Dislocalism
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I. THE END OF TRAVEL?

“When travelers, old and young, get together and talk turns to their journeys, there is usually an argument put forward by the older ones that there was a time in the past—fifty, sixty years ago, though some say less—when this planet was ripe for travel. Then, the world was innocent, undiscovered and full of possibility,” remarks Paul Theroux in his 1976 essay “Strangers on a Train” (130). This lament, a seeming constant in travel writing, a genre in which writers are given license to flaunt their journeys to the remotest places, expresses nostalgia for a bygone era when the elite traveler apparently enjoyed greater privileges. But it is a lament that seems to speak more loudly than ever to a globalized world of “time-space compression.” David Harvey characterizes the latter as a condition produced by “the differential powers of geographical mobility, for capital and labour have not remained constant over time” (Condition of Postmodernity, 234). “Space,” he goes on to say, “appears to shrink to a ‘global village’ of telecommunication and a ‘spaceship earth’ of economic and ecological interdependencies. . . . We have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds” (240). The spreading dominance of capital reduces the spatial barriers erected between different parts of the world and shrinks the time it takes to get from one place to another. This has profound implications for travel writing. So, for example, descriptions of space in older travel narratives in which voyages were made by sea came alive when travelers reached their destinations and related the exotic scenes and peoples they beheld. But with the reduction of travel time, the risks of the voyage
itself diminish and exotic destinations can no longer be magnified by the uncertainties and tedium of travel. Meanwhile, as a result of time-space compression, middle-class mobility expands enormously, making it seemingly impossible for travel writers to “report” new places, people, and cultures as, purportedly, their earlier counterparts had done.

Writing in 1976, Theroux was already clearly troubled by this drying up of travel, and had set about trying to resuscitate “every traveler’s wish to see his route as pure, unique, and impossible for anyone else to recover” (“Strangers on a Train,” 130). Some twenty-five years later, this lament over the end of travel is even more pronounced. In his introduction to the Best American Travel Writing collection for 2001 Theroux concedes that “it is not hyperbole to say there are no Edens anymore: we live on a violated planet” (xvii). Even the remotest corners of the world seem to have turned into tourist resorts. Yet along with this truism, there also persists the need to affirm that, despite it all, if not travel then travel writing must still be possible. So, for example, in Dark Star Safari (2003), Theroux writes of a journey from Cairo to Cape Town saying that he wanted to see the “hinterland rather than flitting from capital to capital being greeted by unctuous tour guides” (3). But in his search for whatever remains of the “interior of Africa” as a “dark” place still concealing mysteries and intrigues there is a palpable sense, not only of imperial Victorian pastiche but of a nostalgia for the lost Eden of travel writing itself—especially for an American tradition which, only about half a century before, had been the province of authors such as Paul Bowles in The Sheltering Sky (1949) or Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue (1963) and Saul Bellow in Henderson the Rain King, (1959).

But does the anxiety over a “planet . . . not ripe for travel” in fact contradict the continued possibility, even the success of travel writing? While it is true that a genre that has historically taken upon itself the depiction of faraway worlds for the benefit of domestic audiences can no longer depend on the existence of these worlds in the same way, travel writing responds by engaging in a dislocalism all its own: here, the travel writer invokes the notion of the end of travel precisely as a way of preserving the genre itself. Thus it is that, in 2001, Theroux finds himself less concerned with the hope that real travel could be resuscitated (as he was in 1976) than with propping up the genre of travel writing itself. The latter, according to him, has now in fact become “a label for many different sorts of narrative” (Best American, xix). Travel writing is not the story of “a first-class seat on an airplane, nor a week of wine tasting on the Rhine” but of a “journey of discovery that is frequently risky” and “often pure horror” (xix).
The redirecting of Theroux’s recuperative gesture toward the direct reconsolidation of the genre of travel writing rather than the activity itself is an expression, I propose, of a more general rhetoric of dislocalism pervasive within the genre as a whole. I will show how, much as in the case of the other genres that I have already discussed, travel writing has always produced a national imaginary of displacement with respect to the “global.” But as travel writers contend with issues of globalization—in what is, for them, its most obvious manifestation, the pervasiveness of tourism—they increasingly become anxious over the loss of both the concept and the genre of travel itself. So travel writing must articulate ways in which travel can continue to furnish a viable form of knowledge in the context of globalization. In so doing, it dislocalizes its own practices while producing and contributing to the rhetoric of globalization. I will explore the way this dislocalism takes specific shape in three travel narratives. Two of them—Robert Kaplan’s *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (1996) and Mary Morris’s *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone* (1989)—are nominally nonfictional works that report the writer’s own journeys. The third, Paul Theroux’s *Hotel Honolulu* (2001), is a novel—a less typical narrative form within the genre of travel writing, but notable titles include the aforementioned *The Sheltering Sky*, say, or Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*, or even Theroux’s own novels such as the *The Mosquito Coast* (1981) and *Blinding Light* (2005). I will show, however, that Theroux employs the genre of the novel as itself a strategy of dislocalism to preserve the travel-writing genre in the wake of the so-called end of travel. I have chosen to analyze these particular works for a variety of reasons, among them because they capture the changes and accompanying anxieties not only of global capitalism but also of the more nuanced shifts that have occurred within the latter in the transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first.³

But before addressing this, it should be noted here that the “end of travel” lament has long been a fixture in travel writing, taking on a variety of forms over time. Historically, the notion of travel is replete with nostalgia and what Ali Behdad calls belatedness. In *Belated Travelers* (1994), Behdad shows that the discursive practices of Orientalism were a significant aspect of the European travel writing of the nineteenth century. He argues that since the “European colonial power structure and the rise of tourism had transformed the exotic referent into the familiar sign of Western hegemony” travel writers exhibited nostalgia for the loss of an “authentic other,” thinking they had arrived “belatedly” (13). Behdad points out that the “belated Orientalism of travelers such as Nerval,
Flaubert, Loti, and Eberhardt vacillated between an insatiable search for a counter experience in the Orient and the melancholic discovery of its impossibility” (15). Mary Louise Pratt further argues in *Imperial Eyes* (1992) that early European travel writers were in effect tools of colonialism. Even though they cast themselves as innocuous observers, they were part of the system of colonization and helped to produce a view of an “other” world that was easily dominated. So on the one hand, while furthering the aims of imperialism, they are nostalgic for a lost world that imperialism itself has worked to alter. Renato Rosaldo, in *Culture & Truth* (1989), speaks in this context of an “imperialist nostalgia” that “uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (70).

American travel narratives in the nineteenth century used the pose of “innocent yearning” in a slightly different way. Americans who wrote about their journeys abroad took on the project of producing American-ness and American identity not only in relationship to the exotic other but also against the “evil” powers of Europe, casting the American in an innocent position as against the European and thinking of themselves as a benign presence. For example, in *Typee*, Herman Melville describes the “natives” using familiar tropes of simplicity, purity, and the “savagery” associated with closeness to nature. But such images of nature and paradise are then counterposed to the French fleets that are, for Melville, symbols of colonization in the Marquesas. If the seeming impossibility of travel in the nineteenth and even the early part of the twentieth century could, as Pratt and Behdad suggest, be attributed to European colonization, then an analogous sense of impossibility in the neoliberal context can be said to result from the forces of globalization set in motion by a new, more all-embracing mode of economic and political hegemony that has come to be seen as synonymous with Americanization. American travel writing must then, inevitably, be read as marked by this phenomenon. To be sure, in many of Bowles’s writings there are already narrative moments that call attention to the penetration of capital in the form of encroaching industrialization into the coastal towns of North Africa. But for Bowles, it was still possible to imagine an interior of Africa as yet relatively unpenetrated by capital. In *Their Heads are Green and their Arms are Blue*, for example Bowles writes about difficulties securing even the most rudimentary sleeping quarters at the more remote destinations to which he travels. *The Sheltering Sky*, made famous by Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1990 film adaptation, tells a story of completely foreign experience, in which, for example, the protagonist Kit finds herself becoming, virtually by force, the fourth wife of a Berber, Belquassim. And her even-
ual escape back to Oran reads, unavoidably, as the return from a still-
faraway world. However, by the time of Theroux’s earlier writings such
as *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), *The Old Patagonia Express* (1979),
and *The Mosquito Coast* (1981) it has already become impossible to sus-
tain the idea of such an interior. The first two works are dominated by a
sense of disappointment as Theroux repeatedly fails to find any interior
destinations that have escaped the spreading tentacles of tourism. In *The
Mosquito Coast*, the protagonist Allie Fox goes to Central America and
tries to develop “Geronimo,” a utopian society “outside” of the U.S.,
which has lost its identity for him as it moves production offshore in
pursuit of cheap labor. Fox, who has come to Central America embittered
by what he sees as the flooding of a once “made in the USA” national
market with foreign goods, is disheartened to find American multina-
tionals such as Dole already there exploiting child labor for canning fruit.
The fact that Fox’s experimental society fails to immunize itself against
a spreading corruption that has already stolen a march on travel clearly
shows that for Theroux the idea that, with the globalization of capital,
nothing counts as remote has already come home.

