

ROUTES

*Travel and Translation
in the Late
Twentieth Century*

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Prologue: In Medias Res

“The Imam and the Indian,” an autobiographical tale by Amitav Ghosh, is a parable for many problems I grapple with in this book. It tells of the encounter between an ethnographic fieldworker and some disconcerting inhabitants of an Egyptian village.

When I first came to that quiet corner of the Nile Delta I had expected to find on that most ancient and most settled of soils a settled and restful people. I couldn't have been more wrong. The men of the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the shiekdoms of the Persian Gulf, others had been in Libya and Jordan and Syria, some had been to the Yemen as soldiers, others to Saudi Arabia as pilgrims, a few had visited Europe: some of them had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas.

The traditional, rural village as airline transit lounge. It's hard to imagine a better figure for postmodernity, the new world order of mobility, of rootless histories. But not so fast . . .

And none of this was new: their grandparents and ancestors and relatives had travelled and migrated too, in much the same way as mine had, in the Indian subcontinent—because of wars, or for money and jobs, or perhaps simply because they got tired of living always in one place. You could read the history of this restlessness in the villagers' surnames: they

had names which derived from cities in the Levant, from Turkey, from faraway towns in Nubia; it was as though people had drifted here from every corner of the Middle East. The wanderlust of its founders had been ploughed into the soil of the village: it seemed to me sometimes that every man in it was a traveller. (Ghosh, 1986: 135)

Amitav Ghosh—a native of India educated at an “ancient English university” who has done anthropological fieldwork in Egypt—evokes an increasingly familiar situation. This ethnographer is no longer a (worldly) traveler visiting (local) natives, departing from a metropolitan center to study in a rural periphery. Instead, his “ancient and settled” fieldsite opens onto complex histories of dwelling and traveling, cosmopolitan experiences. Since the generations of Malinowski and Mead, professional ethnography has been based on intensive dwelling, albeit temporary, in delimited “fields.” But in Ghosh’s account, fieldwork is less a matter of localized dwelling and more a series of travel encounters. Everyone’s on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel.

Routes begins with this assumption of (movement), arguing that travels and contacts are crucial sites for an unfinished modernity. The general topic, if it can be called one, is vast: a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis. The essays gathered here aim to make some sense, or senses, of people going places. What worldly skills of survival and interaction can be recognized in all the coming and going? What resources for a diverse future? These essays are a few beginnings, attempts to trace old and new maps and histories of people in transit, variously empowered and compelled. They are concerned with human difference articulated in displacement, tangled cultural experiences, structures and possibilities of an increasingly connected but not homogeneous world.

Routes continues an argument with the concept of (culture). In earlier books, especially *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), I worried about the concept’s propensity to assert holism and aesthetic form, its tendency to privilege value, hierarchy, and historical continuity in notions of common “life.” I argued that these inclinations neglected, and at times actively repressed, many impure, unruly processes of collective invention and survival. At the same time, concepts of culture seemed necessary if human systems of meaning and difference were to be recognized and supported. Claims to coherent identity were, in any event, inescapable in a contem-

porary world riven by ethnic absolutisms. Culture seemed a profoundly mixed blessing. I worked to loosen its constellation of common senses, focusing on processes of ethnographic representation. My levers for prying open the culture idea were expanded concepts of *writing* and *collage*, the former seen as interactive, open-ended, and processual, the latter as a way of making space for heterogeneity, for historical and political, not simply aesthetic, juxtapositions. Ethnographic practices of making and unmaking cultural meanings were discussed in a historical context of Euro-American colonial expansion and the unfinished contestations which, since 1945, have gone under the name of “decolonization.”

During the course of this work, *travel* emerged as an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture. In these assumptions authentic social existence is, or should be, centered in circumscribed places—like the gardens where the word “culture” derived its European meanings. Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes. But what would happen, I began to ask, if travel were untethered, seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension. The cultural effects of European expansionism, for example, could no longer be celebrated, or deplored, as a simple diffusion outward—of civilization, industry, science, or capital. For the region called “Europe” has been constantly remade, and traversed, by influences beyond its borders (Blaut, 1993; Menocal, 1987). And is not this interactive process relevant, in varying degrees, to any local, national, or regional domain? Virtually everywhere one looks, the processes of human movement and encounter are long-established and complex. Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things.

