Travel writing and the construction of a globalized world

Introduction
One of the biggest contemporary debates, in academia as elsewhere, is whether processes of globalization are contributing to a more equal world or not. Underlying this debate is the question of how globalization should be described in the first place. What does it entail? Is it foremost cultural, economic or social? Who is benefiting from it? In other words, globalization is in no way a fact but a much contested buzz word. The only aspect of it that is for certain is the importance it has gained as idea. Globalization is very much a concept in the making, it is still rather open for contestation and redefinitions, which make it fruitful to study. My dissertation will focus on globalization as a discursive construction rather than describing it in terms of actual social and economic processes. My aim is not to answer the question of whether globalization is good or bad, whether it leads to cultural homogenization or not, or even whether there is such a thing as globalization. The aim is instead to look at how various discourses on globalization are created in texts.

In order to do this I have chosen to study texts that fall within the broad genre of travel writing. Texts about travel are always reflections of the culture they originate in as well as narratives about the exotic and faraway. Furthermore, they contain strong reflections of contemporary ambitions and structures of power along with dominant ideas about culture, places and the Other.

To study globalization discourses with a perspective on travel writing is of importance also because travel has become a central metaphor in theories about contemporary society. Many scholars argue that postmodernity has brought those experiences that are typical of travel to our home culture. Zygmunt Bauman argues that travel is the defining characteristic of postmodernity and divides humanity into the unfortunate Vagabonds and the affluent Tourists.¹ According to David Scott, the experience of alienation and identity crisis, that is associated with travel, is available in ones own society.² Other scholars, Anthony Giddens among them, argue that we are now in the constant presence of the foreign, not least through mediation that intersperse our local here and now with images of the far away.³ Dean

² David Scott, *Semiologies of travel – from Gautier to Baudrillard*, New York 2004
³ Anthony Giddens, *Runaway world: how globalization is reshaping our lives*, London 2002
MacCannell claims that tourism and postcolonial immigration are two fundamental developments that are reshaping society. Both of these movements facilitate the intermingling of cultures, while the mechanisms of consumer capitalism are creating an increasingly global market place.

**Travel writing studies**

In the field of travel research, there is a tradition of seeing tourism as the continuation of colonial patterns and as the enactment of colonial dreams. In her article titled “Saying the same old things” Beverley Ann Simmons claims that tourists can create a position of superiority only through a fantasy in which they become imagined colonizers. In her book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Debbie Lisle even claims that colonial nostalgia becomes more important in travel writing as a result of globalization. She claims that “travel writers alleviate the anxieties created by globalization by recalling the assurances of Empire.”

Without denying the obvious presence of colonial nostalgia in tourism and travel writing, I would like to argue that it is not the only discourse available. Instead, ideas about globalization are becoming increasingly prevalent in these texts. These two paradigms do not necessarily contradict each other. Lisle’s thesis is that a new preoccupation with globalization and cosmopolitan subjectivities is much in line with older ideas. At the same time, the emergence of globalization as a much used concept has the potential of restructuring earlier discourses. In their study of a globalization discourse, Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski describe it as a reinscription and recontextualization of power.

In travel writing there are well-established conventions about how the foreign should be encountered, how different regions should be seen and how the subjectivity of the traveller should be constructed. The texts often rely on clear dichotomies such as home/away and self/Other. Within the field of travel writing studies there has been extensive research on how representations of for example Africa have developed over the centuries. What I am interested in is how the concept of globalization fit into these entrenched, often repeated representations.

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and dichotomies. Is a discourse on globalization used to strengthen or challenge Eurocentric world views?

