

# Imperial Eyes

Travel Writing and Transculturation

Second edition

Mary Louise Pratt



### Thinking through mobility: 1980–2007

Jesus, Hijo del Dios vivo. Ya estoy a bordo del camión y me dirijo a una tierra que no conozco. Mi ilusión es encontrar un trabajo digno que me permita ganar honradamente lo que mi familia y yo necesitamos para vivir como hijos tuyos. Tú que conociste la amargura del destierro cuando con María y José tuviste que buscar refugio en tierra extranjera, comprendes que a mí también el alma se me destroza de amargura al dejar a mis seres queridos. Cuídalos, Señor. Haz que nunca se olviden de mí y que nunca los olvide yo, a pesar de la lejanía. Te pido, ahora, que este viaje llegue a buen término. Líbrame de todo accidente y que en todo me vaya bien. Virgen Santísima, Madre de Jesús, guía mis pasos y dame la fuerza necesaria para superar todas las dificultades del camino. Señor, yo te entrego mi fe, para que siempre me encuentre firme frente a los peligros que me puedan hacer dudar de tu amor. Amén.

Jesus, Son of the living God. I am now on the bus and heading for a country I do not know. My hope is to find worthy work that will permit me to earn honorably what my family and I need to live as your children. You who know the bitterness of exile when with Joseph and Mary you had to seek refuge in a foreign land, you understand that my soul too is torn with bitterness at leaving my loved ones. Care for them, Lord. Make sure they never forget me and I never forget them, in spite of the distance. I pray to you now that this trip ends well. May I be safe

from accidents and may things go well for me. Holy Virgin, Mother of Jesus, guide my steps and give the strength to overcome all the difficulties of the journey. Lord, I give you my faith so that I will always be strong in the face of the dangers that could make me doubt your love. Amen

*Devocionario del Migrante* 'The Migrant's Prayerbook,'  
Diocese of San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco, Mexico, 1997  
(translation mine)

In the town where I'm working, the people organize trips. They rent a truck and fill it! They go straight to the border and from there to Minneapolis. Every two weeks a pickup truck leaves full of *mole*, chiles, cheeses, and so on for Minneapolis, and it arrives back with clothing and all the rest. Half the town is in the United States . . .

The last time I saw the truck leave with the young people, there were many women I knew, but I was afraid to speak to them. I had goosebumps thinking that many of those youth would never see their parents again, others would be gone fifteen years. Wow, how sad, how strong the mothers and fathers are!

Lourdes Trujillo,  
doctoral student in Rural Studies, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico

In the 1980s and 1990s a new phase of empire unfurled across the planet. The collapse of the Soviet bloc brought a new geopolitical order, and the communications revolution transformed every map of the possible. Vastly altered and accelerated patterns of human mobility are one of the key new elements of this order, most conspicuously mass labor migration, from poor countries to richer ones and from country to city, and mass tourism. Today at the beginning of the twenty-first century, tourism is the largest industry in the world after the drug trade. Labor migration has produced, among other things, a reversal of the colonial spread of settlers from Europe outwards. Today every city in Europe and North America has diasporic communities from multiple parts of the globe, often from the country's ex-colonies. Nearly half of the citizens of Surinam reside in the Netherlands. In the late 1990s Spain, facing a steep demographic decline, reversed its former relationship with South America. The Spanish government began inviting Argentines to come and repopulate its rural villages, reversing Argentina's invitation to European settlers in the nineteenth century. Spain's revival of the strategy shared its original racial and racist motivation. In the late 1800s Argentina was trying to erase the indigenous and black presence in its population; a century later Spain was trying to fend off immigration from Africa.

