

*LETTERS FROM BRAZIL: TRAVEL WRITING AND THE  
FEMALE GAZE*

**Ana Lúcia Almeida Gazzola**

**Abstract**

Travel writers in the previous centuries narrated their experiences abroad not only to understand the new world, but rather to legitimize the colonial project, very often telling more about the Europeans and the Metropolis than about the Other. In this context, the position of women writers who wrote travel texts was often ambiguous in the sense that they had to negotiate between the imperatives of colonial discourse and those of the discourses of femininity.

**Keywords:** travel writing – women travelers – female gaze

**Resumo**

Os viajantes dos séculos passados narravam suas experiências no exterior não apenas como uma forma de compreender o novo mundo, mas sobretudo para legitimar o projeto colonial, muitas vezes revelando mais sobre os europeus e a metrópole do que sobre o Outro. Nesse contexto, a posição das mulheres que escreviam textos de viagem era frequentemente ambígua, pois tinham que negociar entre os imperativos do discurso colonial e aqueles do discurso da feminilidade.

Travel writing has been considered, until quite recently, as a marginal form of writing, although traveling is recorded even in myths of origin and in the earliest literary forms. In recent years we have

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witnessed a revival of interest in travel writing, particularly as part of the critical study of colonial and postcolonial discourses.

Within this revival of interest, the question of the encounter between Europe and the “rest of the world” has received considerable critical attention. This encounter has been discussed in terms of its multiple implications – cultural, ideological, political and economic. In the general area of colonial discourse, several studies have focused on the way Europeans represented non-European peoples and on how these representations related to Europe’s expansionist projects.

In Brazil, too, these are central questions in the critical debate today. The dependence of Brazil on developed countries and the continuance of modes of colonial relationship within Brazilian society are signs of the persistence of certain power relationships which have been in operation since the colonial period. The discussion of the peripheral nature of Brazilian intellectual life but also of the possibilities and limits of a decolonized cultural perspective are, then, crucial issues for all Brazilians today.

Within this context, the study of travel writing presents a particularly fertile field for research, since the manner in which the Colony was represented by the Metropolis (i.e., Portugal as well as the other influential European powers) has been a determinant factor in the creation of a Brazilian self-image and a concept of national identity during and after the era of the colonial enterprise. The close textual analysis of travel accounts and of other documents produced during the colonization highlights the fact that the operative discourse of neocolonialism echoes and restates the colonial perspective and its modes of expression.

The texts that make up the various versions of the process of colonization include a wide range of enunciative practices: diaries, logbooks, letters, reports, official documents, sermons, etc. Yet, there is a recurrence of certain strategies and tropes, regardless of the genre to which the text belongs. Colonial discourse, which has produced the representation of the non-European world for Europeans, presupposes certain methods of procedure and analysis, certain types of imagery

and writing, the formulation of questions on the basis of received premises, with the underlying objective of defining and controlling colonial relations. Travel texts constitute signifying practices of enormous ideological impact on the shaping of such relations, and they are crucial instruments in the process of legitimation of the colonial enterprise.

In dealing with these texts, we should therefore address the question of representation itself, that is, who is representing reality, for whom, with what purpose, in what way. What is involved here is what Edward Said has called strategic location<sup>1</sup> – that is, the position of the author in relation to the subject. This position finds expression in the choice of narrative voice, in the images, themes and motifs that circulate in the text, in its structure, and in the relationship established with the reader. These are, I think, the aspects that stand out: the monopoly of the word by the exclusion of the voice of the colonial subject, whose presence is only felt through absence and silence; the configurations of power that result from a position of authority in which a superior value is ascribed to the European culture, taken as model and reference; the obliteration of the individuality of the Other, who is deprived of his alterity, of his difference, and reduced to stereotype; the imposition of a totalizing view that neutralizes contradictions and tensions in the construction of reality.