As I began to consider diverse forms of “travel,” the term became a figure for routes through a heterogeneous modernity. In *The Predicament of Culture* I wrote about the Mashpee Indians of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and their attempt to prove “tribal” identity in a court of law. I argued that their case was hampered by assumptions of rootedness and local continuity, notions of authenticity that denied them complex agency in an interactive, ongoing colonial history. The Mashpee medicine man had spent

several years in Hawaii; many tribal members lived outside the traditional town; there was much coming and going; William Apess, the leader of a Mashpee rebellion for Indian rights in 1833, was an itinerant Methodist preacher of Pequot parentage. I began to see that such movements were not marginal to "tribal" life. I thought of *Moby-Dick's* harpooners, Tashtego the Gay Head Indian, Queequeg the South Sea Islander, and Daggoo the African—literary figures standing for real historical experiences. Such travels were evidently more than reactions to European expansion. For is not Queequeg, who shares his bed with Ishmael, clearly the more cosmopolitan of the two?



"Every man in [the village] was a traveller," Ghosh writes. And the passage continues: "Everyone, that is, except Khamees the Rat, and even his surname, as I discovered later, meant 'of Sudan.'" Khamees is unusual for his lack of wanderlust (he claims to have never even visited the nearest big city, Alexandria) and for having a mocking view of just about everything: religion, his family, the elders, and especially visiting anthropologists. But by the end of the story, after a series of painful and hilarious exchanges about the "barbaric" Hindu customs of cremation and cow worship, Khamees and the narrator have become friends. Despite his dogged homebody status, Khamees even imagines, in his joking-serious way, a possible visit to India. He probably won't go. But we realize that this homebody's view of the world is far from circumscribed. Literal travel is not a prerequisite of irony, critique, or distance from one's home culture. Khamees is a complicated "native."

Ghosh calls every man in the village a traveler, drawing attention to specific, largely male, experiences of worldliness, intertwined roots and routes. But in his late twentieth-century story, the long-established displacements and localizations occur within an increasingly powerful force field: "the West." The tale's climax is an ugly shouting match between the researcher and a traditional Imam—a healer he hopes to interview. All the barbs about Hindu cremation and cow worship have begun to rankle, and before he knows it the visiting scholar is embroiled in an argument with the Imam. Amid a growing crowd, the two men confront each other, loudly disputing whose country is better, more "advanced." They each end up claiming to be second only to "the West" in possessing the finest guns and tanks and bombs. Suddenly the narrator realizes that "despite the vast

gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West."

The story delivers a sharp critique of a classic quest—exoticist, anthropological, orientalist—for pure traditions and discrete cultural differences. Intercultural connection is, and has long been, the norm. Moreover, these connections are channeled by powerful global forces. Ethnographer and native, Imam and Indian, are both "travelling in the West," a depressing revelation for the anticolonial anthropologist. For, as we learn in the book (1992) from which the story is excerpted, Ghosh seeks to map his own ethnographic voyage on older connections between India and Egypt, trade and travel relations which precede and partly bypass the world's violent polarization into West and East, empire and colony, developed and backward. This hope is shattered when he realizes that the only common ground he can find with the Imam is "in the West." But Khamees the Rat tugs against this bleak teleology, with his critical localism, his humor, and his friendly tolerance for a visitor from a land where, he says, "everything is upside down." Even his half-serious offer to visit the narrator in India suggests the possibility of "travelling East." This trajectory of a different cosmopolitanism is prefigured in a passing reference to the African Ibn Battouta, who visited the subcontinent in the fourteenth century. As old patterns of connection across the Indian Ocean, Africa, and West Asia are realigned along binary poles of Western modernization, are there still possibilities of discrepant movement? Ghosh poses, but does not foreclose, this critical question.

Moreover, when travel, as in his account, becomes a kind of norm, dwelling demands explication. Why, with what degrees of freedom, do people stay home? Common conceptions of local roots cannot account for a figure like Khamees the Rat. Indeed, his conscious choice *not* to travel—in a context of restlessness driven by Western institutions and seductive symbols of power—may be a form of resistance, not limitation, a particular worldliness rather than a narrow localism. And what of those who are not implicated at all in the statement "every man in [the village] was a traveller"? We hear little from women in the tale except a few, usually giddy, exclamations. Ghosh's story is quite clearly about relations between *men*, not cultural types, villagers, or natives. And the very partiality of his account raises important general questions about men and women, their specific, culturally mediated experiences of dwelling and traveling.