Critical studies on American travel writing have made much about
the adventuresome nature of Americans. Ihab Hassan in *Selves at Risk*
for example, considers travel writers to be questers looking to connect
spiritually with things and people in the outside world. Others, including
Justin Edwards (*Exotic Journeys*) and Terry Caesar (*Forgiving the Bound-
aries*) have argued that metaphors of travel and mobility remain crucial
to the notion of American identity. I have already discussed such identity
formation in relationship to the concept of immigration, something that
could, in some sense, be loosely categorized as travel. In his introduction
to *The Immigration Reader*, for example, David Jacobson argues that
the (often proudly proclaimed) immigrant origins of Americans makes
their rootedness in the land a more nuanced one, more akin to that of a
traveler. Whereas for most other nations, travel is a transitory phase, for
Jacobson, America never really exits this phase, and is better thought of
as a state of constant “becoming” rather than of static “being.”

But a form of travel that connotes a Euro-American, male, upper-class
subject as its agent can also be thought of as the flip side of immigra-
tion, as its privileged and aristocratic form. More importantly, if literary
critics conceive of immigration as a voyage into the U.S. establishing a
new national identity, travel writers use the concept of travel as a voyage
out of the nation in order to do some of the same work. In this sense, dis-
localist practices in the genre of travel writing are far more pronounced
than in the genre of immigrant fiction. As I have shown in the previous
chapter, the category of immigration ironically serves to shore up the discipline of American literature by dislocalizing it. Travel writers, however, appear much more invested in preserving the category of travel writing than their immigrant writer counterparts, if only because immigrant writing must follow on the act of immigration, whereas, in most cases, travel writers travel *in order* to write. Hence the quasi-autobiographical aspect present in both genres assumes much greater importance in travel writing and is in a certain way inseparable from the genre itself. Though criticism can point to a canon of immigrant fiction that is largely written by immigrants themselves, it is possible to write about others’ immigrant experiences and still participate in the genre of immigration narrative. But it seems that one must write about one’s own travel experiences rather than those of other people in order to remain a bona fide travel writer. Even if travel writers write fictions, it is their reputation as authors of nonfictional reportage that bestows the status of “travel writer.” Consequently the anxiety of travel writers about the end or impossibility of travel has become far more pronounced, since it threatens the existence of the genre and its corresponding writerly subject position.

I argue, in fact, that because great distances increasingly need not be traversed and national borders need not be crossed in order to see something “different,” travel writers must try to recreate that sense of distance or risk in order to reproduce what we might simply term the heroic narrative of travel. In other words, if the nineteenth century travelers traveled long distances in order to see the “other,” late twentieth century travelers must travel in order to produce the perception that the very space that has been progressively annihilated through time/space compression still exists. The production of this respatialization counts as an especially pronounced instance of dislocalism, since not only travel itself, but an important site for the construction of an American identity, is at stake. Maintaining the distance between the U.S. and its “abroad” are reduced to the gesture of defending and redeploying the genre of travel writing itself.

I now turn directly to the three works of travel writing mentioned above: Kaplan’s *The Ends of the Earth*, Morris’s *Nothing to Declare*, and Theroux’s *Hotel Honolulu*. In all of these narratives, dislocalism takes the following shape: intervening directly on behalf of what is in effect their own literary niche, these narratives proceed on the assumption that since American travel writing has always defined itself in relationship to the rest of the world, it is now in an especially good position to mediate this relationship in the context of globalization. In so doing, travel writing not only makes a case for its own viability as a global form of producing
knowledge, but also, as part of the same rhetorical move, counteracts the threat of its own obsolescence as a genre.

II. ACTUAL TRAVELS AND FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS
Robert D. Kaplan’s *The Ends of the Earth: Journey at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*

In *The Ends of the Earth*, the narrative of a journey through Africa and Asia, Robert D. Kaplan, a widely known writer on foreign affairs as well as travel—and a favorite of American neoconservatives—claims that his objective is simply to document how the processes of globalization affect different parts of the world. Globalization, we are given to understand, is still an uneven process and only seeing its realities up close can make it something fully palpable. Along the way, between pausing to berate the unheroic behavior of tourists, Kaplan, like Theroux, evokes the notion of the “end of travel”—but in a distinct and decidedly more politicized context.

Yet I will argue that travel for Kaplan, even on these grounds, is not really necessary to his “ends,” since, without real exception, his “first hand” experiences turn out to be perfectly congruent with the thinking of elite policy makers in the U.S., merely reiterating the already existing and dominant views about the places he visits. And in this process *The Ends of the Earth* speaks, more than to the “earth” itself, to a preexisting ideological drive to shore up the national boundaries of the U.S. by reexperiencing its national “others” as so many attempts, many of them doomed, to enter the U.S-dominated global order. Since travel writing as a genre has traditionally been premised upon travel from one nation into another, reporting the adventures experienced along the way as well as at the point of arrival itself, Kaplan stresses the continued importance of national boundaries so as to preserve the space of heroic travel and thereby the genre of travel writing as a whole. The difference between *The Ends of the Earth* and the genre with which it seeks to identify itself, however, is that its reported border-crossings are like visits to quarantined patients in a hospital, many of whom are not expected to survive. The “end of travel” is averted by traveling to witness what are, in more than just a geographical sense, “ends.”

Acknowledging one of the major claims of the discourse of globalization, that nation-states are weakening and breaking down, Kaplan proclaims as his purpose the direct verification of this theory. The “first act
of geography,” he proclaims, “is measurement” (6). “I have tried,” adds Kaplan, “to learn by actual travel and experience just how far places are from each other, where the borders actually are and where they aren’t, where the real terra incognita is” (6). Of course, thanks to the first travelers, there are now maps that tell us perfectly well where the borders are, but maps themselves do not preserve the real sensations of distance, especially when these borders may be about to disappear. And so they must, it seems, periodically be tested by further, “real” travel.

In part, of course, Kaplan’s travels are motivated by fear that what is happening around the world may have also begun to happen in the United States. “Many of the problems I saw around the world—poverty, the collapse of cities, porous borders, cultural and racial strife, growing economic disparities, weakening nation-states—are problems for Americans to think about. I thought of America everywhere I looked. We cannot escape from a more populous, interconnected world of crumbling borders” (6). Thus he makes much of the fact that two of the poorest sections of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, are named after American cities, “Washington” and “Chicago.” Abidjan’s Chicago is a “patchwork of corrugated zinc roofs” and cardboard walls where hotel rooms are “crawling with foot-long lizards” (19). But as the distance between the domestic and the African “Chicago” is reaffirmed, the effect is to remind us that the lines between poverty and wealth can just as easily be drawn between various parts of the U.S., as they can between, say, Washington, DC, and Abidjan.