Most of the travelers who narrated their experiences in the new world were not doing so in order to understand this new world. On the contrary, they wrote for other reasons, declared or implied, but ending up with a common denominator: the need to legitimate the colonial project, in its military, mercantile or catechetical aspects. The gaze that looked was not innocent, and it was based on a notion of alterity that preceded the perception of the alien, the strange, the other. The Other was represented through the modes of representation already known and supported by tradition, and on the basis of the principles of similitude and self-reference. The result could not be different: it tells more about the Europeans and their practices of representation than about the Other. It should be noted, however, that the texts about the

colonies do not constitute a monolithic expression of an undifferentiated European practice of representation. In spite of a shared repertoire of standard themes, devices and conventions, the texts project the travelers' profound cultural differences, related, for example, to national origins or to religious faiths, which have shaped their modes of apprehension and representation. On the other hand, the totalizing and mythifying perspective that responds to the European expansionist project is sometimes challenged, and it loses its hegemonic character. It is thus possible to locate not only continuities but also mutations, since what was seen depended on the eyes that looked, and on the interests that motivated and oriented the gaze.

In the first two centuries of Portuguese (and/or Spanish) domination in Brazil, the exploration of the land was confined largely to the seacoast, until the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais at the very end of the seventeenth century. The land, virtually unexploited, attracted the eyes of other European powers, and rigid protectionist laws were passed to prevent any challenge to the "rights" over the territory. The colony was, thus, practically closed to foreign access. Yet, there were people trading and traveling, and foreigners did go to Brazil. And several of these travelers left accounts of their trips.

Four main groups of travel texts written on Brazil can be distinguished in a tentative typology: accounts of exploration, accounts of religious missions, accounts of scientific expeditions and accounts of urban focus. The first two groups dominate the 16th and 17th centuries, and present a number of recurring features and themes: the edenic motif, and the sense of awe due to the overwhelming beauty of the land; the organization of the world around the dualities barbarism/civilization; the notion of superiority of the culture of origin; the logic of the civilizing mission, of which Europe is the model and instrument. In the 18th century some new elements are introduced: on the one hand, the scientific works which, in spite of their claims of neutrality, reaffirm the same logic of the previous types; from a gender perspective, the first text written by a woman, a trend which would be consolidated in the following century; and, from the point of view of motivation of the

trip, accounts are written to report political and diplomatic missions concerned with commercial relations. These texts, including most of the female-authored accounts, constitute a fourth group, mainly due to the fact that their focus is primarily urban and even, in the case of some accounts written by women, domestic (on family life and customs, for example). However, this does not imply any change in the ideological direction. On the contrary, diplomats, dealers, engineers, militaries, some in private, others in public missions, traveled to Brazil to establish business contacts and market potentials, in a neocolonial project that reasserts the logic of the transformative and civilizing mission. At any rate, if there is a shift in focus, it leads us away from the wonder of the first accounts. In the description of urban life, many travelers depict the behavior of the different social groups in very critical terms, and also denounce the feudal structures of the rigid and stagnant colonial administration. In several of these accounts, negative characteristics are associated with the *mestizo* society created in Brazil and, once again, difference is presented as inferior in relation to the culture of reference. And, most comfortably for the stereotypical view, there is both a process of homogenization and generalization and a gap between the characteristic depicted and the social process from which it evolved.

The texts written by women present some interesting specificities. Although a surprisingly high number of women traveled in all continents, their texts did not receive the same attention given to male-authored texts. The seclusion of women to the private sphere and the prescribed traditional female roles were social rules these women travelers came to break, even when they traveled in the company of their families. In fact, theirs was a double transgression: the entrance into the public sphere by traveling, i.e., leaving home, *and* by writing. Specific textual and gender constraints had then to be dealt with, and various discursive negotiations were necessary: on the one hand, a strategic adherence to the ideals of femininity that circulated at the time and to the established parameters for female writing, such as delicacy of expression, an emphasis on emotionality, an intimate, confessional tone and the writing in the form of letters or journals which

maintained a suitable private or domestic orientation, prescriptions as to adequate subject matter or style and proper language. The strategies used by the writers to guarantee appropriate womanliness, thus making the texts acceptable, would vary. Markers of femininity were stressed: proper attires, concern with appearance and forms of behavior, for example; adequate – socially acceptable – justifications for the trip would be provided: family obligations, philanthropic reasons, professional activities rather than pleasure or self-fulfillment; there would be indications that the type of event or information – that is, non-serious matters – was appropriate for women. These were recurring elements in the texts, even when the narrator was involved in dangerous events or “manlike” adventures or activities. Many times the writers “hid” under a pseudonym or simply signed the husband’s name, which functioned as a legitimizing factor. Quite frequently, a legitimizing preface by the husband or male editor introduced the text, calling attention to its “feminine” characteristics and to the fact that there was no claim to literary or scientific merit – a statement in many cases made by the writers themselves. On the other hand, in order to avoid accusations of exaggeration or lying (which were frequently made in relation to travel accounts, particularly the ones written by women), the writers needed to maintain a relation to the conventions and genre expectations of travel writing, which had become, during the 18th century, an established and popular form of entertainment. In order to legitimize and confer authority on their accounts, women writers had to produce texts within the accepted parameters for the reconstruction of foreign experience and “exotic” places, such as “objective” style, careful documentation, the “othering” of the foreign country, knowledge and authority, and the inclusion of specific types of information. The appeal to earlier authorities and the reference to male sources are indicative of this attempt to confer authority on the texts.

