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Roxanne L. Euben: Journeys to the Other Shore

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Chapter 1

FRONTIERS: WALLS AND WINDOWS

SOME REFLECTIONS ON TRAVEL NARRATIVES

Because many people of diverse nations and countries delight and take pleasure, as I have done in times past, in seeing the world and the various things therein, and also because many want to know without traveling there, and others want to see, go, and travel, I have begun this little book.

—Gilles Le Bouvier, *Le Livre de la Description des Pays* (1908)

IN A GLOBALIZED world grown smaller by progressively dizzying flows of people, knowledge, and information, “travel” seems to have become the image of the age. Porous borders, portable allegiances, virtual networks, and elastic identities now more than ever evoke the language of mobility, contingency, fluidity, provisionality, and process rather than that of stability, permanence, and fixity.¹ Scholars who traffic in the lingo of deterritorialization and nomadism increasingly traverse disciplines and regions, mining disparate experiences of displacement such as tourism, diaspora, exile, cyberculture, and migration as “contact zones,” sites that articulate the preconditions and implications of cross-cultural encounters.²

In a geopolitical landscape scarred by colonialism and the workings of global capital, however, such encounters often proceed under conditions of radical inequality between and within regions, cultures, nations, and transnational and subnational communities. The corrosive consequences of such real and perceived disparities of power are evident in daily newspaper headlines around the world, demanding and receiving attention if not redress. The events of September 11, 2001, the U.S.-led war on terrorism, and growing opposition to it have galvanized interest in the haunting of contemporary politics by grievances rooted in poorly understood historical narratives of marginalization and persecution. Long a feature of political discourse within postcolonial societies, such grievances and narratives now press on European and American political consciousness in unprecedented ways. What

Foucault aptly called research into “the history of the present” is no longer of interest only to scholarly specialists, for the imperatives of geopolitics have lent a new sense of urgency to attempts to bring these pasts into an often “presentist” social science.³

The recent emphasis on mobility and displacement as both features of and metaphors for an increasingly globalized world has thus been accompanied by detailed investigations of the historical relationship between travel and imperialism, mobility and domination. Within the last twenty years, there has been a virtual explosion of scholarship on “Western” travels to the “non-West” (I will turn to these terms in a moment): travel writing by Europeans in particular has come to be regarded as a window onto the production of knowledge and, more specifically, onto the mutually constitutive images of colonizer and colonized. These efforts are vital interventions into the operations of power, particularly in a postcolonial world in which such operations establish distinctions between center and periphery and constitute their relationship hierarchically. Yet paradoxically, attempts to deconstruct these mechanisms of domination have tended to reproduce this structure and organization. From hermeneutically informed ethnography that aims at the “comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other” to investigations into the way colonial European travel writing “produced ‘the rest of the world’ for European readerships at particular points in Europe’s expansionist trajectory,” the West is continually reconstituted as epicenter.⁴ Seeking to displace a hubristic self-image of the West as the beacon that “shows to the less developed the image of its own future,” these analyses inadvertently reestablish Western primacy, now refigured from model to hegemon whose global reach has called forth new powers of the nether world it can no longer control let alone understand.⁵

What would it mean to invert the questions that reproduce the West as the epicenter of the world? Instead of only investigating how Western travel writing produces the “colonized other,” what features of travel, politics, and knowledge past and present might be brought into view by shifting the theoretical perspective? How, for example, have travel and exploration by Muslims produced and transformed their own sense of self and other, of membership and to which communities? How do journeys by Muslims within and beyond the *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) as well as travels by Westerners serve to articulate and transfigure the parameters of home and a scale of the strange and estranging? If the Syrian poet Adonis is right that frontiers can be either walls or windows, where and when do such borders emerge for Muslim and Western travelers and who are the assorted Others that mark them?⁶ What is the shared knowledge presupposed and re-

worked by way of practices of translation between familiar and unfamiliar, home and abroad? And what might such itineraries, exposures, and mediations suggest about the scope and scale of moral and political obligations among human beings enmeshed in a dialectic of localism and cosmopolitanism characteristic of membership in communities with fluid and fluctuating boundaries?

To even ask these questions in this way is to beg a series of others, perhaps most obviously what it could possibly mean in these shape-shifting times to invoke “the West,” “non-West,” and “Islam” as if they correspond to stable, fixed, and clear entities. Indeed, to conjure these categories without explanation would reinforce the very essentialism the present inquiry aims to destabilize. The worry about essentialism here is not mere academic cant. Words have power, and whether the opposition is between “the West and the Rest” or the “West and Islam,” the presupposition of two uniform and identifiable entities whose boundaries are clearly demarcated from one another carves up the world in ways that erase fissures within each category and the mutual historical indebtedness between them, not to mention the extensive cross-pollination of the present.⁷ Such Manicheanism presumes and reinforces a view of the world in which messy, multiple, and interpenetrating histories and identities are pressed into the service of binaries that distort rather than illuminate the political landscape. As this way of seeing the world gains steam, it becomes increasingly difficult to hear and see, for example, all the people and evidence that challenge, complicate, or contradict it. Under these circumstances, such manicheanism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the attention continually paid to this worldview, even if it is to detail the ways in which it both creates and deforms political life, becomes yet another expression of its scope and power.