Thus, crossing boundaries for the purposes of travel writing becomes more complex than simply going from one nation to another. So for example, about Pakistan, Kaplan writes that the country has a “growing middle class that increasingly has more in common with its American and European counterparts” than it does with the rest of the Pakistani population (326). While clearly aware that negative effects of globalization such as capital flight are not limited to places falling outside of U.S. borders, Kaplan’s travels seem to project and spatialize a desire to keep such effects at a safe distance, seeking reassurance that, even though parts of the world such as Ivory Coast and Pakistan may have something in common with the U.S., they, unlike the latter, exist outside the magic zone in which (as the wishful thinking goes) economic collapse is unthinkable. Kaplan’s becomes, in a sense, a journey aimed at exorcizing the demons of capitalist crisis from the U.S. and banishing them, as convincingly as possible, to other parts of the world. In The Ends of the Earth, dislocalism thus also takes the form of consolidating “crumbling borders” through the act of traveling. Travel thus becomes the privileged term here, preferable to other forms of mobility such as immigration, exile, or pilgrimage.
because it connotes a temporary state, a leaving one’s home only in order to return to it. And indeed for Kaplan this return to the U.S., or in more general terms securing of U.S. boundaries against the ills of the world, is what has become the new—perhaps the last—purpose of travel. The metaphors of travel and mobility themselves become ways of upholding the identity of America according to its own official self-image—and to the ideology of its policymakers.\(^5\)

In order to accomplish this, Kaplan (drawing upon the work of nineteenth century theorists such as that the German geographer Karl Ritter) employs the old notion of geographical destiny, that is, the theory that it is nature and geography that determine the destinies of nation-states. Those countries able to best control geographical and natural disasters, such as the U.S., stand a chance of remaining viable. And by extension those nations that have perfected American ways and know-how will fare far better than those that have not—which will therefore not survive. Geography allows Kaplan to adduce local reasons for the failures of nation-states.

No longer a victim of slavers, Sierra Leone now became a victim of its location—a backwater attracting only dregs and mediocrities from Europe . . . The Atlantic that had once brought slavers and a rudimentary measure of contact with the Western World now brought almost nothing. Sierra Leone was a metaphor for geographical destiny. Sierra Leone helped [him] to feel what it is like to be cut off. (48)

For Kaplan any contact with Europe, even if it was the slave trade that had once made Sierra Leone’s Freetown “a center of human activity,” is far better than being “cut off.” “The slave coast in Africa was ready to be re-colonized, if only the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English would agree to come back with their money” (80). But being “cut off” is attributed entirely to a “geographical destiny” and a pernicious locality. For Kaplan locality (whether cultural or geographical) in Africa offers no respite against domination, nor it is a repository for ideas that might change the inequities of the world. If globalization is to take effect then this will require in principle that all remnants of locality be done away with, if “geographical destiny” should demand this. The only locality that is worth globalizing is that of the U.S. itself, since, according to Kaplan, it is the adaptation of American-style business systems and work habits that has led to the success of national economies in parts of Asia.

And yet Kaplan’s travel narrative remains invested in the local in seemingly doomed places such as Sierra Leone because, as noted above, there
is a simultaneous ideological need to vaccinate the U.S. against effects of globalization that threaten to make parts of it own local territory resemble Freetown. Though at times Kaplan seems to chime in with the standard neoliberal wisdom that attracting foreign investment is the only salvation for regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, the reduction of the local to the determinism of the geographical already implies the pointlessness of resisting the negative effects of globalization. But then, if the U.S. is threatened with a creeping “Africanization,” as Kaplan at times warns his readers, might not this too be a question of “geographical destiny”? To evade such a logic, and to uphold neoliberalism’s providential narrative of globalization against what is unequivocally the latter’s dark side in places such as Africa, Kaplan must resort to a dislocalized form of travel: only a traveler’s eye-witness knowledge of the faraway and the “geographical” could hope to “prove” the abstractions of dominant neoliberal policies without raising the question of the latter’s responsibility for poverty and inequality everywhere, whether in Chicago, Abidjan, or Chicago, Illinois. One has to travel to see geographical destiny erasing national borders in order, in the end, to secure, ideologically, the one border that really matters: that of the U.S.

But there are intermediate zones between Africa and the Euro-American West. Again offering first-hand eyewitness accounts, Kaplan cites developments in parts of Asia as proof that, due to their adaptability to and a willingness to learn from the West, they have won the position of active participants in global economic developments. As in other Asian tiger economies such as Singapore and Hong Kong, Kaplan observes the effects of rapid development in Thailand. Taking a walk in Bangkok he is “struck by the noise: the grinding, piercing high-pitched racket of power drills and jackhammers, along with churning ignitions of the three-wheeled tuk-tuks” (373). Bangkok’s “twenty-four-hour-a-day activity” is a sign of how “many years of fast economic growth rates and correspondingly low birthrates . . . have worked to liberate Thailand from the horrors [Kaplan has] witnessed elsewhere” (373). By “elsewhere” he means, by and large, Africa. And he attributes this success to the fact that in Thailand “Western know-how was welcomed and then improved upon” (378). Similarly, a country such as Pakistan—where he sees a relatively sizeable middle-class and a market for foreign goods—serves as protection against African “horrors.” But what, then, has become of the vaunted law of “geographical destiny” in these faraway places? Does the mere influx of money work in some “geographies” and not others? And why travel to them, if first-hand accounts only confirm what global finance-capital already presumably knows?
The answer, according to Kaplan, is that people in Asia possess far more intellect and ingenuity and are better able to control their geography than the apparently also culturally disadvantaged inhabitants of Africa. Not only, according to Kaplan, are Asians—unlike Africans—willing to Americanize themselves, but in most of Asia Kaplan finds people who are using what he terms “local ingenuity,” a quality he attributes in turn to Asia’s ancient, civilized past and its written languages. On his tour of the Rishi Valley in India, Kaplan claims to observe a form of illiteracy qualitatively different from illiteracy in Africa. He supports this with the frankly preposterous notion that since oral stories in India are based on written epics “thousands of years old” this “allows illiterate villagers [to] tap into a well developed, literate cultural environment, whereas in much of sub-Saharan Africa, local languages have been written down only in the last century” (365). But assigning a qualitative value to literacy does nothing for those who do not and cannot have access to a literate environment if they cannot read. In fact, even if a traditional literary culture exists within certain national boundaries, this works only to emphasize the barred access of the illiterate to a literate environment.

And in any case, even if we are to believe that ancient languages and civilizations, and the “local ingenuity” they purportedly give rise to are what is going to save Asia, this hardly supports the view—one Kaplan also claims to advance—that the only way to economic stability is through capital investment. His tour of Asia, and the Rishi Valley in particular, seems to have as its central ideological purpose allowing Kaplan to affirm that a still tribalized Africa is simply not worthy of such investment. Reverting back to his geographical and environmental determinism, Kaplan writes the following of his trip through civil war torn Liberia:

Though I had seen no soldiers, let alone any atrocities or juju spirits, an indefinable wildness had set in. It occurred to me that the forest had made the war in Liberia. I have no factual basis for this, merely a traveler’s intuition. The forest was partly to blame . . . teenage soldiers [broke] into bridal shops of Monrovia, dressing up like women-cum-juju spirits, and going on rampages that ended in ritual killings. (27)

In claiming to find a causality linking the forest, rampages, ritual killings, and the war, Kaplan takes an imaginative leap that effectively allows him to refer to without having to state the blatantly racist idea that Africa is simply too uncivilized. An “indefinable wildness” seems, on the one hand, purposefully ambiguous—is it the forest or the Liberians, or both,
that are wild?—but in the end it simply renders Liberia as helpless against a geography and nature which can hardly be blamed on past colonization or present-day exploitation by global capital. The operant rule for the traveler/writer here seems to be: where global finance and its state policy makers have already determined investment to be warranted (Asia) culture (in the guise of “ancient languages and civilizations”) becomes something the traveler can claim to witness “first hand”; where such investment has been essentially ruled out (Africa), nature (in the guise of geography and the environment) takes over. Africa may be, for Kaplan, “the inescapable center” (5) of humanity—in a purely paleontological sense—but he travels there only so as to find ample reasons to continue to consider Africa as socially peripheral.

Kaplan states that his goal in the travels recorded in *The Ends of the Earth* “was to see humanity in each locale as literally an outgrowth of the terrain and climate in which it was fated to live” (7). But, as I have tried to show, the idea of the local means many, often-contradictory things for Kaplan. Locality can be the wrong kind of locality, as in the case of Africa, where it works to repel capital, or it can be the right kind, as in the case of Asia, where it works in the opposite way. Moreover, the evocation of the local—in the case of Africa, probably (as Kaplan sees it) beyond saving—allows Kaplan to warn the U.S. against “Africanization” (the turning of Washington, DC, into Washington, Abidjan) without pointing to the connections between the U.S. and global capital generally and conditions in Africa. Kaplan’s travel narrative works to separate the world from Africa, implying that cultural values separate Africans from Asians as well as from Americans. In this regard, Kaplan has only to draw on the familiar domestic discourse that attempts to pin much of the ills of the underdeveloped parts of the U.S. on African-Americans, and presents Asian-Americans, on the other hand, as model minorities, willing to work in desperate conditions for low wages. Implied as well here is the idea that the culture of the U.S. would never let conditions deteriorate to the African levels. In an insidious sense, Kaplan travels to Africa, not, as travel writing has traditionally done, to encourage others to follow in his footsteps (even if only in fantasy) but so that the rest of us can be spared this experience. He goes, so to speak, for the last time, but go he must—showing how the “end of travel” itself requires a form of travel.

