

Travel: New Ways of Seeing

William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*

Henry James' *Daisy Miller: A Study* and Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*

Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*

Leah Franqui's *America for Beginners*

Colson Whitehead's *Nickel Boys*

The human impulse for travel perhaps evokes the nomadic origins of human society. People would leave the compound to explore the world in a ritual for acquisition of knowledge and for survival. This desire to roam, however, can generate tension between the possible stability of home and the lure for the unknown as a vital tension for change and evolution. These fundamental elements in travel live on in many of us today, at least those who have the means to leave their daily routine and choose to travel voluntarily in pleasurable activity that can enable us to relax and return renewed. For others, though, travel is involuntary because of forced migration, war, racism, religious intolerance, political oppression, famine, and more. Such travel, fraught with danger from lack of food and shelter and resources, often leads to the horror of crowded refugee camps. Custom and tradition have also often denied women opportunities to travel. The books we read in this series will include most of these tensions even if many of us resonate with the transformative potential of travel, an unexpected kind of illumination achieved through pilgrimage, a realization about race and culture in a larger context than the parochial views of our region and our nation.

The six books in this series reflect variety in genre, from travel literature to essay to novel, as well as in the gender of the protagonist and author. Different ethnicities and nationalities are represented. The list includes two Pulitzer Prize winners, older and newer works, and authors from different arenas of life. These books in ways talk to each other, challenging us to reflect on our own experience of travel. They will ask us to consider the contrast between the traveler and the tourist, and have we been either one or both. The issue of travel as destructive of regions and ways of life and the possible alternative of ecotourism is dramatized too. Each book offers us the possibility to develop empathy for characters living with challenges that can approximate the ones we live with.

As with any area of literature, the best books are the ones that depict life honestly and accurately, present characters that evoke understanding or even self-identification, and offer insights into experiences both familiar and unknown.

In *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, William Least Heat-Moon confronts the reader with issues that challenge us to dive into the series theme and find points of connection with our human condition. Representing the genre of travel literature, Least Heat-Moon describes his 1982 solo road trip circling the USA by driving on only blue highways, as designated on a map, and NOT interstate highways. Traveling on back roads, he still finds diners rather than national fast food chains. We find an anthropological study of travel as ritual with an individual on a personal journey searching for meaning. Moving back about one century, Henry James' novella *Daisy Miller: A Study* offers historical perspective on travel with what is known as the international theme, the movement of white Americans eastward to Europe in search for their past and history, for a certain quality of life in the cultural enrichment that the so called old world represented to many. In this reverse movement, James depicts Daisy as young and innocent in contrast to the experience and sophistication of Europe. Naïve and perhaps brazen, she takes risks and seems to flaunt the cultural mores of her setting as she travels abroad to *finish herself* or become *educated*. The sense of inferiority that Americans long felt toward Europe underscores the goal of her travel. Juxtaposed to this short fictional work and meant in this series to be read in tandem with it for the same session, Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* pens a modern satirical essay in the tradition of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." From Antigua, Kincaid imagines what a native of her island country might feel as tourists come to see the beauty of this Caribbean island and gawk at or romanticize the native inhabitants, who do not represent the lore of European heritage. Like an Old Testament Jeremiad, we can perhaps see latter day Daisy Millers who look at other cultures through an arrogant or xenophobic lens, who travel to places regarded as exotic and often never leave the comforts of a beach resort's tall walls. How did and do Europeans feel toward American tourists; how do contemporary Caribbean islanders feel toward Brits from the Empire or American cruise ship tourists?

With Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* we turn to a richly comic world in this 2017 Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction. A gay novelist travels abroad to escape from the realization that he has reached his fiftieth year, has lost his former partner to another, and has discovered his recent novel turned down by his publisher because the protagonist is not likeable. He hopes the experience of exploring different cultures and encountering varied people will inspire him to grow so he can revise the manuscript and resubmit it. Moving in a different direction, our next reading offers rich variety in Leah Franqui's *America for Beginners*. Instead of looking at an American traveling abroad, Franqui focuses on a contemporary East Indian traveler coming to the United States. And like James, her traveler is a woman,

an older widow, and the novel shows the dangers a female traveler as well as a person of color can face. Humor and deep personal emotion make this novel evolve with rich sentiment and character development. Colson Whitehead's 2019 Pulitzer Prize winner *Nickel Boys* offers still one new wrinkle to our exploration of travel. Set in 1960s Tallahassee, Florida, and based on a real juvenile reformatory school infamous for its treatment of Black teens, the novel focuses on Elwood whose grandmother raises him in the glory of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideals. Elwood's parents migrated to California when he was little hoping travel to another region would give them more opportunities. When Elwood sets out to travel from his high school to a nearby community college for some advanced classes, he encounters complications that Blacks often experience in this country, especially in the South. Like his parents before him, he will face the dilemma of whether or not he too needs to migrate to find freedom.