In this context, it becomes politically and intellectually crucial to (again) recall that the West is not a civilization with homogeneous roots and clearly delineated historical and contemporary boundaries. As a geographical marker, it is virtually impossible to pinpoint exactly where the West begins and ends, and this is especially so now that peoples, information, and material goods traverse cultural and national borders at will, creating all kinds of transnational and subnational identities that shift and reconstitute themselves in unpredictable ways. Many suspect that what are defined as Western interests are really only the interests of the most powerful of the developed nations; thus while the West may once have been shorthand for Europe, it is now shorthand for the United States and its global reach.⁸ The West is also an amalgamation of multiple traditions—the Greek, Roman, Judaic, and Christian to name a few—and has been perpetually influenced

by and shaped in terms of other cultures and civilizations.⁹ Indeed, crucial components of Western intellectual history may not be Western in any meaningful sense at all; as one scholar argues, “the real heirs of Roman civilization were not the chain-mailed knights of the rural West, but the sophisticated Byzantines of Constantinople and the cultivated Arab caliphate of Damascus, both of whom have preserved the Hellenized urban civilization of the antique Mediterranean long after it was destroyed in Europe.”¹⁰

Moreover, the West is today made up of citizens who embrace radically diverse ethnic, religious, and racial identities. There are those who are American by birth who, by virtue of race or ethnicity or some other marker of difference, feel themselves at once in but not of the West, and scholars have come to designate certain situations *within* the West as colonial—for example, mining communities in central Appalachia.¹¹ Furthermore, while it is now obvious that colonialism has shaped the “Third World,” more recently many scholars have pointed out the ways in which the West has been profoundly transformed by its colonial encounters as well.¹² Those who take the West as shorthand for a series of “values”—for example, democracy, liberalism, constitutionalism, freedom, the separation of church and state—rarely recognize the extent to which such values are defined in contradictory ways and are belied by the very diversity of practices within the West. Finally, such invocations capture as uniquely Western ideas and norms that appear elsewhere in other guises, or whose most powerful articulations emerge in confrontation with, not as an expression of, Euro-American power.¹³ Indeed, “many of the standards exported by the West and its cultural industries themselves turn out to be of culturally mixed character if we examine their cultural lineages.”¹⁴

Critical assessments of nearly every aspect and claim associated with the West have, of course, become commonplace. By contrast, such endless parsing is not commonly brought to bear on Islam, detailed knowledge of which largely remains the purview of specialists. Yet Islam is inescapably diverse, multiethnic, and defined as much by disagreement as consensus. The very term *Islam* in the singular obscures the fact that this is a religion embraced by more than a billion people in countries ranging from the United States to China. If Islam is defined as the religious practices of actual Muslims, one can only conclude, along with Aziz al-Azmeh, that there is no such thing as a single Islam, but rather many different Islams practiced by millions of different people in a stunning variety of places.¹⁵ Positing multiple Islams may finesse but cannot solve the problem of essentialism, however. As Peter Mandaville points out, to “speak of ‘Islams’ is to be haunted by a sense of boundaries; it gives the impression that there is some point

where one Islam leaves off and another picks up," while simultaneously flying "in the face of the fact that the vast majority of Muslims, despite a clear cognisance of their religion's diversity, see themselves as adhering very firmly to a single Islam."¹⁶

Yet to speak of a singular Islam is almost invariably to speak of the sacred texts (the Qur'an and hadith, the reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet), an emphasis that has tended to privilege juridical Islam and its gatekeepers at the expense of more heterodox, popular, and mystical practices.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the historical ebb and flow of claims about an "authentic Islam" constituted by fixed and self-evident truths residing in the "original texts," scriptural Islam is multiply indeterminate. As Khaled Abou El Fadl has argued, for example, while the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) is presumed to be Divine and necessarily perfect, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is by contrast a human and imperfect endeavor, a fluid and fallible process that "ultimately justified the practice of juristic diversity and culture of juristic disputations."¹⁸ Far from conveying one single message clearly, Qur'anic verses have long confronted scholars with a wealth of indeterminacies that have, in turn, generated a dizzying variety of interpretive strategies designed to finesse if not resolve instances of apparent Qur'anic contradiction. There are entire disciplines and literatures devoted to distinguishing fabricated from authoritative reports of the Prophet's life, with much riding on the outcome: hadith judged *sahih* (sound) may further illuminate the meaning of revelation itself, particularly when unclear or contradictory. And there are four schools of Islamic Law just in Sunni Islam, not to mention those of Shi'i Islam and even less well known branches. To make matters more complicated, *Shari'a* is not really fixed even within any single school (*madhhab*), in part because "law is a mirror of society . . . [such that] the evolution of Islamic law reflected a degree of pluralism and religious heterogeneity which was possibly more ingrained than in any other contemporary society."¹⁹