The writers were then pulled in different textual directions, between the imperatives of colonial discourse and those of the discourses of femininity.<sup>2</sup> They had to negotiate with the opposing forces of transgression and conformity, the authoritative status of colonial

discourse and the conventions of appropriate female positions. In this sense, the relation of their texts to colonial discourse becomes problematic. The discursive tensions and contradictions function as counter-hegemonic voices, generating fissures and inconsistencies which render meaning unstable. Due to women's marginal participation in the colonial enterprise, their oppressed position in society, and their need to comply, at least in part, with the expectations of femininity which existed at the time, women's travel writing frequently reveals a more tentative and less assertive perspective than men's, which functions as a factor of relativization in relation to the discourse of imperialism. However, in spite of that, they are also instrumental in the creation of knowledges about the contact zone, and end up by reaffirming the imperial position.

The first travel log on Brazil written by a woman (and the only female-authored text on Brazil in the 18th century) is Jemima Kindersley's *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*, published in London in 1776.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Nathaniel Edmund Kindersley was a British woman on her way to Bengal with her army-officer husband. Her 68 letters to a friend at home, to whom she had promised to describe everything she saw en route, are dated from June 1764 to February 1769, and sent from different ports of call during the voyage and from her places of residence in India. She signs her husband's name: Mrs. Kindersley. Letters 1-5 cover her stay in the Canary islands and letters 6-12 refer to Salvador, in Brazil.

The Letters seem to have been edited for publication, since several of them end rather abruptly, and there are no remarks of a personal nature. The texts constitute exclusively of descriptions and narration of events related to the trip, or comments motivated by them. There seems to be an attempt at maintaining a carefully objective style, dispassionate or even "neutral," with no resource to confessionality, sentimentality or even a personal tone, the more surprising if one considers the addressee is a friend. There are no references to family, friends, or the husband, no names are mentioned, no identifying information is provided, no

personal event is reported. The little we find out about Mrs. Kindersley's situation has to be read between the lines: she sometimes replaces the pronoun I by we; she makes repeated references to forts, soldiers, the Army, revealing a certain degree of inside information; there are indications that her social position is not low: she is invited to visit a musliman zanannah (harem) (220), she comments on the number of servants one must have, she refers to the poverty of "common people," she seems to have a somewhat easy access to information or material goods. Also, the absence of information becomes a source of information: she does not mention any personal project or activity in which she is engaged, leading to the conclusion that she is traveling in the role of wife, and is thus free to register her observations and impressions.

What prevails in the text is, then, a descriptive mode interwoven with commentary, fitting well into the prescriptions of objective style and the othering of the foreign country which characterized travel writing at the time. But, to conform the letters to the opposing expectations related to female writing, a suitable anchoring on the private sphere is provided, as the letters have an adequate domestic orientation. Not only are they sent to a friend, but the author makes clear, more than once, that her aim is to "entertain" that friend. This is reinforced by the introduction to several letters, in which a lighter tone aims at conveying an impression of spontaneity in the recording of experience. She states repeatedly that she does not know much about the people or events, and that she is not qualified to discuss them, but she does not want to miss the opportunity to describe such different manners or places to her friend; she is describing only what she considers interesting or singular, she is only conveying her impressions, she is a woman sometimes led by appearance and judges hurriedly on the basis of first impressions which later on prove to be incorrect (24).