Women have their own histories of labor migration, pilgrimage, emi-

gration, exploration, tourism, and even military travel—histories linked with and distinct from those of men. For example, the everyday practice of driving a car (a relatively new travel technology for masses of women in America and Europe) is forbidden to women in Saudi Arabia. This was a significant fact in the travel experiences of female U.S. soldiers in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. A woman driving a jeep in public was a potent symbol, a contested experience. Another example from the region: consider the very different “travel” histories (the term begins to break down here) of the thousands of female domestic workers who have come to the Middle East from South Asia, the Philippines, and Malaysia to clean, cook, and look after children. Their displacement and indenture have routinely included forced sex. These brief examples begin to suggest how specific histories of freedom and danger in movement need to be articulated along gender lines.

Do the women in Ghosh’s village-cum-transit-lounge travel? If not, why not? What is the mix of choice and compulsion in the different mobilities of men and women? Are there significant class, racial, ethnic, or religious factors cross-cutting gender? Does a focus on travel inevitably privilege male experiences? What counts as “travel,” for men and women, in different settings? Pilgrimage? Family visiting? Running a stall in a market town? And in those cases—common but not universal—where women stay home and men go abroad, how is “home” conceived and lived in relation to practices of coming and going? How, in such instances, does (women’s) “dwelling” articulate, politically and culturally, with (men’s) “traveling”? In relations of complementarity? Of antagonism? Both? Ghosh’s story does not explore these issues. But it makes them inescapable by portraying complex experiences of dwelling and traveling, the roots and routes that constitute one small village. Many questions—empirical and theoretical, historical and political—arise from the statement, “every man. . . was a traveller.”



The present book explores some of these questions. It tracks the worldly, historical routes which both constrain and empower movements across borders and between cultures. It is concerned with diverse practices of crossing, tactics of translation, experiences of double or multiple attachment. These instances of crossing reflect complex regional and transregional histories which, since 1900, have been powerfully inflected by three

connected global forces: the continuing legacies of empire, the effects of unprecedented world wars, and the global consequences of industrial capitalism’s disruptive, restructuring activity. In the twentieth century, cultures and identities reckon with both local and transnational powers to an unprecedented degree. Indeed, the currency of culture and identity as performative acts can be traced to their articulation of homelands, safe spaces where the traffic across borders can be controlled. Such acts of control, maintaining coherent insides and outsides, are always tactical. Cultural action, the making-and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales. Stasis and purity are asserted—creatively and violently—against historical forces of movement and contamination.

When borders gain a paradoxical centrality, margins, edges, and lines of communication emerge as complex maps and histories. To account for these formations, I draw on emerging conceptions of translocal (not global or universal) culture. In anthropology, for example, new theoretical paradigms explicitly articulate local and global processes in relational, non-teleological ways. Older terms are complicated—terms such as “acculturation” (with its overly linear trajectory: from culture A to culture B) or “syncretism” (with its image of two clear systems overlaid). The new paradigms begin with historical contact, with entanglement at intersecting regional, national, and transnational levels. Contact approaches presuppose not sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship, but rather systems already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical processes of displacement. A few recent developments: Lee Drummond (1981) sees Caribbean societies as creolizing “intersystems”; Jean-Loup Amselle (1989), in his account of traditionally cosmopolitan West Africa, argues for an “originary syncretism”; Arjun Appadurai (1990) tracks cultural flows across five nonhomologous “scapes”—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes; Nestor Garcia Canclini (1990) portrays the “hybrid cultures” of Tijuana as “strategies for entering and getting out of modernity”; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s account (1993) of “an out-of-the-way place” and Kathleen Stewart’s ethnography (1996) of a “space on the side of the road” trouble established views of margin and center, maps of development. These are only a few signs of the times, limited to academic anthropology. Many more appear in the chapters that follow.

The book begins with a lecture, “Traveling Cultures,” accompanied by

the discussions it provoked at a cultural studies conference in 1990. The lecture introduces and locates my academic practice on the border between an anthropology in crisis and an emerging transnational cultural studies. It presents less a bounded topic than a transition from prior work—a process of translating, starting again, continuing. Subsequent chapters prolong, and displace, *The Predicament of Culture*, a continuity particularly evident in two major areas: a concern with ethnographic practice and with the display of art and culture in museums. These concerns are clustered in the first two parts of the book.

As a historical critic of anthropology, I have focused primarily on ethnographic fieldwork, a cluster of disciplinary practices through which cultural worlds are represented. In the book's first part, research in "the field" is portrayed as part of a long and now-contested history of Western travel. Where professional anthropology has erected a border, I portray a borderland, a zone of contacts—blocked and permitted, policed and transgressive. To see fieldwork as a travel practice highlights embodied activities pursued in historically and politically defined places. This worldly emphasis contributes to an opening of current possibilities, an extension and complication of ethnographic paths. For as the travelers and research sites of anthropology change in response to geopolitical shifts, so must the discipline.

