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Postcolonial Pictures

Examining the Penguin edition book covers
of Paul Theroux's travel writing through
a visual social semiotic lens.

Rhian Waller

Abstract Travel literature, Paul Theroux writes, “moves from journalism to fiction, arriving [...] at autobiography” (2008: 332). Perhaps because of this hybridity, travel writing is an enduring genre, and its texts are subject to fertile academic interpretation and re-interpretation. However, less attention has been given to the paratextual elements of the travel book. Book covers play a key role in establishing the nature and context of a written work. They operate as visual social semiotic forms, comprising textual and visual signifiers that stand “for an object or concept” (Moriarty, 2011: 228). The argument here is the resulting signs may encode meanings beyond the commercial purpose of the book cover. Semiotic analysis is therefore applied to the covers of Paul Theroux's novel-length travel books. It is argued the Penguin book covers that feature on editions released over the last 40 years frequently include covert signifiers of unequal power relationships between western travellers and the peoples and cultures they encounter.

Keywords Travel literature, colonialism, cover images, paratext, semiotics, Paul Theroux

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Introduction

According to Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiology, gestures and spoken or written words are signifiers. These become meaningful when linked to a signified concept, creating a sign. The social elements of this linguistic work were incorporated into the related branch of semiotic theory, which was further developed to encompass images and other signs by theorists such as Barthes (1964). However, the seeds of visual semiotics are present in de Saussure's earlier work; in his explanation of the relationship between the sign (the word "tree"), the signifier (the sound of the word "tree") and the signified (the tree-as-object), de Saussure uses a diagram; a referent to the concept of a tree (see de Saussure, 2006: 105). This is somewhat fitting; arboreal images frequently feature on travel book covers, and not necessarily to neutral effect.

The relationship between sign, signifier and signified is seldom as simple or arbitrary as in the example given by de Saussure. Meaning may be actively created or passively acquired. It evolves, it elides, it osmoses by association, and it is sometimes assigned to an unwilling subject. With this in mind, this article will use a postcolonial lens in an attempt to peel back the layers of what is signified by the front covers of Paul Theroux's travel non-fiction.

US-born writer Paul Theroux is a prolific author, but despite his popularity, his work has received relatively little academic attention, and there is virtually no discussion of how his non-fiction is packaged in a visual form. He has been an active travel writer for well over 45 years, and his travels have spanned every populated continent.

Theroux's bibliography includes twenty-one non-fiction books and twenty-eight novels, as well as collections of short stories and articles. He won the 1978 Whitbread Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1981, his literature has been translated into multiple languages, and his novel *Mosquito Coast* (1982) was adapted into a film of the same name (Wier, Schrader, Theroux and Hellman, 1986). Pickering (2015) describes him as *the* eminent travel writer of his generation, and he is still active at the time of writing. Pragmatism dictates this analysis will be restricted to selected factual works published between *The Great Railway Bazaar* (first published in 1975) to *On the Plain of Snakes* (2019).

The focus is on the novel-length Penguin editions, widely sold over the last four decades. Penguin, founded in 1935, is a major publisher in the UK. Its founding principal was to provide mass-market paperbacks that would be affordable to the general population. It has been noted as a key player in the cultural and literary history of the UK (Joicey, 1993). Following its transatlantic merger with Random House in 2013, Penguin Random House has become the biggest publisher in the world.

This article includes a contextual section which sets out the overall aims of the study, including a discussion of how semiotic analysis relates to book covers, and the purpose and practice of book cover design. A second section briefly outlines debates around travel literature, followed by an explanation of methodology. The main body of the article is given over to an analysis of post-1980s Penguin editions of Paul Theroux's work, followed by a brief discussion of how the texts concur with or diverge from the cover matter and finally a conclusion.