As the current political climate attests, however, there is much more at stake here than whether or not categories such as Islam and the West are *accurate*, in the sense of corresponding, more or less precisely, to actual geographic, political, historical, and/or normative borders in the world. "Islam versus the West" is an entire system of representation embraced with equal intensity by many contemporary Islamists²⁰ and American neoconservatives, both of whom apparently have the will to remake the world in this image.²¹ Moreover, the political purchase of such categories extend well beyond these narrow circles; there are, after all, many people for whom "Islam versus the West" is not only a powerful system of representation but for whom "Islamic" and "Western" designate zero-sum identities to which they feel an intense

loyalty despite persistent disagreements about the precise *object* of such allegiance. Given what Muhammad Bamyeh characterizes as the heteroglossic properties of Islam enacted in a “unity imagined” rather than “disunity proclaimed,” a singular Islam thus captures and organizes the subjectivities of millions who self-identify as Muslim (among other things), even or especially if such identities enact a reworking of Islamic norms and practices.²² As Talal Asad points out:

While narrative history does not have to be teleological, it does presuppose an identity (“India,” say) that is the subject of that narrative. Even when that identity is analyzed into its heterogeneous parts (class, gender, regional divisions, etc.), what is done, surely, is to reveal its constitution, not to dissolve its unity. The unity is maintained by those who speak in its name, and more generally by all who adjust their existence to its (sometimes shifting) requirements.²³

Importantly, such categories are secured not only by an individual’s subjective identification but also by what Robert Gooding-Williams calls those third-person practices of classification—racial, ethnic, and religious—that establish the range of self-conceptualizations available to describe “our intended actions and prospective lives.”²⁴ In other words, to identify oneself as “Muslim” at this moment in history is not just a matter of where and how one prays but also of, for example, security practices of racial and religious profiling at American and European airports, train stations, and seaports.

What this means is that those engaged directly or indirectly with the dilemmas of contemporary politics cannot simply dispense with such categories by reference to all that they miss, distort, or exclude. Instructive in this connection is Linda Zerilli’s discussion of how it is that the category of “woman” persists as part of a “passionate system of reference” despite mounting challenges to its strategic utility and empirical validity—from feminist objections to the exclusions enacted by any attempt to define “woman” to scientific repudiations of sexual dimorphism.²⁵ Expressed in and reinforced by the daily linguistic practices of ordinary people, “Islam” and “the West” are similarly part of a system of representation that resists argumentation and counter-evidence because, to quote Ludwig Wittgenstein, “what stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.”²⁶ It is not that those who “hold fast” have failed to think critically or rationally, then, but rather because such categories and identities are embedded in mythologies whose force derives from a deeply human desire to make sense of the world around us:

A mythology cannot be defeated in the sense that one wins over one's opponent through the rigor of logic or the force of the evidence; a mythology cannot be defeated through arguments that would *reveal* it as groundless belief. . . . A mythology *is* utterly groundless, hence stable. What characterizes a mythology is not so much its crude or naive character—mythologies can be extremely complex and sophisticated—but, rather, its capacity to elude our practices of verification and refutation. A mythology, as Jacques Bouveresse observes, is the force of an idea, a form of representations, a manner of speaking that provides a universally valid explanation of my world, convincing me "a priori because of the desire, and not the thought, that it should be able to account for every case."²⁷

The point here is that in the everyday practice of ordinary lives such categories come to constitute a grammar that "is not a metaphysical given but a form of representation that sets limits to what it makes sense to say and that is held in place—I do not say justified—not through grand theories but small acts: daily, habitual practices of speaking, acting, and judging."²⁸ As part of what Wittgenstein describes as a passionate commitment to a system of reference, such grammar is "really a way of living, or of assessing one's life . . . it's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation," the relinquishment of which will not be achieved by the piling on of contradictory evidence but rather, as Zerilli puts it, "coming to see differently what has been there all along."²⁹

As all politics entails the making of claims for this or that community which are "inevitably partial and thus exclusive," Zerilli suggests abandoning the rehearsal of feminist arguments against such claims in favor of attending to the multiple ordinary contexts in which words such as *woman* are used and acquire particular and variant meanings—and then are contested and challenged. By asking, for example, how travel and exploration by Muslims have produced and transformed their own sense of self and other, home, and frontier, I would similarly like to set aside the endless rehearsal of inaccuracies and exclusions erased by terms such as *Islam*, *non-West*, and *West*. I do so not because such arguments are unimportant but, on the contrary, because their very logic points to the next step: of moving beyond incantations about hybridity, fluidity, and translation to a substantive and textured inquiry into how particular imaginaries and identities are at once articulated and transfigured by way of jagged and unpredictable exchange with other practices and peoples.³⁰