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Kaplan refers to the experiences that produce his “first hand accounts” (upon which rest the entire credibility of his book) as “actual” travel. Globalization, and the ideological task of keeping Washington, Abidjan, safely distant from Washington, DC, now require not only that travel in the traditional sense
be possible—so as to continue to locate an exotic other to help secure
the national identity formations of a continuously expanding U.S. global
presence—but that it continue to involve adventure and risk. Without
these, the “first-hand accounts” themselves lose value. Crossing national
boundaries to see and document “novel” things is not enough. Kaplan
must go about crossing different kinds of borders, while also insisting that
older political borders still matter, in order to create this sense of adven-
ture and thus to preserve the heroic form of travel. This requires that he
take a jab at how others travel. He says that one does not learn much
traveling in an “air-conditioned four-wheel drive Toyota Land Cruiser”
which, he says, is the “medium through which senior diplomats and top
Western relief officials often encounter Africa,” as though “suspended
high above the road and looking out through closed windows you may
[actually] learn something about Africa” (25). He goes on to say that in a
“public bus, flesh pressed upon wet, sour flesh, you learn more”; and in a
“bush taxi” or “mammy wagon,” one may learn even more, but it is on
foot that one learns the most. For here, he writes, “you are on the ground
on the same level with Africans rather than looking down at them. You
are no longer protected by speed or air-conditioning or thick glass. The
sweat pours from you, and your shirt sticks to your body. This is how
you learn” (25). In other words, “actual travel,” the kind from which one
“learns,” requires some risk and discomfort. Or stated yet more precisely:
adding discomfort and risk—and therefore credibility—to an account of
Africa that in no way otherwise differs from what the “senior diplomats
and top Western relief officials” themselves have to offer requires a kind
of retro-fiction called “actual travel.”

Those who eschew this risk and discomfort and thus refuse to “learn”
what official ideology already tells them are mere “tourists.” With under-
cutting commentary, Kaplan describes Anatolia, the Caucasus, and other
stops on his own end-of-travel tour, as “toxic holiday camp[s] for the
working class on seven-day package tours” (147). But Kaplan is not
averse to the idea that “actual travel” might also afford a kind of excite-
ment and self-fulfillment. And, though the possibilities of finding such ful-
fillment in Asia and Africa are far greater than in the U.S. or Europe, even
parts of Africa and Asia can no longer continue to afford this, so he must
find places that he considers even more remote—as well as look and act
the part. As Kaplan observes in his “marble-and-glass ‘efficiency’ hotel”
in Bangkok: “I crowded into the elevator with several men in expensive
lightweight suits. One held a Compaq Contura in his hand . . . With only
my backpack and batch of blank notebooks and Bic pens, I suddenly felt
antiquated” (371). Again, Bangkok, for all its economic progress—lauded
by Kaplan when it is a question of abandoning Africa to its “geographical destiny”—has lost something for him, specifically the traditional privileges of “actual” travelers. Kaplan admits that “the poorer and more violent the country, the greater the social status enjoyed by a foreign correspondent. In Bangkok, a journalist was nothing compared to an investment banker” (371–2). Thus he offhandedly concedes that the distinction between travel and tourism has more to do with the will to take risks, suffer discomfort, and “learn”; the economic progress, development, and investment, of which the marble hotel is indicative, cheapens his own travel experience. Since Bangkok does not afford him an “actual” enough experience, Kaplan must in fact travel to places that seem to have been left out of the processes of globalization—but where, unlike Africa, the human catastrophe for the moment does not interfere with a strictly non-political form of risk. Witness Kaplan, then, in the Hunza Valley (under the control of the Pakistani government), where he takes an immediate liking to a traveling couple, Dave and Lynn. The latter have come here after unsatisfying experiences in Kuala Lumpur, where, Kaplan tells us, they saw about “a hundred cranes” outside their window. In India they saw haze over the Taj Mahal, and “they told sad tales of deforestation in Nepal” (320). The Hunza Valley, even if it benefits from “irrigation and reforestation programs,” shows none of the signs of the development that elsewhere win Asia praise from Kaplan (320). Here, in fact, we have an especially poignant form of dislocalism: Kaplan must travel to—and write about—the Hunza Valley so as to endow his frankly neoliberal views of Africa and Asia generally with the heroic, first-hand “actual” aura of the true traveler. He approvingly quotes Dave as saying “it’s dangerous but what the hell . . . I’d rather die on a glacier than be mugged in a western city or be killed in a suburban car accident” (319). Kaplan goes on to relate that “Dave and Lynn were getting the equivalent of a classical education free-of-charge simply by traveling and studying the ancient spoken languages in these valleys” (320). He is “delighted” by their “stories of being awakened in the middle of the night by yaks outside their tent in Tibet, and feels like hugging [Lynn]” when she tells him that she writes her free-lance stories on note-pads rather than bringing a laptop, which in any case probably would not work in places like Hunza Valley. Kaplan himself says that he has stopped bringing a computer on his trips and that the result is “liberating” (320). That is, the lack of technology, which, in other parts of the book, he presents as detrimental to development, nevertheless becomes “liberating” for him.

The same dislocalizing logic occasionally even informs what is otherwise Kaplan’s grim, quasi-Malthusian African narrative. In Freetown,
Kaplan stays with a friend, Michelle, who works as a diplomat in a foreign mission. He describes Michelle’s life in Sierra Leone with a twinge of envy, terming a dinner party she hosts as “charming” because, he says, “here was a diplomat who, neither an ambassador nor even a chargé d’affaires, was nevertheless able to attract some of the most important people in the nation to her house where a fine meal was prepared with the assistance of a housekeeper” (55). “The style in which Michelle was able to live in Freetown and the rank of officials she was able to attract were,” he concedes, “indicative of the gap between a wealthy Western land and a poor African one” (55). However, the very gap that makes Michelle’s dinner party “charming” for Kaplan, is elsewhere charged with having made even old-style colonialism essentially too good for Africa. The one redeeming feature of “ends of the earth” such as Sierra Leone is that they afford the possibility of self-fulfillment for Western travelers and diplomat-adventurers such as Michelle: “To most people, especially to Washington careerists, the idea of being a middle- or low-ranking diplomat in a place like Sierra Leone would represent the ultimate in under-achievement, unless it came very early in one’s career” (57). But Michelle is to be envied for having a job “far more stimulating intellectually than almost any job a capital like Washington or London had to offer” (57). Here the “learning” that distinguishes the tourist from the traveler takes an insidious form indeed. Kaplan quotes his diplomatic friend approvingly: “Waking up each morning in a place that’s on the verge of anarchy provides a unique insight into humanity. There are never any lulls” (57).

Here we appear to have “traveled” a long way from Kaplan’s notion of crumbling borders and the experience of seeing America everywhere. But keeping to the official creed of neoliberal globalization is only half of Kaplan’s mission in The Ends of the Earth. The sameness and sanctity of “America” must, as in virtually all American travel writing, be reaffirmed, and thus there must always be created a clear dividing line between the U.S. and the rest of the world. It is this ideology and accompanying narrative structure that allows Kaplan to look with a certain favor on the idea of keeping some nations on the “verge of anarchy” because, thanks to U.S.-led global capital, it is only that way that they can provide a stimulating education for the likes of American “actual travelers” such as Kaplan. Kaplan reproduces a worldview in which the only answer to poverty and inequality is the influx of capital and then, in a typically dislocalizing move, goes on to invoke the notion of local culture and geography—the sine qua non of “actual travel”—as placing severe limits on the usability of that capital. It is just in this way that the real forces of globalization threaten to undermine the genre of travel writing,
while the ideology of globalization requires the genre’s perpetual continuation. Dislocalism is called forth to solve the contradictory task of proclaiming the crumbling of borders while simultaneously reconsolidating them through the act and the discourse of travel. Without the risk of poverty and even anarchy, the risk of travel itself cannot be safeguarded, a risk without which, in turn, a certain deeper risk to the integrity of American identity formation is brought into play—a dislocalizing set of moves that, as I shall show, unfolds in a different way in Mary Morris’s memoirs, *Nothing to Declare*.