What my study has in common with works such as Lisle’s *The global politics of contemporary travel writing*, is a focus on questions of power. Indeed, to define what globalization is, is an act of power in itself. Lisle’s ambition is to clarify the relation between what she calls a colonial vision and a cosmopolitan vision, which she describes as the two different ways that contemporary texts deal with globalization. The cosmopolitan vision includes an appreciation for cultural difference as well as a cultural sensibility. However, Lisle claims that it is also an expression of new forms of Eurocentrism. The cosmopolitanism that is championed in contemporary travel writing is essentially Western and as such it is just as fraught with power as the colonial vision that precedes it. However, to answer the question of whether travel writing is still Eurocentric or not, or whether travel writers are best described as colonialists or cosmopolitans is not the overall aim of my thesis. In relation to Lisle’s work, and other similar studies, I would like to have a closer look at the discourses created around the concept of globalization, in order to describe the different tropes that go into it.

I have chosen (and will choose) texts that in one way or the other deal with definitions of globalization, to see how the concept is used. In other words, in choosing which texts to study I have allowed the theme to be the guiding principle which is in no way customary. In travel writing studies it is most common to describe, for example, the Swedish representation of a specific destination and how this has evolved during a specified period. This has produced well-known studies such as Margareta Petersson’s *Indien i svenska reseskildringar 1950-1975*. In order to get at a globalization discourse however, I believe a different strategy is needed. I will not put a national discourse in focus and will not focus on the representation of a specific destination as such. Instead I will look at how texts about travel relate to globalization as discourse. How is a globalized world constructed in travel texts that in various ways try to describe and define globalization?

So far I have worked with two texts. The first is a book titled *The Global Soul* written by the American travel writer Pico Iyer. *The Global Soul* is not a book of travel writing in a traditional sense but rather a collection of essays in which Iyer argues that the world has become so interconnected that old definitions of belonging and identity have been overturned.
Iyer offers a plethora of examples that he has encountered during his travels, from constantly mobile business men in Hong Kong to the emergence of Toronto as an immigrant city, but it is his own cosmopolitan existence that serves as the prime example. Although Iyer also discuss the more problematic aspects of globalization his overarching thesis in The Global Soul is the idea that this new condition of globalization has an emancipating force. Through the intermingling of ethnicities, cultures and life styles brought about by an increased mobility, the world could potentially transcend old conflicts and arrive at a new understanding of difference.

The second text is a book by the French travel writer Francois Maspéro, titled Roissy Express - a Journey through the Paris Suburbs. Maspéro, along with his photographer Anaïk Franz, travels with the Regional Express Network from the airport Roissy – Charles de Gaulle toward Paris, with the ambition of leaving the train at every suburban stop. The journey is explicitly an attempt to give attention to the unknown lives of those living in the suburban areas around Paris, in the so called banlieues. It is postcolonial in its attempt to focus on the immigrants living there. However, the journey can also be described in terms of conventional tourism.

In my reading of contemporary travel writing and theoretical texts about globalization I have tried to define tropes and themes that reoccur in discourses on globalization. One such trope is the changing ideas about place, including the emergence of the non-place as a concept in academia and travel texts. Other central tropes are ideas about the changing nature of identity and a preoccupation with hybridity and cosmopolitanism. A third trope that always reoccurs in the discussion about globalization is commercialisation and the spread of global capitalism. In the following, I will briefly describe these and what kinds of questions they evoke in a study of travel writing.

**Place**

The emergence of spatial concepts, such as periphery, border, boundary and margin, in the analysis of culture and power is an academic trend that is fuelled by the discourses on globalization. Geographers talk about a cultural turn in their field, and one could likewise talk about a geographical turn in the study of culture where something that was previously seen as stable entities is questioned. Just as these spatial concepts are increasingly seen as constructed, there is a growing emphasis on the constructed and fluid nature of place. This is of course
central to a study of travel writing since the foremost purpose of texts on travel is to create, rather than merely describe, the foreign places that are encountered. The main question for me is how the creation of places intersects with a discourse on globalization. Does the discourse on globalization alter the way different places are constructed? Or does it alter the very concept of place?

