

Introduction

In writings about travel, the Balkans appear most often as a place travelled *to*. Western writings about the Balkans revel in the different and the exotic, the violent and the primitive – traits that serve (or so commentators keep saying) as a foil to self-congratulatory definitions of the West as modern, progressive and rational. However, the Balkans have also long been travelled *from*. The region’s writers have offered accounts of their travels in the West and elsewhere, saying something in the process about themselves and their place in the world.

These articles examine travel from the region, both on its own terms and with an eye to making comparisons with Western practices and discourses. The authors ask how travel writing relates to wider patterns and changes – in literature, in culture, and in politics and ideology. They show, through a variety of instances, some of the uses to which travel writing could be put: social critique or self-representation, manifesto or introspection.

The present fascination with discourses of cultural difference, as well as recognition of the asymmetrical political and economic relationships between the Balkans and the West, puts the East–West axis at the centre of much of the discussion here. The articles unravel some of the strategies and rhetorical devices behind the images of the other in both Western and Balkan travel writing, but the emphasis here is less on recurring patterns than on the specific contexts and interests that accompanied or motivated their creation. These articles direct our attention to the ways writers’ attitudes, objects of attention and purposes have shifted and changed. They also suggest that the tendency to see Balkan self-definition in terms of an all-encompassing East/West polarization may be an optical illusion (or a linguistic one?), hinting at the relevance of relationships between the

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Balkan nations, and between the Balkans and Russia, the Balkans and the farther East, and the Balkans and the ‘Third World’.

Taken together, the articles gathered here raise questions about the homogeneity of perspectives implied by the subject of this special issue. Can we really speak of ‘Balkan’, or even ‘southeast European’ travel writing? Different starting points, in space as well as time, mean different journeys and conclusions. The debate over the characteristics of Greek travel writing poses this issue most sharply – what, if anything, is specific to it? What do we gain by putting the stress on either similarities to or differences from other travel writing traditions? And – to reiterate the political point made so clearly in the correspondence laying out this debate – what assumptions lie behind our choice of approach?

We hope readers will appreciate the utility of redirecting the scholarly gaze, as well as the rewards of attending to the writing of this region of Europe in a broader context. Balkan writers often work with or refer to forms, images and discourses generated elsewhere. But the analyses presented here suggest that the notions of Western hegemony and the ‘colonisation of the categories of identity’ are not the only ones enabling an understanding of either Balkan travel accounts or the patterns of inclusion and exclusion they trace. Rather, a wider set of ideas about travel, writing, experience, identity and power is at work. The various trajectories, traditions and tropes of travel explored here, while eminently comparable, should challenge easy stereotypes of Balkanness, not least those created and manipulated in the region itself.

*Wendy Bracewell
Alex Drace-Francis*