### III. INTERRUPTING DOMESTICITY

**Mary Morris’s *Nothing to Declare***

Women travel writers have long contended with the fact that that travel has traditionally been and remains a primarily male genre. For example, Flora Tristan (*Voyage to Brazil*, 1824), Maria Graham (*Letters from India*, 1824), and Mary Elizabeth Crouse (*Algiers*, 1906) write at some length about how travel for women poses special problems. The genre of women’s travel writing, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued, both duplicates and interrupts the various strategies that male travel writers deploy.

Mary Morris, in keeping with this long tradition, attempts, like male travel writers, to reproduce a sense of risk in her writing. Yet, ironically, as a woman she is in some ways better able to exploit the sense of danger and fear so valued by her male counterparts in the genre, simply by tapping in to the common belief that women are at far more risk while traveling than men. But since time-space compression and the corresponding industrializing and globalizing of travel have made it a relatively risk-free activity, Morris, like Kaplan, finds herself in the paradoxically dislocalized position of having to reinsert a risk factor in order to reproduce the genre of travel writing itself. The title of her book—*Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*—already points to this quite bluntly with its reference to a solitary woman abroad and the evocation of going through customs at a border crossing, always an experience fraught with a certain tension and anxiety.

At the same time, like other contemporary travel writers in the U.S. faced with the effects of globalization, Morris comes under ideological pressures not only to resuscitate “travel” in its heroic form but to maintain the kind of neat and clean separation between “here” and “there”—in this case the U.S. and Mexico—that has traditionally made travel nar-
narratives an effective dislocalizing medium for reproducing and redrawing discourses of national identity. As I will show, Morris accomplishes this in large part by redeploying some of the more conventional moves in women’s travel writing.

Specifically, I will show that, for Morris, a rather old theme in women’s travel writing—the interruption of the narrative of domesticity—becomes a way to reaffirm national boundaries. More precisely, I will demonstrate that, while, for women, international travel typically signifies an escape from home and domesticity, in Nothing to Declare, it is the same interruption-of-domesticity narrative that furnishes a way of rearticulating a U.S. nationalist framework. If Kaplan travels in order to articulate the perniciousness of various national localities as a result of their adherence to non-Western ways, for Morris, the locality of Mexico is, on the surface of things, a refuge from a life grown weary in the hyper-Westernized, overcivilized setting of contemporary New York City. In search of respite from a “terrible feeling of isolation and a growing belief that America had become a foreign land” Morris goes in “search of a place where the land and the people and the time in which they lived were somehow connected” (11). Reading the word “foreign” here as connoting simply the effects of loneliness and alienation, one finds oneself on the familiar ground of a kind of pastoral, with Mexico and its “land and people” standing in as the warm and welcoming peasants and shepherds. But “foreign” also must clearly be read as referring to the perceived denationalizing of New York and the U.S. in general, thanks to immigration and other effects of increased globalization. In this sense, Morris’s narrative suggests other than merely pastoral motives: home has become “foreign,” therefore it has become necessary to travel to something even more “foreign” so as to redomesticate and safeguard the homeland.

Morris, her locus of narration already Mexico, tells us that in her apartment in New York she is surrounded with “familiar things”—“mementos from friends,” and pictures of her grandmother’s family and of her parents (41–42). But, she relates, “all of this is my memory now . . . I have brought nothing to recall my former life, none of the smells or textures or tastes or faces or roads or landscapes I have known before” (42). In other words, Morris declares herself committed not only to interrupting a familiar domestic narrative but also to making sure there is a definite break between her life in the U.S. and in Mexico, including geographical differences. All of this, as we might suspect, is a prelude to the confession of another kind of domestic estrangement: “there was a man named Daniel who had left me the year before. . . . He was one of the reasons for my going to Mexico” (50). We also find out that she has had another
lover in New York who hit and abused her. Though seeking the risks and adventures of a “woman traveling alone,” it emerges that home in New York for Morris has become a danger zone of another kind. She is trying to heal from failed and abusive relationships and she imagines Mexico to be the place that can help her realize this.

Thus—and here again she is initially unlike the declaredly dystopian Kaplan—Morris imagines Mexico, at the beginning of her journey, as a faraway place where unfamiliarity and foreign ways can work to restore the sense of domestic happiness and security. But to make a new home in a strange, distant place requires, for the pastoral traveler just as much as for Kaplan the cynical voyager through the underworld, that the stigma of tourism be carefully avoided. Here Morris makes the anti-tourism moves familiar in travel literature. So, for example, she chooses not to stay in Mexico City because it is too overrun by tourists and settles for a supposedly less globalized (but, as any traveler to Mexico will know, also heavily populated by U.S. travelers and visitors) San Miguel de Allende. She finds a place to live in a neighborhood called San Antonio where very few Americans lived because it was “too far from the center of things” (8). So, though in a less pronounced way than Kaplan, Morris finds that simply crossing national borders is not enough to feel that she has traveled and that her life in the U.S. is safely far away.6

Though Morris tells the reader that she desires to go to Mexico for its supposed power to heal her alienated self, she immediately begins to underscore her fears of the place as well. Thus, “San Miguel de Allende is not a dangerous place, not a threatening place,” she insists, but even while adding that she had “never been more afraid in [her] life than [she] was in San Miguel” (25). For Mexico, while a setting for a pastoral idyll, is also a land of predatory men for Morris. There are numerous points in the book at which Morris imagines being pursued by unknown male assailants. For example, while taking a swim at night, she suspects she is being pursued by two men. She thinks to herself that it “would be easy for them to pluck [her] from the sea” (102). She decides to swim “into the darkest water of all” and stays there “until they were gone” (102). These kinds of fantasies likely strike a chord with those of her readers who have already been caught up in the narrative imagining of Mexico as a dangerous place, especially for women. Again, as with Kaplan, this element of fear and risk is somehow required to certify that it is travel, not merely tourism, that is the subject of her story. Citing Camus, Morris claims that “what gives value to travel is fear” (25). But more than simply valorizing Morris’s travel narrative, the surplus fear and danger available to women travelers are extracted from the U.S. and placed safely within
the borders of Mexico. Morris recounts her romantic past in New York while she is in Mexico as if she is trying to remember a dream: “Sometimes at night I lie awake and try to remember a certain person’s features. Or his scent . . . And I try to piece him together, like a jigsaw, but I cannot find his substance” (42). And yet, these sorts of recollections seem almost outside the substance of her book if only because, as she says, she is making an effort to forget that life. What amounts to her domestic misadventure in New York manifests itself only at the margins of her Mexican solo quest as what she calls her “ghosts.” But these ghosts soon become pronounced in the story in unanticipated ways.

Morris’s effort to leave behind her broken relationships increasingly breaks down because she must confront them again in the course of her relationship with a Mexican woman named Lupe. Lupe, with whom Morris forms her closest relationship in San Miguel, lives near her house, running errands for her and taking care of other domestic chores. “I went to Lupe,” writes Morris, “for things I needed. For washing clothes I could not get clean, for cooking rice” (27). Lupe herself, meanwhile, has been in a relationship with a man, José Luis, whom she rarely sees. She has seven children, and one of her daughters, it turns out, is expecting a child with a man who is also an absentee father. Morris’s living situation assumes, then, representational shape as the direct contrast to Lupe. Morris rents a house that “has a living room, kitchen, and small patio” in addition to two bedrooms and a balcony. (8). Lupe on the other hand, lives in a small place with several children, a place “infested with flies” and with no place to wash and clean. Though neither Morris nor Lupe has a stable love life, Morris portrays Lupe’s state of abandonment as the consequence of her own looseness in relations with men. Lupe, it turns out, was married before she met José Luis, and has children both from him and from her former husband. José Luis, while still paying Lupe occasional visits, sees another woman as well. In fact, it is unclear exactly how many children Lupe has by each man. At one point teary-eyed Lupe tells Morris that José Luis’s other “señora” is having another child, but follows this with the rueful observation that “a man isn’t worth crying over” (127).

