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Melting Ice and Disappointing Whale Hunts: A Climate-Focused Review of Contemporary Travel Writing

Introduction

By its very nature, travel writing has always maintained a tight focus on place: on what it means to explore, appreciate, and better understand the planet. Climate change, however, is creating problems that complicate travel writers' attempts to tell stories about the world in which they reside. For example, in *Lands of Lost Borders*, a 2018 memoir about biking across the Silk Road, Kate Harris writes powerfully about wildlife conservation and public land management. Although climate change is closely related to both topics, though, it's not a point of emphasis in the memoir, appearing just a handful of times in nearly 300 pages. For climate-conscious readers, then, works like *Lands of Lost Borders* should raise important questions. Are travel writers and editors connecting climate change to everyday life around the world, and are they sharing stories about collapse and resilience from frontline communities—and should they? Are they reflecting deeply enough on travel's carbon footprint? Are they responding to climate change with the levels of sophistication and creativity that the crisis demands—and do they have a responsibility to do so?

Of course, travel writing is not the only form struggling to respond to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Writers, readers, and critics across the spectrum are noticing the ways that climate change subverts generic conventions; as environmental humanities scholar Stephanie LeMenager remarks, “people outside of academia, people who might not be expected to care about genre, are looking hard for Anthropocene genres—for patterns of expectation and narrative form with which to combat this

unsettling era of climate shift and social injury” (220). In response to the climate crisis, new genres like cli-fi are claiming use of narrative patterns from genres like sociopolitical satire, as noted by American literature scholar Courtney Traub (91), and hard-boiled crime fiction, as discussed by American literature scholar Jamin Rowan (forthcoming). But for existing forms, the recognition that anthropogenic climate change has permanently altered our world is forcing writers and readers to undergo generic growing pains. The number of travel essays about climate change, for instance, is still low, and the narrative patterns that travel writers deploy to discuss this crisis are limited. Fortunately, many contemporary travel writers seem interested in using their work to examine climate change, as *Wild* author Cheryl Strayed indicates after describing the “mission” of the genre in *The Best American Travel Writing 2018*: “This mission seems ever more important in 2018, as we come to grips with the grave ecological consequences of human-caused climate change and the devastating results of religious and ideological extremism, cultural imperialism, and xenophobia” (xviii).

Travel writing has largely stepped beyond its colonialist origins, and similarly, it can now become a defender of Planet Earth and the people who live on it, just as forms like place writing and nature writing are already doing. In fact, as Barry Lopez demonstrates in his 2019 travelogue-memoir *Horizon*, travel writers are uniquely well positioned to document climate collapse, offer firsthand accounts of systems and communities in crisis, and remind their readers—self-identifying world citizens—of how much is at stake. But to do so successfully, travel writers and editors must continue, or begin, to interrogate their own motives and wrestle with hard questions about climate change. Since their work is designed to promote greater love for and curiosity about the planet on which they reside, a deeper engagement with climate change is a fitting focus during an era when the threat of climate collapse hangs over the Earth. Hopefully, scholarship like this will prove a useful framework for climate-based travel writing throughout the 2020s and beyond.

Methodology

Perhaps no collection better represents the contemporary state of the travel essay than *The Best American Travel Writing*. Headed up by series editor Jason Wilson, the anthology is released annually to showcase exceptional essays originally published elsewhere. Each collection begins with a foreword from Wilson and an introduction from his guest editor, and the anthology generally converges around themes like the self, personal relationships, race, gender, culture, the environment, and war and unrest. Given the series' acclaim and its variety of topics and settings, it provided a convenient sample from which to analyze the deployment of climate themes in travel writing.

To conduct this literature review, I surveyed the editions of *The Best American Travel Writing* published from 2010 to 2019 and looked for climate themes. When essays were available online or through library databases, I relied on the search feature to look for terms like “climate change” and “global warming”; when I located those terms within essays, I read the entire piece and noted whether it mentioned climate change in passing or substantially engaged with climate-related concepts. When an essay was not available online or through a database, I read the essay as it appeared in *The Best American Travel Writing*, again noting if, how, and where climate-related concepts appeared. I also read the foreword and introduction of each collection, understanding that those short critical works offer valuable insights into the editors' preoccupations, the anthology's major themes, and the current state of travel writing.