The book's second part develops an earlier interest in strategies for the display of non-Western, minority, and tribal creations. Here I focus particularly on the museum as a place where different cultural visions and community interests are negotiated. Several essays explore developments in the current global proliferation of museums—from the highlands of New Guinea, to Native Canada, to diasporic urban neighborhoods. Something more is going on than the simple extension of a Western institution. In line with the book's general approach, museums and other sites of cultural performance appear not as centers or destinations but rather as contact zones traversed by things and people. This is both a description and a hope, an argument for more diverse participation in a proliferating "world of museums."

My approach to museums—and to all sites of cultural performance and display—questions those visions of global, transnational, or postmodern culture which assume a singular and homogenizing process. "Question" here suggests a genuine uncertainty, an ambiguity sustained. One cannot avoid the global reach of Western institutions allied with capitalist markets

and the projects of national elites. And what could be a better symbol of this global hegemony than the proliferation of museums? What more bourgeois, conservative, and European institution? What more relentless collector and commodifier of "culture"? While recognizing the ongoing power of these legacies, my account of the current world of museums posits a global determination which works through, as much as against, local differences. The performance of culture involves processes of identification and antagonism that cannot be fully contained, that overflow national and transnational structures.

This concern with possibilities for resistance and innovation within and against global determinations is deepened in the book's third part, "Futures." Here I survey contemporary articulations of "diaspora," seen as potential subversions of nationality—ways of sustaining connections with more than one place while practicing nonabsolutist forms of citizenship. The history of diverse diasporas is reconfigured as a "prehistory of post-colonialism," a future far from guaranteed. Reflecting further on intersecting routes, I invoke Susan Hiller's reopening of a gathered life and its possessions in her recent installation at Sigmund Freud's London home, the Freud Museum. And I end—begin again—with a meditation written from my current location in northern California: an essay on transpacific contacts and a juxtaposition of different historical visions at Fort Ross, the furthest outpost of the Russian Empire in America. In these chapters, transnational travels and contacts—of people, things, and media—do not point in a single historical direction.

The world (dis)order does not, for example, clearly prefigure a post-national world. Contemporary capitalism works flexibly, unevenly, both to reinforce and to erase national hegemonies. As Stuart Hall (1991) reminds us, the global political economy advances on contradictory terrains, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes obliterating cultural, regional, and religious differences, gendered and ethnic divisions. Flows of immigrants, media, technology, and commodities have similarly uneven effects. Thus, recurring announcements of the obsolescence of nation-states in a brave new world of free trade or transnational culture are clearly premature. But at the same time—from India to Nigeria, to Mexico, to Canada, to the emerging European Union—the stability of national units is far from assured. The imagined communities called "nations" require constant, often violent, maintenance. Moreover, in a world of migrations and TV satellites, the policing of frontiers and collective essences can never be

absolute, or not for long. Nationalisms articulate their purportedly homogeneous times and spaces selectively, in relation to new transnational flows and cultural forms, both dominant and subaltern. The diasporic and hybrid identities produced by these movements can be both restrictive and liberating. They stitch together languages, traditions, and places in coercive and creative ways, articulating embattled homelands, powers of memory, styles of transgression, in ambiguous relation to national and transnational structures. It is difficult to evaluate, even to perceive, the range of emerging practices.

In 1996 we are all too familiar with the virulent currency of nationalisms. If, in these essays, I emphasize cultural processes that complicate, cross, and cross-up national boundaries and communities, I do not mean to suggest that such processes exist outside the dominant orders of nationality and (largely capitalist) transnationality. And if one may find guarded optimism in subaltern and non-Western transcultural experiences (if only as possible alternatives to the one-way street of traveling "West"), there is no reason to assume that crossover practices are always liberatory or that articulating an autonomous identity or a national culture is always reactionary. The politics of hybridity is conjunctural and cannot be deduced from theoretical principles. In most situations, what matters politically is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony.