***Blue Highways: A Journey into America* by William Least Heat-Moon**

When Least Heat-Moon loses his college teaching position in Missouri and realizes unresolved tensions in the relationship with his wife and perhaps his own Indian identity, he consults a map to remedy geographical ignorance and sets "out on a long... circular trip over the back roads of the United States." He decides that following a circular route around the country will give him purpose as he would "come around again" to where he had begun. He starts in spring as blue geese honking north signal him to depart driving in his truck *Ghost Dancing*. With no particular time frame, he winds about among small towns that look like museum dioramas. When he finds on a map a location with a curious name or unusual characteristic, he heads that direction. For example, he drives to Nameless, Tennessee, an out-of-the-way location with maybe ninety inhabitants. For Least Heat-Moon, the traveler misses the journey if he does not focus with curiosity and alertness on observing what he travels through; he shows what we now would call ecotourism in how he does not disturb the environment he travels through. Alluding often to Walt Whitman, he champions receptivity to new ways of seeing. At a Cherokee historical area in North Carolina, he hikes with a ranger through woods realizing that one day pavement will be laid there so "high-heeled ladies and overweight men can tiptoe a few steps" to see what they don't understand and "take a snapshot of themselves." The contrast between the traveler and the tourist he describes memorably as he laments that "without trees and isolation, you lose the mystery." He realizes that the notion of progress will probably lead the Interior Department to view this world he travels through as a source for timber and mining as well as tourist destinations. Eventually, he looks for historical locations pertinent to his family history. Along the way he encounters and has conversations with a Trappist monk in Georgia; a Black woman who lives in a federal housing project in Louisiana; a Hopi elder in Utah who says he has survived the Spaniards and missionaries and other Indians, but the tourists now are worse than smallpox; a Seventh Day Adventist Bible salesman in Idaho with strong evangelical beliefs; a female

teen runaway afraid of being abused. Throughout these encounters and the ongoing travel through the land, Least Heat-Moon, like the Native American spiritualists Black Elk before him, ponders some overarching meaning or clarity. Mystery remains triumphant though. The book becomes a profound reflection of one person on who he is as well as a probing for coherence within the United States, its people and its ways. This book will live on and echo through you.

***Daisy Miller: A Study* by Henry James
and *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid**

James and Kincaid might seem as different as two writers could be. Yet they both focus on travel abroad, even though from different perspectives. Published a little more than a century apart—1878 and 1988, respectively—both works offer provocative situations for comparison and contrast. James’ novella charts the path of a young American woman from a wealthy business family as she moves across Europe with an uncultivated mother who can offer no guidance. Daisy does what she pleases oblivious or defiant of European mores. Her behavior reflects American innocence and the desire to develop her own selfhood regardless of the European proprieties she flouts. An American expatriate Winterbourne both admires and judges her by European standards. Is Daisy arrogant and disrespectful of European culture, especially in her relationship with men? Has Winterbourne stayed so long in Europe that he has lost his own cultural heritage? The novella will move to Rome and the Coliseum where Winterbourne observes Daisy with a young Italian of questionable reputation. And pertinent to us in our time, elements of a pandemic help bring the story to a close. With *A Small Place*, Kincaid reverses the usual viewpoint of the traveler or tourist in travel literature by rendering her satirical essay from the perspective of the object of the tourist’s gaze, the native. Using the second person point of view, Kincaid creates a narrator who writes in an incantatory tone to render the thoughts of a typical tourist. The stereotype of the ugly tourist that emerges in sentences as rhetorically brilliant as James’ calls into question the ethical and moral understanding of going abroad and thus seems to cancel any distinction between the traveler and the tourist. Does the very position of looking at someone, as opposed to being looked at, carry with it the power of representation, the ability to label and categorize? Do the tourists parallel James’ young heiress? Are all tourists exploitive? Do they represent the decline of public taste and behavior in general? What of the economic benefits and yet ecological dangers of tourism? The essay also asks us to consider whether “every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere.” But can every native afford to be a tourist and journey abroad? Much reflection can accumulate within us in comparing these two works and how each illuminates the other.