However, this impression of lightness or weakness cannot be sustained by the text. In fact, we are dealing here with a very learned person, who is obviously well read and quite perceptive. The type of subject matter on which she chooses to concentrate entirely escapes the prescriptions of female writing: if she has an obvious interest in matters



related to women and family life (which was suitable for her condition as a female writer), she does not limit herself to descriptions, but presents an acute analysis of the implications of tradition and customs, of unwritten laws, of the lack of education and information – in general, perceptive social commentary on the condition of women. We can say that her texts, in this respect, provide us with a double documentation, both on the condition of women in the countries she visits, and, by comparison and contrast, in her own country. Also, rather than remaining on the level of the picturesque or the exotic – which would be better suited for entertainment – she dwells on matters of economy and social organization, distribution of wealth, characteristics of different governments, and major social issues such as freedom, slavery, the role of religion, and the importance of education for a free society. Through analogy and contrast, she compares the foreign countries among themselves or to England, and even to ancient civilizations, thus providing a broader view of history and society. In fact, together with the descriptive mode which characterizes objective style, she makes use of a more interpretive and analytical mode, which allows her to introduce not only social commentary but also a historical perspective, a point to which we will return at the end of this discussion. This confers subtlety and depth to her text, and indicates Mrs. Kindersley is constructing and talking from a position of knowledge not expected of female writers and of simple letters to entertain a friend. She establishes her authority and a powerful subject position through references to her wide reading (Greek philosophy, quotations in French, references to texts written by other travelers, detailed historical facts of ancient or more recent history, etc). On the other hand, these references also function as legitimizing factors, indicating the ambiguity of her position as a female writer:

I fear that my account of the government and people of Hindostan must appear uncharitable, or you may think that, with the true spirit of an Englishwoman, I condemn whatever

is contrary to the customs of my own country; or, perhaps, that I am writing on a subject which I am only superficially acquainted, especially as it is not uncommon with travellers to “mistake the abuse of laws for the laws themselves”, ...and I must confess that the extreme depravity of the people, and the tyranny of superiors, appears so incredible to those who are used to contemplate a milder form of government, that I have not confidence to proceed, till I have first transcribed a passage or two from Mons. Montesquieu, which I hope will serve both as authority and illustration. (189-90)

The same ambiguity is revealed in the opposition between types of information and in the use of references to other travelers. The sources for authority in travel writing were the *doxa* (common opinion), direct experience or knowledge derived from books. Mrs. Kindersley relies heavily on these three sources, indicating she has not only first-hand information but also erudition. An example of the first two strategies is the insistent use of the pronoun I and of verbs that refer to perception, information or opinion, such as I have seen, I was told, I was informed, what I mostly disapprove of, etc. However, she repeatedly questions the information she receives, measuring it against the knowledge derived from books, and uses the latter to confirm or deny the former. Referring to accounts about the jiboia snake in Brazil, she states: “I have no great faith in these my informers, but I must observe, that Don Ulloa, whom I esteem a good authority, mentions in his voyage, creatures which answer to this description” (48). But she is also aware of the fact that travellers sometimes lie, make statements without proof, exaggerate what they see, or generalize on the basis of specific and particular events or attitudes. These are accusations she wants to avoid, and her search for confirmation from reliable male sources has that function. However, in a contradictory move, she herself undermines her position as she recognizes she has insufficient knowledge about the manners she describes and the cultural and social reasons behind them due to the difficulties in communication and in

the access to information. Also, difference itself becomes an obstacle to proper understanding, a point whose awareness reveals a sense of balance and a capacity to respect otherness most travel writers fail to achieve. In a reference to the Armenians, for example, she states that "their language, appearance, customs, and manners, are so different from ours, that an acquaintance with them is impossible" (276).

Kindersley is also very suspicious, at certain points, of the doxa and of oral tradition, but only of that which pertains to the foreign people. She refers to what she calls absurd beliefs, ridiculous stories, superficial pretenders. In this sense, what could function as a factor of relativization of the eurocentric position fails to do so, since she does not apply the same suspension of belief to English received wisdom, but rather reinforces all of its ideological presuppositions. Yet, the path is open for conclusions in that direction, as she tries to distinguish between myth and history, between superstition and religion, pointing out that statements express different interests and that religion, superstition, and ignorance are powerful political weapons for the manipulation and control of uneducated populations.