Aware that Lupe (at least in Morris’s depiction of her) fits into widely held North American views regarding the gender relations of Latin American men and women in general, Morris writes that she found herself “wondering if [she] felt judgmental” (33). But Lupe is disturbing to Morris’s Mexican interlude in a still more profound way, for, by bringing into sharper focus those troubling aspects of domesticity that Morris would rather keep relegated to a ghostly netherworld, Lupe also makes it harder
for Morris to draw a clear borderline between her lives in the U.S. and Mexico. Here the dislocalizing impulse of *Nothing to Declare* emerges into fuller view: the escape from the domestic misadventure in New York into the hoped-for self-reintegration of her Mexican solitaire only confronts Morris with a domestic scene that suggests how lucky she has been all along. The stage is now set for shunning Lupe’s world and returning to the relative haven of superior gender politics and domestic possibility in New York—for women like Morris, that is. Leaving “home” is merely a way of securing it more firmly against the possibility of real dislocation and critique. But in the age of globalization and time/space compression, the fiction of “travel” becomes more and more necessary to this domestic restoration.

It is true that, on its surface, the relationship that Morris shares with Lupe appears to make a case for bridging the differences between two women who do, after all, share similar experiences with men. Perhaps Mexico is not so “far” from the U.S. after all. For example, Lupe finds Morris crying and, with sisterly concern, chides her gently with her refrain that “it was no good to cry over a man” (19). Later, while attending the celebrations for the Mexican Day of the Dead, Morris asks Lupe to bury her in the Mexican part of cemetery since the part where the Americans were buried was “all fenced in, well gardened and kept up, but with no visitors and no one bringing flowers” (187). But though Morris here seemingly desires a connection with Mexico, on a more fundamental plane she continues trying to rebuild that fence. Here the reader is reminded of Morris’s depiction of a hole in a city wall through which poor people were crossing into more well-off areas and which had been cemented closed with “shards of U.S. soda pop bottles . . . to keep the poor people away” (89).

It is through Lupe that Morris confronts the ghosts of her own past relationships with men, suggesting, perhaps, that Morris did have to leave home in order to rediscover it. She confesses to Lupe that she would like to have both a husband and children. Lupe jolts Morris out of her ghostly relation to her own domestic troubles. But there is a subtle move to exclude and separate the two worlds at work here, outside the sisterly bond. Lupe’s woes—broken relationships, little money, more children than she can take care of, a house hardly adequate for living—are all symptomatic of the condition of poor and working women generally under the globalized, neoliberal regime that has more and more placed the boundaries of nations in question. Lupe, for example, tells Morris: “José Luis gives me fifty pesos a day to feed my children. It is not enough. I barely make do. That is why I work for the señora of the Blue Door
Bakery” (33). It is precisely this kind of low-wage work, routinely performed by women in the informal sector, that has made their exploitation even greater than in their work as part of a formal workforce. Historically, even in the formal sector, women have performed temporary and low-wage labor. Furthermore, Mexican women perform this kind of informal labor even in the U.S., often in the employ of women like Morris. But these forces do not enter into Morris’s imaginary, Lupe’s exploitation here being linked largely to gender and to her experience with Mexican men. This is because, if they did enter into the equation, they would complicate the dislocalized arrangement that restricts them safely to the Mexican side of the border, where the well-intentioned feminist traveler from the north can regard them from a safe distance.

In effect, the character of Lupe makes it possible for Morris to attribute a national and cultural character to conditions for women that are class-based. “It is difficult for men and women to get along,” says Lupe, with an ethnographized naivety that more easily shrugs this all off as a simple fact of (Mexican) life (33). “Mexican men,” proclaims Lupe, “are either too serious and no fun or fun and lighthearted and not to be trusted” (128). And Morris needn’t tell the reader whether she agrees with this native wisdom in order for the global conditions of gender and class to be safely recontained across the border.

Morris’s impetus to project bad gender politics onto Mexico also takes other forms in her narrative. For example, she finds herself getting bored in a relationship she initiates with a Mexican man, Alejandro. He seems to be the opposite of José Luis in terms of his relationship to domesticity. Alejandro largely takes care of the domestic chores and even proposes marriage to the author. But Morris writes that she grew bored with his domestic solicitude: “I had been with men where I had to do all the work and I had hated that. . . . But the opposite wasn’t satisfying either, and I felt in my relationship with him more like a man than a woman” (179). Leaving aside for the moment the possibility of reading this relationship in terms of the politics of racial hierarchies, this episode suggests that, while Lupe’s relationships with men are framed within machismo, Alejandro (North-)Americanizes Morris’s desire to be “more like . . . a woman.” Is there a possibility given these parameters to imagine Morris having the same opportunity of domestic happiness in New York?

Lupe’s role as foil to Morris’s dislocalized domesticity works in other ways as well. If Lupe brings her to the realization that she wants a husband and kids and at least the part-time duties of a housewife, this hardly enforces on the author/narrator a deeper understanding of the latter category. In a discussion about the effects of machinery on the worker in
the first volume of *Capital*, Marx explains how machinery was “transformed into a means of increasing the number of wage laborers by enrolling . . . every member of the worker’s family without distinction of age or sex” into the workforce (517). This meant the usurpation of the free domestic labor of the women, a cost that would otherwise have to be covered by capitalists. It is this particular relationship of women to domesticity (where their labor is considered a natural resource) that Morris wants to interrupt through her Mexican sojourn. And yet this interruption is itself dependent on Lupe’s labor, who, like many women, while working for free in her own household is also driven by her economic circumstances to do odd jobs for Morris and take care of Morris’s apartment while she is away touring the rest of Mexico. The conditions that force women to work as domestic servants hardly leave room for the kind of familial environment so desired by both Lupe and Morris.

This is a set of conditions that *Nothing to Declare* cannot confront and so displaces through a cultural-essentializing that in turn masks itself behind an abstract gender politics. Again, by implying that Lupe’s situation is the result of the *machismo* of Mexican men—after all, Morris pays Lupe for her work, while José Luís merely takes from her—Morris can reproduce the distance between the U.S. and Mexico, interrupting the domestic misadventure that haunts her wherever she goes. In this context, a fantasy Morris has in which she imagines herself as a bird that flies to her grandmother’s Ukrainian village is worth quoting at some length:

I perch above the house. I drink black tea, suck sugar in my beak, and munch on dried bread, and when it is time for them to leave for America, I follow. I fly. I must go and build my nest . . . A male finds me and we mate, almost in midair. He hovers over my back and our wings enfold . . . I am an eagle woman, a builder now, layer of eggs, perched on high, a woman of both heights and heart. I lay two perfect eggs . . . My mate disappears, but for forty-two days I sit and wait, and then they hatch. I care for these young until the fledglings go. And then I am free to fly to new places. (245)

The eagle seems to be a reference to Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec god who, according to legends, created life and would one day return to reclaim the lost empire—and a symbol evoked by a range of emancipatory movements in Mexico and elsewhere. This fantasy, occurring to Morris as her departure back to the U.S. is imminent, is one of freedom in domesticity and also reasserts her view of Mexico as an ancient and legendary place that has helped her to heal. In its structure, it shares certain similarities with Lupe’s life: men appear to produce children but then disappear.
But this fantasy is unavailable to Lupe for she is unable to fly free. Her children and the barely tolerable living conditions in which she has had to make her home bind her to Mexico. And it is precisely because of her specific condition that she can support Morris’s fantasy but not her own, even if both share the same desire for a rewarding domestic life. Having safely shunned her ghosts within the boundaries of Mexico, Morris returns to the U.S., where the rhetoric of a more enlightened gender politics redeems and liberates a narrative of domesticity now safely restored to its place within national borders.