Shifting the focus from inevitably contested and infinitely contestable abstractions means resisting the temptation to wrap quotation marks around such terms as *the West* and *Islam* in an attempt to finesse the tension between categories that are clearly inadequate and their obvious political purchase.³¹ It also means retaining these terms despite the fact that they are not parallel constructs, however construed; as the West is not a religion (although it can elicit religious devotion), a contrast of equivalents would juxtapose Islam and Christianity or contrast Islam with Judaism. Moreover, while Islam is a “discursive tradition” with a long and rich history,³² the West is a category of relatively recent provenance through which history is increasingly organized (the ancient Greeks, for example, understood themselves as geographically west of the barbarians, but not Western in the contemporary sense).³³ Indeed, historians suggest that even the First Crusade, that supposedly paradigmatic moment in the “clash of civilizations,” was read as such only after the fact.³⁴ Given all this, I deploy these terms in a very specific way, as instances of “master signifiers” along the lines suggested by Bobby Sayyid and Peter Mandaville in connection with Islam; here Islam as well as the West “does not refer to a specific set of beliefs or practices, but rather . . . functions as a totalising abstraction through which meaning and discourse can be organized.”³⁵ Taken as master signifiers, then, the West and Islam capture what is imagined as continuous and unitary in dialectical relationship to those concrete articulations and enactments by which they are transformed and adapted in different contexts for plural purposes.

To return, then: travel narratives have been particularly suspect for the representational power they enact over those they survey, not to mention the Western imperial endeavors the travel genre is said to both express and facilitate.³⁶ Yet this does not exhaust all that travel narratives can reveal, particularly if the travelers and narratives are pluralized to incorporate precisely those perspectives and peoples silenced or eclipsed by the almost single-minded focus on Western journeys abroad.³⁷ Rather than adding to the ongoing anatomization of the past, present, and future of Euro-American peoples—our histories, our intellectual traditions, even our erasures of others’ histories and intellectual traditions—in the chapters that follow, I seek to shift the theoretical perspective by bringing into view the ways in which travelers of all kinds, past and present and from many directions, produce knowledge about others and themselves comparatively. Doing so not only contributes to a more textured history of our present “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order,” but also answers Sanjay Subrahmaniam’s call to

not only compare from within our boxes, but spend some time and effort to transcend them, not by comparison alone, but by seeking out the at times fragile threads that connected the globe, even as the globe came to be defined as such. This is not to deny voice to those who were somehow “fixed” by physical, social and cultural coordinates, who inhabited “localities” . . . and whom we might seek out with our intrepid analytical machetes. But if we ever get to “them” by means other than archaeology, the chances are that it is because they are already plugged into some network, some process of circulation.³⁸

Toward this end, the following inquiry is concerned less with matters of historical and empirical accuracy and more with those representational practices that arrange human experience into narrative accounts, and in particular, what such practices disclose about the ways in which these travelers make sense of themselves and the worlds through which they move. As Mary Gergen argues, such practices are themselves embedded in

traditions of storytelling, dramatic performance, literature and the like [that] have generated a range of culturally shared forms of emplotment, or narrative forms. When the individual attempts to understand him/herself, these culturally embedded forms furnish a repertoire of sense making devices. It is through embedding one’s actions within one or more of these forms that one’s actions take on meaning; they belong to a person with a certain past, heading in a certain direction, and with a future that will represent an extension of this past. Yet . . . narrative constructions are not the mere product of cultural history. The particular form that they acquire for any person is an outgrowth of the social relationships in which one is currently embedded. One’s narratives typically include the positioning of others in relationship to self. . . . Likewise, others’ self-narratives contain constructions of other individuals embedded in their mutual social surrounds. Thus, the narrative constructions within a community of interlocutors may be viewed as a communal achievement.³⁹

As the narratives that follow often graphically detail jagged skirmishes among different subjectivities and modes of life, they are particularly illuminating windows onto the ways in which a whole range of categories, identities, and norms are articulated and transfigured. They not only disclose, for example, what Islam means to particular Muslim travelers at specific moments but also where, at what moments and under what circumstances this broad discursive construct (however

distinctively articulated) dissolves or recedes in importance, supplanted by other, equally powerful constructs that emerge and combine to organize experience and produce knowledge through layered contrasts. More specifically, I will argue that these journeys and the ways they are given narrative shape illustrate how a sense of home and other is produced and transformed through shifting sets of nested polarities—Sunni and Shi'ite, West and East, male and female, white and nonwhite, Muslim and Christian, among others—that are plastic, contingent, and persistent. In contrast to those who take identity and membership as given by God, nature, lineage, or territorial locality, the continual traction and mutability of these polarities suggest that home and away, self and other, familiar and foreign are “not an instant property or possession” but rather emerge, transform, and recede in the course of the journey itself, much like the flow of a river nested between solid embankments.⁴⁰