In the U.S. in 2000, according to the census of that year, one person in ten living in the United States was born in another country; another ten per cent had a parent who was. In California, half the children entering school spoke languages other than English. Fifteen per cent of the population of Guyana lives in New York City. Such demographic changes have impacted every

aspect of social, institutional, and material life in both the places of origin and the places of arrival. Travelers still travel, and travel books are still written and read, but the dramatic changes and accelerations of the last three decades require us to learn to think through mobility.<sup>31</sup> The term "globalization" has emerged to name the epochal shift in global relationships at the end of the twentieth century. But its most conspicuous mark, perhaps, is the demise of a narrative of progress that was widely shared by peoples in very different circumstances across the planet. The grand narrative of modernity, which included all humanity in its teleological design, slowly lost its grip on imaginations and actions. By now, in 2007, the idea of a world in which all will at some point be equally "developed" has been so thoroughly abandoned that we have to be reminded that this was recently a globally shared expectation.<sup>32</sup> These final pages are not the place for a full-fledged account of globalization and the restructuring of planetary relations by an imperially designed neoliberalism, as urgent as it is to engage these themes. I will try, however, to convince those who've read all the way through this book that they have not wasted their time. For I hope to show that the tropes and conventions of travel writing examined in this book are still with us, often in mutated form, like the imperial relations they encoded. In this rapidly transforming present, those conventions continue to generate meanings, position subjects, enchant, disenchant, and re-enchant the world.

For many people the imperial character of the new global order was obscured for a time by a legitimating language of free trade, flow, open markets, a global ecumene. And yet, the reverse diaspora of people from the ex-colonial countries to the cities of the ex-colonizers was mainly caused by multinational capitalism's latest scheme to maximize profits through indebtedness and low wages, both abroad and at home. Along with people, a vast and continuous inflow of wealth comes from the poor countries to the rich, in the form of debt servicing, sheltered cash, and wildly exaggerated profits. Through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, alliances of rich countries set in motion a new wave of plunder, imposing extremely harsh social and economic conditions on the populations of weaker countries in the name of corporate profit. States were compelled to abandon their custodial and redistributive functions and were placed in the service of business classes serving the interests of multinational investors. Migrant laborers, like the one who carried the prayer booklet quoted above, took on the task of recuperating some of that plundered wealth, to redistribute it back to its place of origin. Today many national economies, including those of Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and India, depend for their stability on this money sent back along family lines.

The metropole is a self-interested and ambivalent host to these reversed diasporas. We've been looking throughout this book at how, in earlier centuries, people sought to depict the changing global order to themselves through stories and used stories to create ways of imagining the changes they were living. So it is now. As a scholar of travel literature, I could not help

noticing in the 1990s that my daily newspaper was engaged in a revival of what in chapter 5 I called survival literature. I used that term to refer to the sensational tales of suffering and survival, monsters and marvels that 300 years ago came back to Europe from faraway shores. Towards the end of the 1990s that genre reappeared in a new guise, this time at the metropole's own borders. Newspapers began carrying shipwreck stories, like that of the 900 Kurds who in spring of 1999 ran aground not in Tierra del Fuego but on the coast of Southern France. In early 2007, as this edition goes to press, these remain a daily occurrence. On the morning I wrote this, my paper reported on the wreck of a rubber dinghy holding 50 people heading for Sicily from Tunisia. Nineteen people had died, the survivors said, and their bodies were thrown into the sea.<sup>33</sup> Stowaway tales returned too, but today they tell not of European boys hiding under decks heading for Treasure Island, but of East European families clinging under trains in the tunnel between France and England, and African boys found frozen to death in the wheel casings of jets landing in European airports.<sup>34</sup> In 1998 the castaway tale made a sensational reappearance in the United States, in the drama of Elián González, the Cuban five-year-old who washed up on the shores of Florida. Played out for weeks on television, the case became a *cause célèbre* among Cuban Americans. It was fraught with contemporary politics, and old poetics: the child, some Floridians said, was a reincarnation of the Baby Jesus and had been rescued by dolphins.

Death and rescue tales circulate in abundance, emanating not from the Sahara but from the Arizona desert, like the story in summer 2000 of the infant miraculously rescued from the arms of its dead mother, a young Salvadoran trying to cross into the United States. The rescuers were the Border Patrol, a role played in the older Saharan stories by passing Bedouins. The comparison is ironic, of course. In 1999 the suffocating nightmare of the slave ship replayed in a dramatic report from the port of San Francisco. Eighteen Chinese laborers emerged mad with suffering from a cargo container in the depths of a freighter where seven companions had died. A few months later England was shaken by the story of 43 Chinese men dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in the back of a truck smuggling them from the Netherlands. A few weeks after that, on the banks of the Rio Grande, crowds watched two men drown trying to cross into the United States. The event was broadcast live on television. In early 2001, white on black lynching rose up from its grave, not in the U.S. south, but on the southern coast of Spain. Captivity narrative was reborn in places like Los Angeles and Dubai, Milan, and Bangkok, in tales of indentured servitude and forced confinement in domestic service, sweatshops and brothels. When slavery itself was found to have made a comeback in West Africa, the reporter from London's *The Daily Telegraph* deemed it a "spectacle from the 19th century." In Abidjan, he reported, girls cost five pounds.<sup>35</sup> At the same time Europe discovered it was hosting thousands of captive female sex slaves, many of them Russian and East European. As if it had been