Another spatial concept that has importance in an analysis of travel and globalization is the concept of non-place, coined by anthropologist Marc Augé. Augé defines the non-place as characterized by abstract commerce, solitary individuality and the ephemeral, in comparison to traditional places which are permeated by the memory of the past and by stable human relations. Augé mentions supermarkets and airports as examples of non-places, his foremost example being the transit lounge at Roissy 1 (Charles de Gaulle). Augé’s critique of non-places is similar to the critique of tourism which often sees tourism as creating inauthentic experiences and relations.

Both Iyer and Maspéro work with the notion of non-places and inauthenticity. For Maspéro it is the very reason he decides to tour the suburbs. When the tourist takes the Roissy-Express train from the airport to central Paris, the suburbs that lie in between are reduced to a grey mass of land, to non-places. To leave the train and travel through them is an attempt to acknowledge their existence (and ultimately the existence of the postcolonial immigrants living there). What Maspéro is criticizing is how tourism and other forms of commercial travel restructure places. However, at the same time his text is in no ways innocent in its definition of place. He uses the notion of the suburbs as “hidden” to construct his own traveling subject as an adventurous explorer.

Iyer is discussing the existence of non-places in his description of the airport as a place of anonymous transit and glossy consumerism. Iyer notes how people that are passing through the airport undermine the place by playing out their personal dramas there even though the airport is arranged to discourage displays of intimacy and emotions. The concept of the non-place is very much a part of a globalization discourse as well as a discourse on global capitalism. Augé's prime examples of non-places are the supermarket, a place of commerce,

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and the airport, a place of international transport. The question for me is how the notion of non-places is used in the texts. What are the connotations connected to it?

Augé’s concerns over how commerce and international travel create alienating non-places come together in his description of the international business man as a character of globalization. For Augé’s business man, there is no distinction between home and away. No matter where in the world he is staying at the moment, the homogeneity of accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants, will ensure him that he can navigate any place successfully. He is also perfectly suited to fully take on the consumerist identity offered to him by the non-place. While flying, the business traveler readily answers the invitation to identify himself with the “virile-looking fellow” in the perfume ad of the in-flight magazine. He is, in other words, the implied reader of the inflight magazines and the implied club member of the frequent flier schemes that Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski studies, and as such he is a central character in discourses on globalization. The business man shows up as a character in Iyer’s book, as well as in texts by scholars such as Bauman. The description of the global businessman as one of the characters of globalization brings us to the next trope.

**Identity**

Identities are often seen as changing and becoming more free-floating as a result of globalization processes. Identity is a central theme as well in the study of travel writing. Travel writing is traditionally self-centered narratives in which the outer journey is connected to an inner journey of self-discovery that is facilitated by the encounter with difference. Scholars, not least Edward Said, have commented on how a European identity was created in relation to the European construction of the Orient. Globalization is said to create a whole new set of subjects. In his critique of V.S. Naipaul, Rob Nixon describes Naipaul’s identity as being neither Caribbean, nor European. Instead, Nixon claims that he is best described as being metropolitan. Naipaul on the other hand sees himself as an exile which prompts Nixon to elaborate on the subtle differences between the exile, the émigré, the emigrant and the expatriate. Other central characters are the before mentioned business man and the tourist.

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Pico Iyer’s book has taken its title, *The Global Soul*, from the identity construction that Iyer is championing. For Iyer, his claim to be a Global Soul is very much the raison d’être of his travel writing, or at least of the specific book with the same title. Being a Global Soul is equalled with holding a position from which the world can be experienced and described. Only Global Souls are sufficiently detached from everything to correctly define the world, making them the ideal travel writers. The question of identity figures as well in Maspéro’s book in which he is negotiating his identity as simultaneously insider and outsider. He is an insider because he is travelling in his own country and has extensive knowledge of the region. He is an outsider for two reasons; because of his privileged position in relation to the immigrants and working-class people he is describing, and for being a traveller (or tourist) who by definition has a temporary relation with the destination visited. Maspéro is also discussing his own identity in terms of cosmopolitanism even though it is not explicit. He claims that one of the reasons for him to tour the suburbs is that far away places such as China have been fully explored by earlier travel writers.