These essays are written under the sign of ambivalence, a permanently fraught hope. They discover, over and over, that the good news and bad news presuppose each other. It is impossible to think of transnational possibilities without recognizing the violent disruptions that attend "modernization," with its expanding markets, armies, technologies, and media. Whatever improvements or alternatives may emerge do so against this grim backdrop. Moreover, unlike Marx, who saw that the possible good of socialism depended historically on the necessary evil of capitalism, I see no future resolution to the tension—no revolution or dialectical negation of the negation. Gramsci's incremental and shifting "war of position," a politics of partial connections and alliances, makes more sense. In the tradition of Walter Benjamin's cultural criticism, these essays track emergence, new orders of difference. How are people fashioning networks, complex worlds, that both presuppose and exceed cultures and nations? Which forms of actually existing transnationalism favor democracy and

social justice? What skills of survival, communication, and tolerance are being improvised in today's cosmopolitan experiences? How do people navigate the repressive alternatives of universalism and separatism? Posing such questions at the end of what will surely be the last "Western" millennium, we are beset with problems less of belatedness than of earliness. Hegel's Owl of Minerva flew at dusk. Where on the turning earth? What can be known at dawn? By whom?



Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location, in the perspective of this book, is an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations. The essays that follow attempt to be accountable for their own routes, their sites and times of production. Full accountability, of course, like the dream of self-knowledge, is elusive. The kind of situated analysis I have in mind is more contingent, inherently partial. It assumes that all broadly meaningful concepts, terms such as "travel," are translations, built from imperfect equivalences. To use comparative concepts in a situated way means to become aware, always belatedly, of limits, sedimented meanings, tendencies to gloss over differences. Comparative concepts—translation terms—are approximations, privileging certain "originals" and made for specific audiences. Thus, the broad meanings that enable projects such as mine necessarily fail as a consequence of whatever range they achieve. This mix of success and failure is a common predicament for those attempting to think globally—globally enough—without aspiring to overview and the final word. My expansive use of "travel" goes a certain distance and falls apart into nonequivalents, overlapping experiences marked by different translation terms: "diaspora," "borderland," "immigration," "migrancy," "tourism," "pilgrimage," "exile." I do not cover this range of experiences. And indeed, given the historical contingency of translations, there is no single location from which a full comparative account could be produced.

The essays gathered here are paths, not a map. As such, they follow the contours of a specific intellectual and institutional landscape, a terrain I have tried to evoke by juxtaposing texts addressed to different occasions and by not unifying the form and style of my writing. The book contains extended scholarly articles, supported and argued in conventional ways. It also includes a lecture, a book review, and several essays that respond to specific contexts of cultural display—museums and heritage sites—in

immediate, sometimes frankly subjective ways. Experiments in travel writing and poetic collage are interspersed with formal essays. By combining genres I register, and begin to historicize, the book's composition—its different audiences and occasions. The point is not to bypass academic rigor. The sections of the book written in an analytic style will be judged by current critical standards. But scholarly discourse, an evolving set of conventions whose constraints I respect, condenses processes of thinking and feeling that may experiment in diverse forms. The book's mix of styles evokes these multiple and uneven practices of research, making visible the borders of academic work.

The purpose of my collage is not to blur, but rather to juxtapose, distinct forms of evocation and analysis. The method of collage asserts a relationship among heterogeneous elements in a meaningful ensemble. It brings its parts together while sustaining a tension among them. The present ensemble challenges readers to engage with its parts in different ways, while allowing the pieces to interact in larger patterns of interference and complementarity. The strategy is not only formal or aesthetic. A method of marking and crossing borders (here those of scholarly expression) is pursued throughout the book. Discursive domains, like cultures, are shown to be constituted at their policed and transgressed edges. Chapter 3, for example, portrays the historical making and remaking of "objective" anthropological research in relations of dialogue and conflict with the "subjective" practices of travel and travel writing. Scholarly genres are relational, negotiated, and in process.

In medias res, this book is manifestly unfinished. The personal explorations scattered throughout are not revelations from an autobiography but glimpses of a specific path among others. I include them in the belief that a degree of self-location is possible and valuable, particularly when it points beyond the individual toward ongoing webs of relationship. Hence, the struggle to perceive certain borders of my own perspective is not an end in itself but a precondition for efforts of attentiveness, translation, and alliance. I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her "identity"; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history. I understand these, and other cross-cutting determinations, not as homelands, chosen or forced, but as sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue. It follows that there is no cure for the troubles of

cultural politics in some old or new vision of consensus or universal values. There is only more translation.

The essays gathered here grapple with this predicament. Is it possible to locate oneself historically, to tell a coherent global story, when historical reality is understood to be an unfinished series of encounters? What attitudes of tact, receptivity, and self-irony are conducive to nonreductive understandings? What are the conditions for serious translation between different routes in an interconnected but not homogeneous modernity? Can we recognize viable alternatives to "traveling West," old and new paths? In the face of questions such as these, the writings collected in *Routes* struggle to sustain a certain hope, and a lucid uncertainty.