As I will suggest by argument and example throughout this book, there is more at stake in pluralizing the investigation of travel as a metaphor for and practice of the pursuit of knowledge than simple recognition that “non-Westerners travel too.” This pluralization is, in fact, part of a wider effort to recuperate a more capacious understanding of political theory than one defined in terms of a parochial mapping of Western answers to fixed questions posed by a pantheon of (almost exclusively) Euro-American philosophers. This builds on my argument for comparative political theory advanced elsewhere, and in particular the claim that theorizing involves examining and making explicit the assumptions and commitments that underlie everyday actions, a practice on which no time, culture, or institution has a monopoly.⁴¹ Inasmuch as such examination requires a measure of critical distance, theory so defined entails a kind of journey to a perspective that makes larger patterns and connections visible. What this means, then, is that theory is not only embedded in actual practices and experiences, but that theorizing is an inherently comparative enterprise, an often (but not inevitably) transformative mediation between what is unfamiliar and familiar and, by extension, between rootedness and critical distance. In this context, then, “travel” signals both a metaphor for and a practice of journeying, in Nietzsche’s words, to “the other shore,” to worlds less familiar, and in terms of which a traveler may well come to understand his or her own more deeply and fully.⁴²

This argument and enterprise can be usefully illuminated by way of a contrast with Edward Said’s “Traveling Theory,” an essay that tracks how theories and ideas circulate, and in particular how they are adapted, transfigured, undone, reworked, and domesticated “from

person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.⁴³ As the particular journey that preoccupied Said was the “academicization” of theory as it moved from European contexts to the universities in the United States, the essay was, no doubt, intended to simply “offer a metaphor for reading certain aspects of intellectual life.”⁴⁴ Yet its own peregrinations through subsequent academic scholarship has invested it with enormous methodological and political weight, transforming “Traveling Theory” from a brief set of provocative reflections into an entire methodology and mode of inquiry. Setting aside such *ex post facto* freight, what is particularly instructive here is how the present inquiry differs from Said’s in the way it defines and locates the practice of theory, a shift in focus that brings into view aspects of the production of knowledge that “traveling theory,” as either metaphor or method, cannot.

In Said’s analysis, “theory” is largely used synonymously with “ideas,” both of which are opposed to a critical consciousness whose job is to “provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory.”⁴⁵ For Said, the fact that “every text and every reader is to some extent the product of a theoretical standpoint, however implicit or unconscious such a standpoint may be” is part of what makes theory inevitably incomplete and necessitates the oppositional services of the humanist critic.⁴⁶ By contrast, I define theory as a practice of inquiry in which critical distance plays an integral role, thereby shifting the emphasis from “theory” as a body of ideas subject to domestication or in need of constant chastening to “theorizing” as a reflective activity engaged in by ordinary people at particular moments in time. In this way, the particular standpoint at work in all theorizing represents not an inadequacy of the theoretical enterprise but a critical component of it, along the lines suggested by Sheldon Wolin’s description of political theory as a practice of vision inevitably dependent on where the viewer stands.⁴⁷

The focus here is not on the circulation of ideas through concrete contexts but rather on embodied travelers whose sense of self, knowledge, time, and space at once emerges and is transfigured by the doubled mediation between rootedness and distance, familiar and unfamiliar. Tracking subjectivities rather than theories places front and center much that transpires between and below those moments when ideas touch down in different scholarly settings. It suggests, for example, that what Said describes in the passive voice as the “distance traversed” by ideas is often rough terrain negotiated by ordinary people

whose identities are themselves the product of travel and the conduit by which meaning moves and changes from place to place.⁴⁸ But more important for my purposes, the circulation of big ideas through the work of extraordinary thinkers at epoch-making (or profession-establishing) junctures rarely brings alive what I want to call those theoretical moments that erupt erratically in ordinary lives, those less than grand encounters with what is strange and estranging that occasion the translating practices I am arguing are central to theory. Travel narratives that enact these mediations, moreover, enable generations of readers to witness vicariously those instances in which quite ordinary people willingly and unwillingly run up against the disorienting friction between what they think they know and what they do not yet know, and the openings and closures this sometimes explosive tension produces.

Such theoretical moments may or may not ultimately be systematized into a body of knowledge that rises to the level of what most would call theory, and there are examples of both in the chapters that follow. Yet I want to suggest that in themselves such moments are windows onto what Charles Taylor calls "social imaginaries," that is, the "ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."⁴⁹ Both factual and normative, a social imaginary may be informed by and in turn transform intellectual ideas about social reality, yet because of its "indefinite and unlimited nature," it exceeds those explicit doctrines and theories that largely remain "the possession of a small minority."⁵⁰ Understood in these terms, what I am referring to as theoretical moments are not only windows onto social imaginaries in flux but are also crucial instances of the "everyday cultural practice through which the work of imagination is transformed."⁵¹ Whether the imagination transformed is that of the traveler or of the reader, then, such practices are more than quaint exercises in fantasy; they represent those rare moments by which people might not only come to "see differently what has been there all along" but also "conceive of themselves living differently."⁵²

So understood, such "journeys" need not be across vast distances; indeed, depending upon where and how one lives, they might entail simply crossing the street. Moreover, as I will discuss in the concluding chapter, in some instances they may not even require physical movement. If L. P. Hartley is right that "the past is a foreign country," imaginative travel across history, for example, may well involve exposure to what is strange and estranging, a dislocation that can initiate awareness of and reflection on modes of life other than one's own.⁵³ Needless

to say, not all journeys, imaginative or literal, by definition produce enlightenment. In fact, as becomes clear in the chapters that follow, the motivations for travel as well as its consequences are contingent and unpredictable, a complex and mercurial interaction of the personal, political, historical, and institutional at once suggestive of loose patterns and resistant to any attempt to “model” which journeys and conditions will produce or predict a critically reflective or tolerant “attitude.”