IV. THE POLITICS OF FICTION

Paul Theroux’s Hotel Honolulu

It is useful to recall at this point Paul Theroux’s lament in the Introduction to *The Best American Travel Writing* that there are no Edens anymore, and that “the world has turned . . . Just about the entire earth has been visited and re-visited” (xvii). As I have shown in relationship to Kaplan and Morris, it is this anxiety about the end of travel that drives travel writers to focus on preserving the genre itself and, through this dislocating detour, the notion of a distinctive American identity. Theroux’s novel, *Hotel Honolulu* (2001), a work of outright fiction at one level at least, resonates strongly with his lament that there are no more Edens. As the setting in a novel about the excesses of tourism, Honolulu itself emphasizes the compression of space through time and highlights the “end of Edens” anxiety by taking as its point of departure not only the turning of exotic destinations into tourist resorts of the most mundane kind but the fact that one need not even travel outside the U.S. to get to these places.

The narrator is himself a writer who claims to have given up writing. He takes a job in the seedy motel from which the novel takes its title. As the novel begins, we hear the voice of the narrator: “nothing to me is so erotic as a hotel room” (1). So from the very beginning of the narrative we find ourselves already in a touristic world, far removed from Theroux’s privileged and anti-touristic world of real, but bygone travel. The narrator, like Theroux, has written about thirty books and claims that he is trying to start his life over at the age of forty-nine, after having lost money and houses and gone through a divorce. He confesses that in his new occupation as the manager of Hotel Honolulu, he is taking refuge from his writerly life: “I needed a rest from everything imaginary, and felt
that settling in Hawaii, and not writing, I was returning to the world” (7). The fiction openly proposes the idea that tourism has so pervaded the planet that there is nothing more for a travel writer to write about, nothing to do but to start working in the tourist industry. The narrator/protagonist is frequently thankful for his job. “My career as a writer,” he confesses, “had not trained me for anything practical. . . . I had no marketable skill. . . . I was grateful to my employees for their work. They ran the hotel and they knew it” (52). There is essentially nothing for him to do. What better job for a failed writer? As he states: “I had gotten to these green mute islands, humbled and broke again, my brain blocked” (52). The novel thus makes a direct link between the blocked brain of the writer and the need to work in tourism for money. The block itself afflicts the protagonist while still living, and trying to write travel narratives, on the mainland. Thus it is the (fictionally) declared end of travel and the exhaustion of travel writing (or what passes for it) that endangers the narrator’s way of making a living and sends him “traveling,” so to speak, into the dark heart of tourism itself.

The setting of Honolulu gestures in several different directions in the novel. As I have already pointed out, it emphasizes the fact that one need not travel outside the U.S. to experience the exotic locales so desired by travelers and tourists alike and that it helps travel writers such as Theroux to circulate the notion that travel is threatened. But more importantly, Hawaii as a setting facilitates the drive of travel writers such as Theroux to dislocalize their own writerly practices. In some sense, Honolulu has become emblematic of the fact that, with the “end of travel,” what passes for the exotic may as well be sought within the U.S. itself, and nowhere more successfully than in cities that depend upon tourist dollars, such as New York, San Francisco, Orlando, or Honolulu.

And yet Honolulu is not quite like other cities. It is not American in quite the same way as the others. As part of the Asia Pacific Rim, Hawaii is a politically American destination able to represent itself as a place in which pleasurable excesses of a different sort than those in New York are available for the tourists. The narrator and Theroux himself as author, draw upon this perception so as to help shore up the increasingly globalized imaginary borders of the U.S.: whatever excesses of tourism found within the borders of the U.S. can be contained within the only quasi-American periphery of Hawaii. I will argue in what follows that Hotel Honolulu, perhaps even more emphatically than nonfictional travel writing, implicitly reaffirms the hegemonic imaginary of the U.S. as the mainland, to be cautiously kept apart from the more peripheral states, territories, and military bases in places such as Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and
Guam. I will also show that, for Theroux, the very fictional form of the novel itself functions dislocally as a way to preserve the genre of travel narrative and the notion of a distinctly American (or this case mainland, continental) cultural identity.

Theroux, in fact, gives some hint of this specific utility of fiction in his aforementioned introduction to the edited collection *Best American Travel Writing*. Here, in addition to criticizing dismissively much of the travel writing being done today and lamenting the “end of Edens,” he holds out a reprieve for the genre: the literary notion of point of view. People, he says, do not read his books to learn, say, about China but rather to gain his *perspective* on China. This move clearly opens a path to the travel novel, and travel fiction in general—a category to which Theroux’s own writing has substantially contributed—a medium in which the author need not be responsible for reporting facts and in which the idea of their perspective correspondingly gains in value. Indeed, the concept of point of view or perspective is given special emphasis in *Hotel Honolulu*, whose very abstract form as a novel positions it, in a sense, to play the role of a meta–travel narrative. The fictional narrator of *Hotel Honolulu* both rationalizes his life in Hawaii and yet sees it as an ill fit for his pre-existing self-image. Within this particular negotiation, the narrator thus dramatizes in relation to himself the ambiguity noted earlier in the physical setting of Hawaii: far enough away to be imagined as exotic and yet close enough to become merely the sad emblem of the domestic excesses of tourism to be found anywhere within the U.S.⁹

What is distinctive about *Hotel Honolulu*, however, is that it (loosely) fictionalizes even the ambivalences and possible exhaustion of the travel writing genre itself, taking the impulse to rescue the genre through the foregrounding of “perspective” still one step further. For Theroux, the novel offers a way of taking even further license with the genre of travel writing than its general rules and conventions.

By making fictionalization a means to what is also the metanarrativizing of travel, Theroux can not only claim the ultimate value and authority of his own “perspective”—not just the real “China” but *his* China—but also create an extra space within which to distance himself from this perspective when the need arises. His “point of view” regarding Hawaii is licensed as the invention of Hawaii. Here we have dislocalism at full throttle: thematizing the “end of travel” allows not just for the continuation but for the proliferation of writing about travel. The specific mechanisms of this dislocalist metanarrativizing in *Hotel Honolulu* are as follows: 1) the narrator/author can represent his own (travel) writer’s block and resulting abandonment of his career in travel writing precisely
so as to convey the ironic result that he will always be a writer; and 2) despite, and precisely because of his (fictionalized) belief that life as a quasi-phony hotel manager in Honolulu is all that he is fit for now, he engineers the implication that in fact he will be always be different simply because he is still the genuine article: a writer from the mainland.

The narrator in Hotel Honolulu might in some ways be described as “going native.” He marries a woman named Sweetie, who, along with her mother Paumana, has worked most of her life in the hotel. He has a child with her, who, like her mother also grows up in the hotel. But in effect, he preserves a more distant relationship with most of the people around him. His invariably bungled and ironized attempts to be like the Hawaiians he lives and works with merely furnish him with further opportunities for marking his distance from them and for condescending to them. He tells us that the owner of the hotel Buddy Hamstra, “always introduced me by saying, ‘Hey, he wrote a book!’ I hated that” (7). Buddy’s new manager knows right away, and lets us know, that his boss is almost illiterate and that perhaps that was the real reason why Buddy hired him—out of respect for someone who wrote books. Or consider, for example, the protagonist’s confessed response to people whenever they asked him what he did for a living. He tells us: “I never said ‘I am a writer’—they would not have known my books—but rather, ‘I run the Hotel Honolulu.’ That gave me a life and, among the rascals, a certain status” (7). The narrator of Hotel Honolulu does not want to admit he is—or was—a writer, not so much because he has left his career behind as he claims to have done (or to have wanted to do) but because he would not be recognized. Hawaii, after all, is not, for him, the sort of place that is much concerned with reading and writing. For him, writing about Hawaii is one thing; but to be a Hawaiian writer—if such a thing could in fact exist—is something else entirely.

For the narrator, writing, even when it is blocked and fails, is still the mark of a superior mind. The protagonist complains, for example, of a group of “visiting journalists, brazenly demanding a week of freebies in exchange for a few paragraphs in a colorful puff piece . . .” (308). “These potential guests always asked to see me, and they’d announce ‘I am a travel writer.’ I associated this term with people who recounted their experiences in . . . glossy in-flight magazines. . . . ‘Travel at its best,’ one of them wrote about the Hotel Honolulu” (308). It’s almost as if the protagonist had come to the Hotel Honolulu for no other reason but to be able to sneer back at these would-be imitators and debasers of travel writing. In the very next line he seeks to rescue the genre by confiding to the reader his own conviction—a refrain already familiar here in both
Kaplan and Morris—that “travel at its best, in my experience, was often a horror and always a nuisance, but that was not the writer’s point” (308). The resonance with much of Theroux’s other fictional writings about the state of travel writing today is here unmistakable.

