some gap between two spaces, it is the duration that we abide in these interconnecting gaps, rather than the duration we take to traverse them. Holland and Huggan add:

[Travel writing] is a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines. Travel narratives run from picaresque adventure to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable, and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology, and social science, often demonstrating great erudition... (8-9, italic mine)

One way to look at the above is how travel writing follows a theoretical eclecticism that is ruled not by the dictates of the disciplines it borrows from but by its own positionality. Another would be to see travel writing to be present in any form of writing. I want to stress on “erudition” as this is the only way out of losing the so called heterogeneity of travel. The moral superiority of the traveller over the tourist, a capitalist barter on which the tourist industry thrives, shapes the personality of Emmeline Lott in Elisabetta Marino’s essay “A British, Middle-Class Woman in the Harem – Emmeline Lott’s The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople (1865).” What thrived in the case of Lott was not the tourism of today, but a more primordial tendency of European ethnographic superiority and also the turpitude of the...
Orient. These unfortunately are the values and the fears from which we have not been able to extricate travel writing even today.

There is not a lack of space but that of rigour with which we study travel. Where was Sofia’s commitment to her north in Francesco Negri’s – Italian adventurer to visit the North Cape in 1664 – standing on “the edge of the world” (Birkeland, 4), where was the sexual body, the circularity of the simultaneous inward and outward walking? While travellers take the to and fro around the travel site, the sexual body travels to and fro within its own geographicality. After the Second World War and the sudden collapsing and shortening of worlds and world routes there was the fear of the death of travel writing. But it was only to mask the death of the masculine traveller, who had become so common and spread everywhere that he inspired no sexually emancipating identity. Travel writing had become non-gendered.

Waugh’s announcement [of the death of travel writing], echoed by Levi-Strauss, later elegized by Fussell, was very much part of late – specifically postwar English – modernist anxiety. Bureaucratic impersonality; progressive means of transportation allied to a sophisticated travel infrastructure; the monstrous rise of tourism – all of these struck Waugh as symptoms of the modern (male) adventurer’s decline (Holland and Hugan, 197)

But travel is also about building settlements, temporary or durable, in those fleeting moments. And what could be more heterogeneous than the individual traveller? The fake promise of a paucity of space leads to the cramming up whatever little information we can find about new spaces. This leads to a desexualisation of the travelling body, with the omission of the essential step of “becoming-woman” that is central to travel, as we will see in Chin-yuan Hu’s essay “Metaphor of Travel in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (1928),” in this volume.

The cult of moving away from a homogenized world, in pursuit of an authentic heterogeneity is most affectingly summarized in the National Geographic Society’s “Geotourism Charter” which lays a historic emphasis on “authenticity and making a place better by visiting and spending money” (qtd. in Levin, 9) The question of authenticity is most troubling and inquired after
in Siddhartha Chakraborti and Anurima Chanda’s essay “The Maya in Monuments: Musings on the Makes, Masks and Mirages of Dalit Memorials around Delhi,” that talks about a recent phenomenon of Dalit architecture, the legitimacy of whose aesthetics, identity, and even need for construction has been so severely under scrutiny that people forgot to even care about the fate of these monuments apart from those at its governmental helm having kept these neglected forums for revenue generation. In other words with the possible recouping of the expenditure on these buildings in future, they might turn become legitimate and even authentic; the travel aesthetics that Chakraborti and Chanda point out however remains at bay.

The final essay in this volume, befittingly a travelogue itself, sensibly shatters the protective bubble of leisure and capital with which it begins first of all, promenading complacently down the streets of Vienna, as part of a Fulbright scholar’s travels, which is of a rather commonplace value today. Stephen Newton has premonitions about death in his “The Rooftops of Vienna: An American in Austria,” like any suspecting tourist has in a foreign land. And accordingly he comes to represent a paternal order which is soon displaced as he finds that it is not the death of his own self, but that of the traveller, in philosophical sense, when he discovers how the natives themselves go on about actively producing their own spaces and travelling in them, like the spray painter painting “planets and stars.” History takes a back seat as what happens right there is more historic than all the ideological, capitalistic, academic, and historical reasons why someone had come to Austria. The music not so melodious to the ears of the traveller gathers life force for an ailing woman in the wheel chair. Towards the end Newton, in the words of Levin, manages to “portray a subject who enacts a dramatic negation of the social field of signification” (3). Probably what dies soon hereafter is the tourist’s identity; the native has usurped it all.

The poems in this volume are too numerous to begin discussing upon. There are over forty poems by ten authors and none can be singled out just here. It is up to the reader to pay rigorous and enjoyable attention to their scopes and mores. As such they are like what Deleuze and Guattari have called rhizomes in their Nomadology: wherever a poem opens, a space is found to have grown.
This issue marks the second year of *Coldnoon: Travel Poetics*. It is indeed a joyous moment for both you and me to have come this distance in very little time, as it seems. I hope we will keep up creating our promised changes.

Editor,
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Bangalore
References


The Big Sleep. Dir. Howard Hawks. Warner Bros., 1946. Film.