Much as the field of political theory is itself organized around rich texts, this inquiry tends, somewhat unavoidably, to privilege those experiences that ultimately issue in written form (although several here originate in oral cultures or were first delivered orally). There is much about the phenomenon of human mobility not captured in writing, and many travelers past and present do not have the education, leisure, or institutional power to produce a written text of what often were and continue to be harrowing experiences of dislocation.⁵⁴ Nevertheless the capacity of written narratives to convey how people see and refashion the world through contrast provides an invaluable window onto the double mediations I am arguing are constitutive of comparative theorizing. This is precisely why the stakes of an investigation of travel narratives from all different directions exceed the matter of simple inclusion: just as the “add-women-and-stir” approach to accommodating questions of gender within political theory avoids interrogation of its constitutive assumptions, the following analyses raise questions about the relationship between how political theory is defined—as an institutionalized discipline, a canon of books, a set of interrogatives, a philosophical genre, or a practice of inquiry—and who may be recognized as theorizing, in what locales, and in which genres.⁵⁵

The genre of Arabic literature known as the *rihla*, a book recounting travels, and particularly those undertaken in pursuit of knowledge (*talab al-ilm*), is an opportunity to explore just these questions. This is not because all Muslim travel is theory, or because all accounts of travel in pursuit of knowledge are by definition reflective or even interesting—wonder is, after all, the “beginning of wisdom [only] when it leads to further thought.”⁵⁶ Rather, as theorizing is, in my view, inherently comparative, and as comparisons entail acts of translation that simultaneously make sense of and distort the unfamiliar, the *rihla* is an occasion to map complex connections among travel, theory, and knowledge rarely developed outside of the confines of Euro-American political thought. Such connections challenge the sequestering of *rihla fi talab al-ilm* (travel in search of knowledge) in fields guarded (sometimes jealously) by specialists of Arabic, Islam, and Middle Eastern history. At the same time, they challenge a definition of theory as a systematic body of knowledge produced by extraordinary thinkers in

epochal moments. Finally and relatedly, they trouble the widespread assumption that political theory is and should be organized around particular Western texts whose canonical status both presupposes and secures the preeminence of the philosophical treatise as the genre most appropriate to the discipline.

Some scholars have recently begun to mine the *rihla* as a treasure trove of political, cultural, and historical knowledge. The following inquiry is intended to build on and complicate such studies, many of which suggest that Muslim travel narratives serve as a lens for regional and historical comparisons and as a vehicle for heightening consciousness of the extent and nature of the *umma* (Islamic community).⁵⁷ Divided by time and region, the *rihlas* I analyze refract the complex, permeable, and constantly shifting contours of membership and community within and beyond the *Dar al-Islam* across history. More specifically, these accounts span several centuries and so make possible a comparative analysis of such journeys in the precolonial and colonial periods, illustrating the ways in which Muslim travel has varied by region and by epoch, often transforming and codifying notions of Islamic heartland and frontier. Indeed, while many scholars of cross-cultural encounters tend to focus on how other people engage with the West, these *rihlas* foreground those journeys in pursuit of knowledge both in lands demarcated as Western and those within *Dar al-Islam*, loosely linked territory which, in its heyday, constituted a transhemispheric Afro-Eurasian civilization in almost continuous intercommunication by way of an extraordinary fluidity of people and knowledge across political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.⁵⁸ The *rihla* thus provides an opportunity to see the ways in which critical reflection as well as narrowness of vision is borne of encounters with multiple Others, where otherness is defined not just against the West but also by regional, racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual, and other differences somewhat closer to home.

In the following chapters, then, I investigate the connections among travel, theory, and knowledge in several representative texts of the *rihla* genre and in several texts regarded as central to Western political thought in which the association among travel, theory, and political wisdom is particularly salient. Each chapter is an attempt to enact as well as argue for these mediations across discipline, genre, history, and culture. Consequently, they are organized thematically rather than chronologically, and pair quite different texts to delineate and then progressively destabilize a series of neat oppositions between, for example, the literary and the historical, political theory and the *rihla*, Islamic and Western travel, and masculine and feminine mobility. As these texts can be productively read both in terms of and against the

grain of these polarities, the point here is not to dispense with such distinctions but rather to suggest that attention to their instability, plasticity, and contingency brings into view all kinds of unexpected commonalities and ruptures.