The Study

This project revealed low engagement with climate-related concepts. Only four of the 219 essays surveyed are written about climate change and the various ways that it manifests itself around the globe. Five other essays mention climate change by name, as seen in Kevin Baker's “21st Century Limited”: “All the practical reasons for promoting train travel, which Will sneers at for their ‘flimsiness,’ are in fact of vital importance in a world where every day brings a new report from actual scientists that climate change is proceeding at a

pace faster than anticipated” (38). At least four additional essays refer to climate change without naming it as such, as Henry Shukman demonstrates in “Chernobyl, My Primeval, Teeming, Irradiated Eden” with the sentence, “We may wipe ourselves out with a nuclear holocaust, or with carbon and methane, or some other way we can’t yet conceive of” (36). None of Wilson’s 10 forewords mention climate change, and of the guest editors’ 10 introductions, one vaguely refers to “environmental crises” (Collins xx), while two more fully discuss the connections between climate change and travel writing (Strayed xviii; Fuller xvii).

Although the series’ interest in climate change remains low throughout the 2010s, its level of engagement increases over time. In the anthologies published in the first half of the decade, no essay mentions climate change by name, although pieces from 2011, 2012, and 2014 circle around related ideas (Klinkenborg 114; Shukman 36; Perrottet 142).

Then, in 2015, two essays use the term “climate change” in passing, which at least allows the writers in question to communicate that “climate change” has become part of an everyday American vocabulary (Baker 38; Maddux 148). In 2016, another essay mentions climate change by name (Nobel 171); significantly, Gretel Ehrlich’s “Rotten Ice,” the first essay taking on climate change as its primary theme, also appears in the collection. As part of the 2017 edition, guest editor Lauren Collins mentions “environmental crises” in her introduction (xx); another climate essay, Saki Knafo’s “Waiting on a Whale at the End of the World,” appears in the book too. In the 2018 anthology, Strayed’s introduction builds upon Collins’s foundation by naming climate change as a major pressure on 21st-century existence (xviii). No essay from that year’s collection discusses climate collapse, although Ian Frazier’s “What Ever Happened to the Russian Revolution?” uses the term “climate change” in passing (131).

Finally, in 2019, guest editor Alexandra Fuller’s introduction describes the planet as “climate-changed” before praising the anthologized essays for “[bringing] our shared world up to our noses and [reminding] us that we, too, live here, one person among more than 7.5 billion on a tiny, lonely, imperiled planet” (xvii). In that year’s collection, Devon O’Neil’s “Irmageddon” and Noah Snider’s “Cursed Fields”

deal primarily with climate change; a third essay briefly mentions it (Paumgarten 235), and a fourth refers to it without using terms like “climate change” or “global warming” (Knafo, “Keepers of the Jungle” 126).

Strikingly, three of the four essays with overt climate themes feature Indigenous characters and take place in the Arctic. In “Rotten Ice,” which was originally published in *Harper’s Magazine*, Ehrlich interweaves climate science with her travels alongside a family of Greenlandic Inuit subsistence hunters. In “Waiting on a Whale at the End of the World,” originally from *Men’s Journal*, Knafo describes the month he spent in an Inupiat village in northwestern Alaska, where he joined a local team for a traditional bowhead whale hunt. The team’s efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, as they had been for the previous 21 years, largely due to climate change. In “Cursed Fields,” also first published in *Harper’s Magazine*, Snider chronicles an anthrax outbreak, which began when old bacterial spores emerged from thawing permafrost, among reindeer owned by Nenets herders on Russia’s Yamal Peninsula. (A discussion of the fourth essay, “Irmageddon” by Devon O’Neil, originally published in *Outside*, will appear later in this article.)

Narrative Patterns

The inclusion of Indigenous characters—the first narrative pattern operating in three of the climate-themed essays—calls immediate attention to the ideas that it allows the writers to communicate and the cultural sensitivity that it demands of them. Indigenous peoples have long been the victims of a cruel paradox: while they are minimally, if at all, responsible for creating systems of climate collapse, they “are among the communities most affected by climate change” (Harlan et al. 138), and their “populations, cultures, traditions, and political contributions are consistently excluded from the highest levels of climate change policymaking” (147). Additionally, as Harlan et al. point out, “the Global South and people of color, Indigenous communities, the poor, and women and children in all nations...bear the brunt of climate disruption in terms of its ecological, economic, and health burdens” (128). (As Wolbring notes, climate change also disproportionately affects people with disabilities.) White travel writers documenting

Indigeneity always run the risk of creating “a well-intentioned non-indigenous narrative” that “ends up prioritizing white desires” (Alber 109); meanwhile, ethnic studies professor Stefan Jonsson suggests that “if a post- or decolonial narrative of the Arctic can be envisioned at all, it needs to take figures like [Inuit women] as *subjects*” (231). This echoes a statement made by Sami artist Katarina Pirak Sikku, who wrote, “Having been an object, I want to become a subject and reappropriate my history” (qtd. in Jonsson 232). The question that arises, then, is whether the essayists who write about Indigeneity in *The Best American Travel Writing* portray Indigenous individuals as subjects or objects, as three-dimensional beings or two-dimensional figures.