The main question that a focus on identities raises is: How is difference and power constructed from the perspective of these new subjectivities?

**Commercialization and semioticization**

Debates about globalization are often centered on the globalization of capitalism, and this connection is especially salient when it comes to the tourist industry. Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski have studied inflight magazines and frequent flier programmes within a project on language and global communication. One central point in their work is their description of the so called “semioticization of culture” in which ideas takes importance over materiality. Increasingly, images and lifestyles are products that can be sold through brands. In frequent flier programmes what the customer buys, along with air miles, is an elite cosmopolitan life style that does not go with any material benefits other than that of extra leg room and non-synthetic blankets. According to them globalization and a cosmopolitan identity has become what they call an identity resource in the construction of an elite traveller and consumer.

The idea of selling images is of course not new to the tourism industry which has always sold desired identities and ideas of places along with hotel rooms and train tickets. However, if one

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11 Thurlow and Jaworski
is to believe the book *Destination Branding*, the ties between tourism and the construction of life styles are of increasing importance. In the introduction to *Destination Branding* the editors write “places are potentially the world’s biggest tourism brands. Choice of holiday destination is a significant lifestyle indicator for today’s aspirational consumers […] as style and status indicators, destinations can offer the same consumer benefits as other more highly branded lifestyle accoutrements such as cars, perfumes, watches and clothes. All are used to communicate, reflect and reinforce associations, statements and group membership […]”.

Since the concept of globalization is increasingly a part of the brand defining efforts of tourism and other commercial activities it is of importance to study it as discourses that are bound up with global capitalism. To get at the commercial aspects of globalization discourses my thought is to study travel magazines such as the Swedish magazine *RES*.

Finally, two other issues that are connected both to globalization discourses and travel writing is difference and mobility. To construct difference in some way is, as many critics have stated, central to travel writing. If travel writers of today choose to embrace the concept of globalization this should change the positions from which difference is defined. A travel writer who defines him/herself as cosmopolitan constructs difference in other ways and from a different point than for example the imperial 19th century traveller. Mobility is, just as the concept of place, increasingly given critical attention. As I wrote above, travel is often seen as being an emblematic condition in contemporary society whether one is physically on the move or not, but attention has also been given to the enormous differences in the circumstances under which one moves. The tourist is a symbol of the privileged, Western traveller whose leisure trips stand in stark contrast to the arduous movements of the immigrants.

In summary, I will study travel writing with a focus on texts that tries to define globalization. My starting point is an analysis of the two texts mentioned above with a perspective on the three tropes that I have mentioned as recurrent in discussions about globalization.

Main question: What are the central tropes of the discourses on globalization as it is constructed in travel writing? How does the construction of globalization discourses challenge or recontextualize conceptions of place, identity, mobility and difference?

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Very tentative disposition:

New conceptions of space:
Non-places
Commercialization of space
Places of transit
The fluidity of space

Francois Maspéro’s *Roissy-Express-a Journey through the Paris Suburbs*

New identities:
The Cosmopolitan
The Global Soul
The Other
The tourist as the emblematic condition of contemporary society

Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul*

Commercialization:
Globalization as sales pitch and identity resource

Travel magazines: *RES* and others
Emilia Ljungberg, text till seminariet den 25/11

References:

**Primary texts:**


**Secondary texts:**


Giddens, Anthony, *Runaway world: how globalisation is reshaping our lives*, London 2002


Morgan, Nigel, Annette Pritchard and Roger Pride, *Destination Branding*, Oxford 2004


Simmons, Beverley Ann, “Saying the same old things”, in Michael Hall and Hazel Tucker, *Tourism and postcolonialism*, New York 2004