Less by Andrew Sean Greer

In *Less*, Greer offers the series the world tour sometimes associated with the travel experience. Protagonist Arthur Less, a 49-year-old novelist, struggles with aging, sexual identity, and the questioning of his literary career. Learning that his lover has rejected him for another and that his new novel has been rejected because it lacks a likeable character, he decides he must leave San Francisco, where he has lived almost all of his life, and travel the world. With clever sensorial images, Greer moves Less through the world with comic misfortunes and adventures. "Too old to be fresh and too young to be rediscovered," he arranges a series of literary events and teaching opportunities so that he can traverse much of the world hoping to discover himself and thus humanize the protagonist in the novel he needs to revise for publication. He ranges through New York, Mexico, Italy, Germany, Morocco, India, and Japan. Greer dramatizes the vast cultural differences as well as the daunting task of packing, the loss of luggage, and additional difficulties of traveling. Will Less move more as traveler or tourist? Will he learn some sense of tolerance for different cultural ways, and thus work to make his protagonist more human?

America for Beginners by Leah Franqui

In her debut novel, Franqui, a Puerto Rican and Russian native of Philadelphia who now lives with her husband in Mumbai, offers a strong contemporary story about cross-cultural alliances, the bonds of family, and what it means to learn about America. Unlike other books in this series, Pival Sengupta, a wealthy sixty-year old widow who has never left Kolkata, India, travels to the United States ostensibly to take a guided cross country tour through the usual American tourist locations. She makes arrangements for the road trip through the hilariously second-rate and expensive First Class India USA Destination Vacation Tour Company whose boss camouflages his Bangladeshi immigrant origin. Like the much younger Daisy Miller in James' novella, Pival confronts the tradition that has denied women, but also persons of color, opportunities to travel alone. The tour company thus hires a young actress, Rebecca, to serve the job of *companion* along with a young, green guide Satya who has never left the New York area. The comic travels of this unlikely trio verge on becoming a screwball comedy in the Bollywood tradition until the deeper reason for Pival's daring journey begins to surface: she is looking for her son who migrated to the USA for college, but also to find freedom from his authoritarian father and cultural oppression in India. As the bonds between the three companions deepen on the road trip, they begin to see America in different ways. Much like *Least-Heat Moon*, each perhaps comes to a sense of self-reflection on identity and cultural barriers; each may move forward with a deeper sense of how to see self and become one of the "beginners."

***Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead**

In *Nickel Boys*, Whitehead shows the limitations Blacks have experienced when they try to move about, for Caucasians have often tried to limit and relocate them. Travel has proved dangerous if not impossible because of poverty and the lingering residue of the Jim Crow laws. Set during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the novel champions Elwood's grandmother who raises him with Martin Luther King's speeches on the importance of maintaining one's dignity in the face of oppression. She has given him a record of King's speeches that he listens to repeatedly. He loves to read and realizes that reading and travel are like each other, for both focus on the pleasure of exploring. Elwood works hard and learns from his high school History teacher who helps him enroll in some college classes concurrently. The travel to attend the college leads to trouble, though, for the mistreatment of persons of color persists. At the reform school he is sent to, he meets Turner, who becomes his close friend and confidant. Elwood tries to hold onto King's ringing assertion, "Throw us in jail and we will still love you." Turner thinks that Elwood is naive, that the world is crooked, and that the only way to survive is to scheme and avoid trouble. The conditions at the reform school are so horrific that Elwood joins with Turner in a dash to escape and travel as far from the school as possible. Their travel is paradoxically a combination of the involuntary and voluntary. Where will and where can Elwood and Turner migrate to? Sigmund Freud remarked that "a great part of the pleasure of travel is rooted in dissatisfaction with home and family." Is that true here? Consider the migration and destination in the second half of the novel? Has either learned new ways to see? Does the novel lead us to travel away from the historical amnesia that can erase the crimes against humanity the Antiguan natives in Kincaid's *A Small Place* as well as Turner and Elwood experience? In the connection between traveling and forming broader perspectives, will Elwood and Turner obtain distance from the limited world of their youthful experience? Do their experiences as travelers affect their perceptions of their own country? Can travel be a metaphor for the experience of human existence?

For Further Reading

Nonfiction

Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars by Paul Fussell, 1982.

Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalization by Mary Louise Pratt, 1992.

Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography by James Clifford 1986.

Fiction

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift, 1726.

The Innocents Abroad by Mark Twain, 1869.

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, 1719.

There There by Tommy Orange, 2018.

Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life by Herman Melville, 1845.

Documentary Film

Regret to Inform, directed by Barbara Sonneborn, 1998.

“Travel: New Ways of Seeing” was developed in 2020 by Dr. Harbour Winn, Professor Emeritus of English at Oklahoma City University, where he has taught courses in literature, film studies, and Montessori education. He has been involved in public humanities programs for many years and was the Humanities Scholar on the grant that first brought the *Let’s Talk About It* program to Oklahoma. This is the eighth series theme he has developed. At OCU, he directed the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature for its first 19 years and the OCU Film Institute for its first 35 years.