Chapter 2 is a kind of prelude to the journey, as it adumbrates a conception of theorizing as an inherently comparative enterprise by recuperating the Greek practice of *theôria*, precursor to the English word *theory*, the Islamic emphasis on *talab al-ilm*, and the association between the acquisition of wisdom and the experience of travel both presuppose. This juxtaposition foregrounds an overlapping grammar in which travel becomes a metaphor for and a practice of the pursuit of knowledge about others and oneself by way of literal and imaginative contrasts with seemingly alien lands, peoples, and institutions. Such overlap, I suggest, works as a prism to refract the practice of theorizing across history and culture. As recent work in anthropology, cultural, and postcolonial studies has shown, however, an unqualified emphasis on travel collapses important distinctions between those who can and cannot travel, and those for whom mobility is a matter of survival rather than leisure. In contrast, my particular use of travel is an attempt to ground the acquisition of knowledge in those inescapable, ordinary, transformative if inevitably flawed practices of translation so often occasioned by exposures to the unfamiliar. I will argue that travel in search of knowledge is not only a practice of translation but a *term* of translation,⁵⁹ a conceptual bridge across traditions separated by culture or time in which the link between mobility and wisdom, as well the corruption or loss it risks, are explicit.

In chapter 3, I turn to Herodotus's *Histories* (ca. fifth century bce), for Herodotus provides one of the earliest known uses of the word *theôria* in the ancient West when he describes Solon's journey from Athens. By associating the wisdom for which Solon is famous with his intensive travels, and by characterizing those travels as a *theôria*, Herodotus is a bridge to an understanding of theory as inherently comparative. It is also a bridge to the *Rihla* of Ibn Battuta, the famous fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler whose narrative of his search for knowledge established many of the paradigmatic features of the *rihla* genre. In these terms, Ibn Battuta's travels may be characterized as a *theôria* and the *Histories* a *rihla*. Taken together, these two travelers and texts in many ways serve as templates for the analyses that follow, as they occasion the elaboration of three arguments central to this book. The first is that the association of travel and the pursuit of knowledge is not confined to any particular cultural constellation or epoch. The second is the claim that knowledge about what is unfamiliar and familiar is produced comparatively by way of what I call nested polarities—

for example, between Greek and non-Greek, Sunni and Shi'ite, barbarian and civilized, male and female, Muslim heartland and frontier. These recurring dyads are both plastic and persistent, serving to establish contrasts that alternately distort and enable understanding of what is familiar and unfamiliar. This leads directly to my third argument: the course and consequences of exposures to the unfamiliar are unpredictable, in part because they simultaneously serve to articulate and transform the parameters of home and the foreign, at once occasioning a perspective of critical distance productive of what I have called theoretical moments and enacting sharp closures in which prejudices harden and commitments congeal.

Turning to the nineteenth century, in chapter 4 I juxtapose the virtually contemporaneous journeys of Alexis de Tocqueville to America and an Egyptian by the name of Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, who was on one of the first student missions Muhammad 'Ali sent to Paris. Despite important differences between them, I argue that these two nineteenth-century texts can be characterized as pedagogical *theôriai* (plural of *theôria*) to unfamiliar lands in search of practical wisdom to bring home: al-Tahtawi sought in Paris knowledge of the sciences he saw as integral to the intellectual reawakening and material prosperity of Egypt, and Tocqueville sought in America instruction for France on the risks and rewards of a fully realized democracy. *Democracy in America* and al-Tahtawi's *Rihla* are particularly illuminating for my purposes as they illustrate a series of transhistorical and cross-cultural continuities in the meaning and practice of travel in search of knowledge, while also disclosing several evocative discontinuities. Like Ibn Battuta and Herodotus, for example, both travelers establish their credibility by reference to the authority of autopsy—here in the Greek sense of the word, meaning “seeing first-hand,” and in Arabic *'iyan* (direct observation). Their journeys also illustrate the double-edged nature of travel detailed in chapters 1 and 2, that is, its risks and dangers, as well as its radical unpredictability. To the extent that their later travels became implicated in imperialist projects, these two cases also exemplify the longstanding interplay between travel and domination while illustrating the ways in which this nexus is in some ways distinctively articulated in the nineteenth century.

In chapter 5, I analyze questions of gender and genre through Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), a novel that tells of fictitious Persian travelers to Paris who call themselves “searchers after wisdom,” and the writings of Princess Sayyida Salme bint Sa'id ibn Sultan, a nineteenth-century Arabian princess from East Africa. I argue that both texts destabilize a series of oppositions that not only sustain the coding of travel and travel writing as heroic, masculine, Western, and scien-

tific, but also establish a boundary between those philosophical treatises considered the proper material of political theory and those genres—memoir, novel, *rihla*—largely considered beyond its jurisdiction. More specifically, I argue that the multivocality of the epistolary genre ultimately confounds rather than certifies a series of oppositions between West and East, male mobility and female immobility, domestic and political, novel and theory. The *Memoirs* of Salme, who not only physically traveled from Africa to Europe to the Middle East, but was herself a “translated person,” negotiating multiple worlds, languages, and practices, illuminates the complex experience and multiple mediations occasioned by travel, and can thus be read both with and against the grain of the same binaries Montesquieu’s novel subverts.⁶⁰ In particular, her writings bring into view the reach and limits of comparative theorizing, the political complexity of domestic realms often hidden from view, and the rough and gritty underbelly of what Said has called the “privilege of exile.”