Fortunately, Ehrlich, Knafo, and Sneider seem generally respectful of the Indigenous people they meet and the traditions they document. Ehrlich, for instance, succeeds in portraying her friends Jens, Mamarut, Mikile, and Gedeon as individuals rather than stereotypes, possibly thanks to the emotional investment that she has made in their friendship across the many years that she has visited Greenland. She writes about the fears, frustrations, and sorrows that they experience, and she quotes them directly throughout her essay, letting their own words shape the readers’ understanding of their world. This cultural sensitivity, as well as Ehrlich’s interest in allying herself with Inuit subsistence hunters, allows the essay to communicate more powerfully about the effects of climate change on sea, ice, animals, and people. If “Rotten Ice” benefits, though, from its tight focus on Jens and his family members, it makes the mistake of letting a small group stand in for all Indigenous people in the Arctic, as demonstrated here: “I traveled with an extended family of Inuit subsistence hunters who represent an ice-evolved culture that stretches across the Polar North” (36). Ehrlich’s words seem to convey that Indigenous peoples are a monolith, at least across the Arctic, even though Knafo’s and Sneider’s essays highlight unique challenges and cultural practices among Indigenous communities beyond Greenland.

In fact, one of the most significant omissions from “Rotten Ice,” “Waiting on a Whale at the End of the World,” and “Cursed Fields” is greater critical engagement with the writers’ reliance on Indigenous

characters. Clearly, Indigeneity provides an entry point where travel writers can locate, access, and share climate themes, but when writers are willing to examine their own intentions, especially concerning their interactions with traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups, the resulting essays may provide more nuanced discussion while also performing antiracist work.

The second notable narrative pattern emerging from these three essays comes from their setting in the Arctic. Travel writers' and editors' polar preoccupation undoubtedly stems from the idea that "like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, [the Arctic] has become *the* place in which to look for clues of what will happen to the world as a whole" (Graulund 290). In fact, all three writers admit that this is the case, with Sneider noting that "Russia has been warming since the mid-1970s, at a rate some 2.5 times faster than the global average, and the acceleration has been most pronounced in the Arctic regions" (286). Knafo, for his part, writes, "The sea ice in the Arctic has been melting at an unprecedented rate, and by Kivalina it was just inches thick, if that" ("Waiting on a Whale" 121). Finally, as Ehrlich explains, "What happens at the top of the world affects all of us" (37). Ehrlich and Sneider also write about how a climate-changed Arctic makes possible a new irony: fossil fuel extraction is growing, or is projected to grow, across the region. Ehrlich, for instance, notes that Jens's grandchild "rather than being raised in a community of traditional hunters, ... will grow up on an island nation whose perennially open waters will prove attractive to foreign oil companies" (49). Sneider engages with similar ideas in greater depth, mentioning that the Yamal Peninsula contains "some of the world's largest known gas reserves... and a large chunk of the planet's oil, too," then describes how a Russian energy company is planning to expand its extraction across the peninsula (288). He goes on to cite research suggesting that Russia's gross domestic product will grow by more than 400 percent as the Arctic warms, even though the global GDP will shrink, and finally, he quotes Vladimir Putin, who told "business and government bigwigs at a forum on Arctic issues" that "climate change provides more favorable conditions for economic activity in this region" (288). Of course, the essayists' decision to hone in on the business opportunities that climate change is bringing to its own

perpetrators is unusual in this genre, but it aligns the essays' political thinking with the conclusions that climate justice scholars and activists are making outside of travel anthologies. Through this framing, in which the essays contrast the advantages that climate change brings to oil-and-gas companies against the ways that it harms Indigenous groups, the writers are likely to strengthen the emotional impact—probably of indignation—that most readers will feel.

For many readers, though, the essayists' decision to write about the Arctic should also point out a gap in contemporary travel storytelling. As “Irmageddon” indicates, stories about climate collapse are already occurring beyond the Arctic: on islands, in deserts, on mountains, in forests, on steppes and savannas, on farmland, in oceans, on coral reefs, and in cities, to name just a few climate-changed settings. But in the sample analyzed here, only O’Neil’s “Irmageddon” takes place below the Arctic Circle. By setting his essay in St. John after the passage of Hurricane Irma, O’Neil demonstrates that climate change is affecting non-Arctic places, and the essay’s central location is striking for other reasons too. First, O’Neil undermines readers’ potentially escapist fantasies about islands like St. John by showing what climate change can do to those places; he even notes that St. John felt “apocalyptic” on the morning after Hurricane Irma’s passage (223). What’s more, many travelers tend to forget that the Caribbean, home to tens of millions of people, is not just a series of beach resorts or a string of cruise ports. O’Neil, though, who grew up on St. John, quotes many of his childhood friends in the essay, letting readers see how the hurricane’s landfall and aftermath affected the people living—not just vacationing—on the island. “Irmageddon,” then, models how other travel writers can write about the effects of climate change on non-Arctic places and reminds readers that climate change primarily harms people.