Plate 41 "Waiting and Watching" (2005). A Border Patrol agent watches over detained migrants in the desert lands of southern Arizona. (Photo, Orlando Lara).

waiting in the wings, abolitionism duly dusted itself off and reappeared, led by the London Antislavery Society, founded in 1787 and now called Anti-Slavery International.<sup>36</sup> No one alive in the year 1980 would have imagined that this is what we would be worrying about at the turn of the new millennium.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the stories that staged the new global order came from distant shores. In the neoliberal order that consolidated itself in the 1990s, the stories are generated at the metropole's own borders, sometimes right before its inhabitants' eyes. As with the death and survival literature of the past, the dramas appearing in the world's newspapers every day do the work of staging the new planetary order, a newly mutating imperial order, creating its subjects, its hierarchies and its relations. The differences are illuminating. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was survivors who told of shipwrecks, captivity tales, castaway stories and the like, the ones who providentially (a key term) lived to tell the tale. By definition the story always had a happy ending that affirmed the viability of an emergent metropolitan global, and often imperial, subject. These subjects were the heroes of their own stories, their names appeared in the title. Today's recyclings of this archive tell mainly about the anonymous dead; narration is in the third person. Driven by a different desire, the contemporary variants perform dramas not of departure and return, but of denial and exclusion. Traveling laborers die en route to a new life; survivors

are returned to where they came from. Success stories could be told – a great many migrants do make it. Yet the death dramas are what grip and resonate in the metropolitan public imagination.<sup>37</sup>

What is going on? The dramas of death and despair, it seems to me, are not just an expression of anti-immigrant paranoia. They provide an alternative register, a kind of reality check, against the gleeful accountings of mega-profits and epic dealmaking that occupy the business pages and addict those who fly business class. The metropole contemplates itself in these narratives as a fortress sustained by violent exclusion and assailed by desperate people no less deserving than those within, just less fortunate. Is it displaying to itself its intensifying legitimization crisis? Or is the effect rather to remind those on the inside how lucky they are, and how threatened?

Despite the death stories, the fact is that the ex-colonial diasporas have settled in the metropole, in ways that compare only ironically with settler colonialism. Today nearly every town in the United States has a Mexican or Central American colony. Villages throughout Mexico and Central America have full-fledged satellite communities in the United States from which people, commodities and money move continuously back and forth, like Minneapolis for the indigenous community mentioned in the quotation above. Enclaves are born. There are Tzotzuhl-speaking apartment complexes in Florida and Nahuatl-speaking buildings in New York, reorganized by indigenous social relations. The Mixteco from Oaxaca have a transnational network extending from Puerto Escondido to Anchorage. As Enlightenment travelers came home laden with curiosities and specimens, the contemporary global workforce returns in the other direction with suitcases of clothing, car parts, boxed appliances, oversized bundles with wares that will be sold to pay for the trip. As architectural notes from India were sounded in Victorian London, so today Mexican towns and villages are spotted by two-storey houses whose architecture bespeaks money from abroad. In the nineteenth century English second sons headed to India or the Caribbean to make their fortunes; today young men from Puebla, San Salvador or Cuenca are dispatched to Los Angeles, Chicago, or Salt Lake City in a quest for cash to buy land, start a business, pay for education or medical care. The Virgin of Zapopan, based in Mexico's state of Jalisco, recently created a new version of herself to attend to her devotees in California. The new incarnation has aptly been called "la viajera" ("the traveler").