I conclude in chapter 6 by drawing out the implications of the previous chapters for theorists engaged in debates about a “new cosmopolitanism” and the challenges of a world in which identities are not only shaped by particular places and spaces such as nation and culture, but are also subject to the multiple cross-currents, displacements, and exposures created by rapid economic globalization. Theorists engaged in these debates tend to see in the features of the contemporary world an unprecedented level of contact and exchange among peoples and information and, correlatively, a distinct challenge: to rethink the scope and scale of moral and political obligations among human beings whose identities and loyalties are no longer coextensive with the modern nation-state. Yet the chapters in this book demonstrate that the fluidity of identities and boundaries associated with the postcolonial, increasingly globalized world has a long history and is not only the product of the spread of Western cultural and economic power. The travelers and narratives surveyed here thus underscore what is missed in an often overly presentist and culturally narrow debate about appropriate ways of being, acting, and encountering others in a deterritorialized world. More specifically, the Islamic ethos of travel in search of knowledge I trace throughout this book illuminates a genealogy of Muslim cosmopolitanism obscured by such European analytic and temporal frameworks, one woven from a variety of doctrinal sources and all the disparate practices, moments, and ideas that punctuate the history of Islamic societies and continually inform and transform the reimagining of the *umma* (Muslim community) as a moral, political, and even virtual *Oikoumene*.⁶¹

There is no doubt that some kinds of mobility cauterize critical reflection; it is instructive to recall, for example, that medieval chroniclers of what later came to be called the Crusades often referred to such martial excursions as *via* or *iter* (path or journey) or *peregrinatio* (pilgrimage).⁶² It is also clear that direct exposure to what is culturally unfamiliar is just as likely to engender alienation or antagonism as openness. In the concluding chapter, then, I draw out the ways in which these narratives make possible a critical assessment of the expectation that direct exposure to what is strange and estranging is conducive to expansive rather than provincial solidarities and attachments. Taken together, these narratives unintentionally show that direct observation cannot guarantee depth of insight into one's own *nomoi* (customs, laws) or that of others, and that vicarious or imaginative travel does not by definition prohibit it. The kinds of blindnesses that attend physical travel on the one hand and, on the other, the insights available to those who journey imaginatively, suggest that what is crucial to "travel" is not bodily presence but the dislocating character of the encounter. Just as engagement with past theories that are strange and estranging are crucial to what Wolin calls "political initiation" into the complexities of political life and to developing the capacities for reflection, judgment, and exploration, texts that reflect and enact such dislocating mediations between the familiar and unfamiliar can serve as an invaluable resource for those who do not or cannot travel, in part by enabling imagination of and reflection on modes of life other than their own.⁶³

As the following chapters show, juxtapositions of Muslim and European travels, both literal and figurative, point to numerous differences within and across history and culture in the meaning, practice, and narrativization of travel in search of wisdom. Yet they also reveal common patterns where perhaps only difference was expected. In light of the current political purchase of arguments contrasting an insular Islamic civilization with a West characterized by boundless curiosity, perhaps the most important (and seemingly obvious) commonality is that Muslims and Europeans have long compared and understood themselves in terms of a shifting panoply of others. Moreover, whether the subject is Montesquieu's Persians or Ibn Battuta's Sudanese, such journeys, either explicitly fictional or ostensibly factual, often serve less as reliable geographical or anthropological documents of actual places and peoples than as windows onto the dialectical process of acquiring knowledge about others and about one's own cultural and political world. Thus these juxtapositions disclose common mechanisms of translation and mistranslation, transcultural and transhistorical patterns by which both Muslim and European travelers seek and produce

knowledge about others as well as themselves. They make visible the ways in which such knowledge is constituted through shifting sets of nested polarities—us and them, self and other, male and female—that are as much product as premise of a dialectical engagement with shifting terrain.

Such commonalities challenge the presumption that political theory is a field not only produced by but coextensive with the West, one recently reinforced by scholars anxious to secure a certain spirit of intellectual inquiry as a Euro-American possession and establish Islam in particular as the antithesis of critical reflection. At the same time, however, it suggests that despite the legacy of colonialist and imperialist enterprises, the West does not have a monopoly on what Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman have called “imperialist theorizing,” the kind of theorizing that happens when “I observe myself and others like me culturally and in other ways and use that account to give an account of you. In doing this, I remake you in my own image.”⁶⁴ Representational power is an inescapable feature of translation—the women, Shi’ites, and Chinese of Ibn Battuta’s *rihla* no more speak for themselves than did Herodotus’s Egyptians—yet techniques of representation may also be said to constitute the very conditions of intelligibility across difference; they make it possible to locate reverberations between what is unfamiliar and familiar and negotiate the dislocation between rootedness and distance. Using travel as a term of translation, then, makes visible the extent to which the desire for new knowledge, the capacity for critical distance, curiosity about what is strange, and the will to remake another in one’s own image are not the purview of any one cultural constellation or any particular historical epoch.