In most situations, however, what prevails is the eurocentric view, or rather an Anglocentric view. Most cities and houses have a "vile appearance," the streets are "dirty and mean", Santa Cruz is ill paved, Salvador is ill finished. In Santa Cruz, for example, the "walls convey ... to the mind of a person just come from England, an idea of rooms not quite finished" (4). The exceptions are the cities built by the English or that remind of England in any way: the Cape of Good Hope, for instance, is a very pretty town and, "some few circumstances excepted, equal in neatness and conveniences to any of our sea-ports in England" (53). Or a description of Madras as, "without exception, the prettiest place I ever saw, ... built entirely by the English" (77). England remains as a point of reference, and universal taste must be measured by its standards: "But let not what I have said lead you to suppose, that any thing here is equal to the noble edifices in England; I only mean, that there is a neatness, and a uniform simplicity throughout the whole of this town, which cannot fail of being universally pleasing" (79).

Aesthetics is also established from the imperial position, both in terms of fashion and physical appearance: Bersian women “would be incomparable” if their beautiful eyes “were set off by a fine red and white complexion” (230); others “have none of that beautiful red which animates and gives life to beauty in colder climates” (230). Dresses are strange because they do not conform to English fashion. Kindersley is affirming European values of taste and reasserting a position of superiority from which she passes judgment. Reality is, then, constituted by the colonial gaze. Furthermore, the description of manners and customs is done by homogenizing people and groups into a collective *they*, by codifying difference through a normalizing discourse: “the strong lines in the character of a Hindoo are effeminacy and avarice. Those of a Tartar cruelty and ambition” (197). “The Hindostan are little superior in knowledge to the brute creation,” the Hottentots are all addicted to gluttony and drunkenness (69), Portuguese and Brazilians are all indolent (46). She is against slavery, but she makes the most obvious racist statements: the blacks “are by nature disagreeable” (50), the Hottentots “are tolerably white” (68), the Mahrattors “follow the constant maxim of all black powers, changing sides as the face of affairs alters” (121). Sometimes she tries “not to be unjust,” and gives a fair and balanced account of negative and positive aspects (239). In other moments, however, she reduces the natives to the grotesque and presents them as caricatures, referring to their most ridiculous grimaces” (232) and “grotesque figures” (262).

In her references to other European peoples, comparisons are almost always favorable to the English, although she seems to be striving for impartiality. The Spaniards were led by religious zeal to a barbaric treatment of the Indians, but their sense of family honor and their trustworthiness in terms of the word given are remarkable; the Portuguese treated the Indians with humanity, but are the greatest thieves on earth; the Dutch are hard-working people, but dull, and the only example of torture of a native occurs in one of the Dutch colonies (the Cape of Good Hope); the French are cultured but frivolous. The English, well, they were not capable of developing the Cape as the

Dutch, who took possession of it after them, but they are to be excused because the land is quite inhospitable (56). Their religion is sober, different from the populist excesses of the Catholic Church: in England, “men profess less zeal and practice more virtue” (52). And, to justify the colonial enterprise, she mentions the luck of the natives who were conquered by the most generous masters – the English, of course. Yet, she is fair enough to indicate that this high opinion of the English is not universal. At least in the case of the Portuguese, “the English are to be suspected,” and the governor of Bahia comes to the point of not allowing her to stay at the house of an English merchant because “two English women under the same roof is too much....” To reciprocate, she is extremely harsh with the Portuguese, and strongly criticizes their manners, their lack of culture and refinement, the despotic character of their government, the corruption of the army, the vices of the clergy, the lack of freedom, the poverty of the people. Brazil, in a few words, is not a place where one would want to live... .

However, although what we have shown so far indicates a reassertion of the ideology that informs the colonial enterprise, Kindersley offers us in some of her letters a surprisingly different perspective, as she distances herself from specific events and received wisdom, and tries to convey a broader view of history and a more analytical explanation for racial relations and present events. In fact, she challenges the colonial presuppositions, when she realizes no observation on a foreign country should be generalized, and when she sees through the ideology of the “natural” inferiority of some races: “I will not pretend to determine (on a point which has been often urged) whether black people are by nature inferior in understanding to white; who can judge of it here, where the nature of the government checks the growth of every virtue?” (193). And also, in her repeated remarks about the rise and fall of nations, about the temporary nature of glory and wealth, and about the inevitability of historical change, isn’t she also indicating that the colonial enterprise is nothing but one more moment in history? It seems to me that it is here that she really disrupts

the apparent solidity of colonialism, and announces that England, too, will pass.

### Notes

- 1 See Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- 2 See Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference*. Women's Travel Writing in the 19th Century. London: Routledge, 1990.
- 3 Kindersley, Mrs. (Jemima). *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*. London: J. Nourse, 1776. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are indicated in the text.