We are often invited to imagine this kind of movement as "flow," a metaphor that suggests a natural process which by gravity will automatically reach a horizontal equilibrium. Flow is the preferred metaphor of globalization. The horizontal image of flow makes the market appear as the consummate leveler. Like gravity, whatever effects it produces are by definition the effects that it was supposed to produce. They cannot be questioned. But the travel stories reveal the flow metaphor to be perverse. The asphyxiated Chinese workers were not flowing in the back of the truck; the Rio Grande may have been flowing but not the young men who drowned there. Money

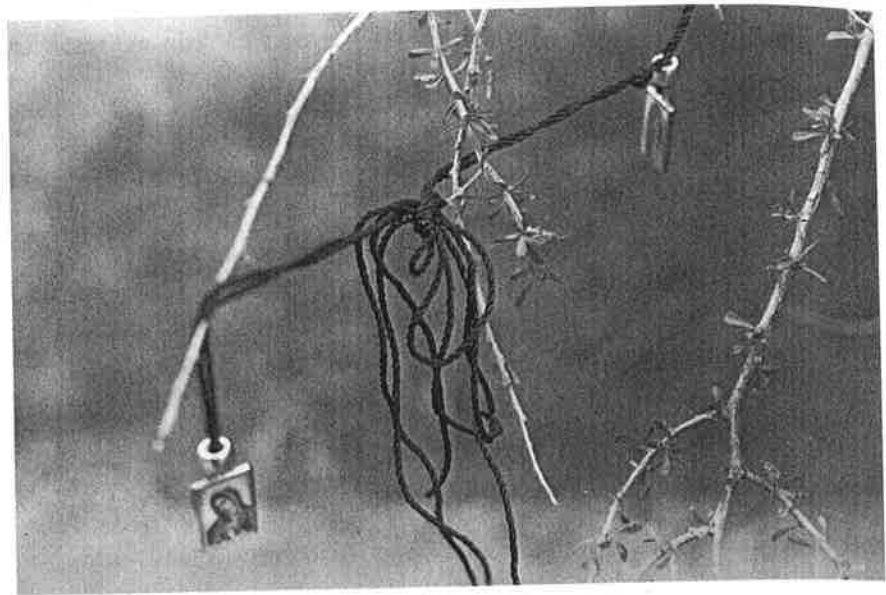


Plate 42 "Virgin Medallion" (2005). A medallion depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe left tangled in a branch by migrants walking through the Tohono O'odham Nation in southern Arizona. (Photo, Orlando Lara).

does not flow. It is sent, and the need to send it often confines transplanted workers in veritable bondage abroad. "Flow" disguises the fact that the world of neoliberal capitalism is run by decisions people make that have ethical dimensions. These decisions have constructed a world that, metaphorically, defies gravity. Its forces are not horizontal but vertical. They pump wealth upward into fewer and fewer hands, while immiseration and displacement spread. Top and bottom both recede before our eyes.

As some of the examples I have mentioned suggest, these mass-scale reconfigurations of the human world produce new forms of citizenship and belonging. Transplanted people exercise their citizenship in the form of an often permanent "awayness." Home communities reconfigure ritual life around the comings and goings of their expatriot migrants. The phenomenon of satellite communities often implies dual citizenship both literally, and, in an existential sense, of a kind of doubling of the self into parallel identities in one place and the other, one language and another. This can be both a fragmenting and an empowering experience. Often, though not always, it goes on under conditions of scarcity, insecurity, and restricted choice. It is astounding to realize that market math does not differentiate between a living earned in one's place of origin and a living earned away as a migrant. In other words, it does not count the incalculable costs that migrant labor imposes on individuals, families, communities, the interruption of generational and conjugal relationships, the cost to children of absent



mentors, caretakers and teachers – all this is made invisible by statistics, yet overwhelms anyone who, like the rural anthropologist quoted above, visits a rural community whose social fabric is in tatters.

The new mobilities are disrupting the monopoly of one of the most taken-for-granted norms of human social life, namely the normativity of staying. When the Virgin of Zapopan generated her new traveling double, *la viajera*, the original acquired a new name, *la quedada*, 'the one who stays.' Until then, the state of staying did not need to be named. Though only about four per cent of the world's people are thought to be in the migrant stream at any given time, the normative backdrop of immobility ("home and here") against mobility ("elsewhere and away") is no longer the basis for the geo-social ordering of the world, nor the sole criterion for citizenship and belonging. New geographers will be required to map the planet reconfigured yet again by the vast mobilizing powers of technology, curiosity, necessity, and empire.