No matter here that the narrator cannot write or the fact that he is now a hotel manager in Honolulu, and no matter how much he claims he is at home on the island: he takes great pains to establish that he will never be like the Hawaiians. It is not so much that he will always be an outsider, but that they, even on their own turf, will never be insiders. Once a writer, always a writer, especially since it is, after all, not the object written about but the perspective that really matters. To be a writer becomes, in Theroux’s version of the “ends of the earth,” purely a passive mark of identity and distinction. Sneaking looks at other people’s mail, the protagonist readily excuses himself: “this, I told myself, was part of my job, my exploratory life as a writer” (86).

Writing—even if nothing is written—and point of view—even if it is only that of a motel manager—are intimately connected in the novel. From his position at the front desk, that is, squarely in the center of a touristic-industrial “heart of darkness,” the narrator nevertheless gains a point-of-view that is far more credible than anyone else’s in the novel. Theroux’s often expressed claims that that he, as a writer, must be accorded the right to be an unreliable narrator ring a bit false here. “Unreliability” apparently rests on a privileged kind of surveillance with which the locals themselves could not be trusted. A place to sneak looks at people’s mail, the Hotel Honolulu is also a place for secret sexual adventures, and here too, the front desk is the best place for the non-writing writer to be perched. Here he has only to consult the other hotel employees, especially the workers who clean the bathrooms, and he will become privy to these secrets. In fact the details of his own adoptive family life as a transplanted mainlander supposedly contain such a secret, one of major proportions. Rumor has it that the narrator’s wife Sweetie was born out of a sexual liaison between her mother Paumana and a visiting John F. Kennedy. But Paumana, it seems, never knew and remains ignorant of the identity of her one-night stand. Her own “point of view” as a local vouchsafes her nothing. This is something for the protagonist to know: he names his daughter (by Sweetie) Rose and explains that it is after her great grandmother. Secrets become, for the narrator, the place-holders of writerly privilege and self-image, even when writing itself has to be given up. Secrets, even if known by the locals, would be wasted on them, for precisely because of their proximity to things, they could not remain distant enough to be able to write about them. They may live
the stuff of secrets, like Paumana, but they still have no knowledge of it. Having sacrificed travel, and even writing itself, the protagonist of Hotel Honolulu would seem to conserve in every other respect the Western, imperializing epistemological authority analyzed and critiqued by Pratt, Rosaldo, Clifford, and others.

This dislocalizing move—traveling “there” precisely so as to remain where and what one is—extends to Hawaii/Honolulu itself as setting. It becomes a repository for what has come to be identified as the excesses of tourism: sexual exploits, affairs, even murders. And as semiperiphery, Hawaii is also sensed as containing the secrets of an even more dangerous and sinister nature, notably those of Pearl Harbor and the island’s violent, colonial history. Though not explicitly mentioned in Hotel Honolulu, the novel is clearly informed by these historical ghosts.

But the narrator makes it plain that he is a poor fit for the tourist-minded Honolulu society. His mainland identity must be maintained. He considers that he has gotten the hotel manager job largely because he is a “haole”—a white mainlander—a point he particularly insists upon (7). While feeling like an outsider at a family dinner at the Honolulu Elk’s lodge, the narrator finds himself asking questions like “Where am I?” and “Who am I?” (206, 7). At one point during the dinner he goes outside and joins a man who turns out to be Leon Edel, the biographer of Henry James. The narrator takes an immediate liking to him because he uses what the narrator considers eloquent language describing the sun as “rubious,” “effulgent,” and “tessellated” on top of the distant sea waves (209). This meeting and his subsequent conversations with Edel drive home the fact that the narrator had never considered himself as part of his adopted Hawaiian surroundings. “I stared at him as though at a brave brother voyager from our old planet” he says after first meeting Edel, thus widening to cosmic dimensions the gulf between Hawaii and the mainland. When at one point Edel says to him that he “had no idea you were here too” this makes the narrator confide to the reader: “That ‘too’ was nice and made me feel I mattered” (211). When Edel inquires about his present writing projects, he says nothing about his supposed decision to stop writing and responds that he is “thinking of a book, titled Who I Was” (211). Suddenly the protagonist seems less settled with the idea of who he has become—a hotel manager. Luckily for him, as he notes, Leon is tactful enough not to inquire too much about that. Further conversations with Edel show that the protagonist is also less than comfortable with the idea of having Sweetie as a wife. With Edel, he refers to her as a “coconut princess” and a “little provincial” (211). He feels his wife has never understood him. When this line of thought seems about to go too
far, however, he grows more philosophical about it, even trying to rationalize it, with the support of Edel, by supposing that someone like Henry James would have approved of them living in Hawaii. Edel reassures him: “Henry James would love Hawaii because we do” (212). “We mused without regret,” says the narrator, “knowing that we really belonged back there but that we had succeeded in slipping away” (213). Enlisting James as someone who would approve of their slipping away since he spent much of his own life in Europe, especially England, they happily fantasize a “Henry James in a billowing aloha shirt approach[ing] as Leon spoke, seeming to conspire, speculating about another inhabitant of our world” (212). This momentary image of James, far from his East Coast/European milieu, evokes for the marooned narrator a kind of compensatory image of exiled, mainland sophistication. But soon he wonders: “how much of this description fitted me and my living here. James with plump sunburned jowls, in island attire . . . big busy bum . . . indicating throngs of tourists” (212).

This attachment to Leon Edel (and through him, to the real trove of cultural capital, Henry James) is a near perfect emblem of the narrator’s fear of taking on the persona of a tourist. The knowing confabulation with Edel and their desire to create an enclosed world for themselves—a kind of island-mainland within Hawaii—works to seal off any solidarity with the rest of the real island itself. Edel—the successful, if slightly overshadowed writer-biographer who will never have to fear the eclipse of his effectively immortal and inviolable subject—is the perfect foil against which to put in proper perspective the hero’s condescending relations with the rest of the local characters, with perhaps the exception of Rose. His response to Buddy’s request to get Edel to write a blurb about the hotel in the local newspaper is quite telling: “The very idea that the eighty-nine-year-old biographer of Henry James and chronicler of Bloomsbury would write a squib for the local paper about his liking for Hotel Honolulu was so innocent in its ignorance that I laughed out loud” (387). Only to such “innocent,” unknowing, and intellectually clueless types—“lovable,” of course, for those very reasons—would it occur to propose such a thing. But, then, only in the Hotel Honolulu would the self-reassuring and self-restoring gesture of a metropolitan/mainlander’s laughter at the ignorance of the natives perform its real, dislocalizing work of reproducing the distance between the mainland and Hawaii. Everything, even the slightest idea that might call the essential borders into question, is placed back within safe bounds.

By the novel’s end, it becomes very clear that, though the narrator has come to Hawaii to make his peace with his life, he will never be at peace
in it. He weeps incessantly at the news of Edel’s death. Toward the end of the book, when Sweetie shares with him that she has become privy to another secret—John F. Kennedy Jr. will be visiting Hawaii—she learns that he already knows about this secret news. But, we are told, Sweetie refuses to believe him when he explains to her that he discovered this secret because Jacqueline Kennedy herself had called to tell him of her son’s visit. He wonders whether his wife knew him at all. Ruefully, the narrator concludes that his wife is a hopeless naïf, and that he has much more in common with his daughter Rose, who can still be rescued from the islander’s provincialism and who might, after all, come to appreciate her fortuitous if distant connection to the Kennedys, represented here as the paragons of East Coast aristocracy and refinement. Theroux’s time/space compression is momentarily defeated and the wide and safe gulf between mainland and island, the nation and its dangerously ambiguous semiperiphery, traveler and tourist, opens reassuringly before him.

There is no return home in this novel, but none is needed. Though the narrator throughout the book claims that he has left his writing career behind, the ending of Hotel Honolulu reveals this to be false. He has, as might have been expected, been writing the book we read, a book he calls a “book of corpses” (424). But the narrator has apparently been resurrected—assuming he was ever in any real danger. Writing about travel is still possible after all: all that is necessary is to locate its “end” somewhere far away, at the “ends of the earth.”