New Possibilities in Climate-Based Travel Writing

Encouragingly, many travel writers are already course-correcting. For example, in *The Best American Travel Writing 2020*, Wilson mentions climate change in his foreword (ix), and guest editor Robert Macfarlane

engages meaningfully with related concepts in his introduction (xix). Of the 23 essays anthologized in the collection, five mention climate change by name (Bahnson 24, 39; Chayka 63, 72; Lasdun 136; Li 143; Salopek 264-265), and Salopek's "Walking with Migrants" even explains how changing weather conditions will turn tens of millions of people into climate refugees by 2050 (Salopek 265). Two additional essays refer in passing to carbon capture (Anderson 17; Pearson 222). Most significantly, two essays take on climate change as their primary subject: Lacy M. Johnson's "How to Mourn a Glacier," which takes place in Iceland, and Emily Raboteau's "Climate Signs," which takes place across the boroughs of New York City. "Climate Signs" is perhaps the most interesting essay in this batch, since its urban setting allows Raboteau to develop new narrative patterns in climate-based travel writing, but the fact that nine essays at least refer to climate-related concepts is heartening. Hopefully, climate essays will become more common in travel writing throughout the 2020s as the pandemic and other crises obligate the form's readers and writers to rethink travel and its effects. With any luck, those yet-to-be-told stories will employ a wide variety of narrative patterns to match the wide variety of climate stories occurring around the world.

For example, travel writers and editors can continue to report on how climate change is affecting Indigenous groups, and there is great opportunity for similar stories across the Global South, in communities of color, in low-income neighborhoods and households, and in other places where particularly vulnerable people live and work. At the same time, as scholars Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson assert, "The story does not, and must not, end with the label 'victim.' When you're close to the problem, you're necessarily close to the solutions" (xix). Climate-related travel storytelling will become more solution-oriented when essayists both turn to and include the people most impacted by climate change.

Another opportunity in climate-based essays is "tentacular thinking." History of consciousness scholar Donna Haraway introduces tentacular thinking by explaining that climate change challenges humans to "make attachments and detachments" to other life forms and "weave paths and consequences

but not determinisms” (31). To practice tentacular thinking, humans must become adept at “thinking-with” plants, animals, and fungi, such as spiders, mushrooms, crows, and penguins. At its base, thinking-with is a practice similar to—and probably inspired by—Indigenous frameworks for viewing the world, in which all living beings are endowed with personhood. As Sherri Mitchell, a lawyer and member of the Penawahpskek Nation, puts it, “Seeing the world through an Indigenous lens requires one to take a world-centered view that recognizes the relationships that exist among all living systems” (18). Later, she states that “every plant, tree, and animal carries its own unique wisdom and can teach us how to live harmoniously with one another and in relationship with Mother Earth” (24). Ultimately, what matters most in thinking-with is the way that humans perceive their own position in the world: ideally, as members of an interconnected family of Earth-based life, capable of stepping into the metaphorical shoes of their plant, animal, and fungal kin.

Tentacular thinking is a task that travel writers are well suited to perform; in fact, many are already doing it. Saki Knafo’s “Keepers of the Jungle,” anthologized in *The Best American Travel Writing 2019*, thinks-with orangutans, if briefly: “You wonder what the orangutan is thinking. And then the screeching ape demonstrates his mastery of simple tools by breaking off a stick and throwing it at you. Knowing what you know about humans, can you blame him?” (130). Although Knafo could have thought-with the orangutan in greater depth, his attempt to see into the orangutan’s mind—and to access the orangutan’s understanding of humankind—is commendable. Similarly, Robert Macfarlane thinks-with mycorrhizal fungi in “The Secrets of the Wood Wide Web,” anthologized in *The Best American Travel Writing 2017*. He explains that an underground network of mycorrhizal fungi enables inter-tree communication, then quotes a young scientist specializing in the subject: “‘You look at the network,’ Sheldrake said. ‘And then it starts to look back at you’” (159). In this way, Macfarlane and his scientist friend remind readers that travelers have much to learn about *and* learn from their family members belonging to other species. When

implemented in climate-based travel essays, this style of thinking-with could allow readers, writers, and editors to become more aware of the toll that climate change is taking on beyond-human life.

As travel writers seek stories of climate collapse and solutions from frontline communities all around the world, continue to invest in tentacular thinking, and create other ecologically minded narrative patterns, hopefully with greater intention and in greater numbers than ever before, their essays will raise the stakes in Anthropocene travel writing. As a result, travel writers will come to perform the best and most important work that their form is capable of doing: sharing *truly* global stories during an era of global crisis.

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