Book Covers and Semiotics

The idiom 'don't judge a book by its cover' is hopelessly out-dated; designers spend a great deal



of time ensuring a cover is commercially palatable and has ‘shelf appeal’, often by foregrounding images that are engaging and aesthetically-pleasing. It is likely members of a publishing team, however carefully they assemble the elements of a book cover, operate on a basis of the “gut” feeling articulated by Harrison (2003). Some images will be instinctively understood to ‘work’, while others will not. The main drivers for aesthetic choices in cover design revolve around marketing, as the cover has become a powerful and increasingly sophisticated promotional tool (Drew and Sternberger, 2005). The book cover is a multimodal semiotic artefact that utilises a “tight coupling” (Horn, 1999: 27) of textual and image-based signifiers. In other words, paratextual features such as a title, subtitle, logo and cover quotes couple with the main image, frequently a photograph or artwork, to form a macro-sign. The title contextualises the image, while the image supports the title. These integral signifiers, therefore, can be viewed individually and as part of a whole.

Genette describes the role of these elements, particularly title and subtitle text, as to “designate, to indicate subject matter, to tempt the public” (2009: 76). Although considered the least significant functions by Genette, the latter two are key concern here.

In terms of indication and temptation, what is *supposed* to be signified by the cover is the book-as-product, and, by extension, the implied quality, desirability and distinctiveness of that product, as well as an indication of content. Sonzogni (2011) describes this as an act of “visual translation”, wherein the narrative is reinterpreted into image-signs. Cover appeal is, to a degree, culturally determined. As Salmani and Eghtesadi point out, just as the text of a translated book undergoes adjustment to fit the “social and ideological factors [...] dominant in the target society”, the cover will likewise be adjusted (2015). These social and ideological factors are present at the design stage of first publication — the process of translation only renders these phenomena more visible.

The profit imperative may drive graphic and aesthetic choices, but the resulting images carry more meaning than the intended commercial signification. As Kress and van Leeuwen note, “meanings belong to culture, rather than specific semiotic modes” (2006: 3), and, likewise, visual language, too, is “culturally specific” (p.4) and encodes “cultural values” (Kourdis, 2013). With this in mind, it is possible the commercial and western context of particular book cover design may lead to aspects of neoliberal capitalist ideology, as well as cultural stereotypes and clichés, being encoded in the cover itself. A book’s cover and content are not objective mirrors of reality, or even straightforward subjective records of what the traveller observes. Instead, they are intensely multi-subjective, as they are assembled by the artist(s) or photographer and graphic designer(s) subject to multiple level of oversight through the publishing hierarchy, and they are intended to reflect the text and its subjectivities. Any visual semiotic analysis must pivot on this understanding.

The Politics of Travel Writing and Postcolonialism: A Very Brief Overview

Travel writing, by its nature, depends on the author encoding and the reader decoding cross-cultural signs, which opens up multiple avenues of understanding. As a result, signs encoded by the author may be interpreted in various ways; some meanings are understood by broad audiences, while others may be buried. Covert subjectivities, as when a writer encodes their subtle colonialist views, can be problematic, but, because of their embedded nature, the signified meanings



may not be recognised *as* subjective. Chandler argues “we become so used to such conventions in our use of various media that they seem ‘natural’”, therefore disguising the “conventional nature” (2002: 215) of culturally determined views.

Travel writing traditionally replicated and, arguably, compounded societal inequalities and colonial attitudes. It was, for instance, originally “a man’s genre, written for and by men” (McAdams, 2014). Blanton points out early travel writers had a tendency to “carry with them the unexamined values and norms of their own culture and to judge foreign cultures in light of those habits of belief [...] establishing a kind of control over them” (2013: 8). Thompson notes the “patrician” tendencies of travel writers whose “freedom to roam the globe was [...] predicated to some extent on the privileges accruing from their social standing” (2011: 59). The privilege that facilitates the travel writer’s movements may run alongside a corresponding de-privileging of the host culture by reducing subjects to stereotype through “sweeping judgements” (Thompson, 2011: 90) or by encoding discriminatory racial and cultural messages, where a place or people is diminished, Othered and limited “to the role of props” (Achebe, 1990: 124). Orientalism (Said, 1978) and similarly problematic depictions of Africa (Youngs, 1994), wherein Asian and African cultures and people are constructed in text and images as alien, savage and inferior, are both symptoms and mechanisms of this process.

The aspects of Victorian travel writing that support colonialism and western expansionism is discussed in detail by Pratt (2008), who picks apart the written subjectivities of “mastery”, some of which persist into the 20th century. Blanton is more generous toward contemporary travel writing, “where values are discovered, not imported [...] where other cultures can have their say” (2013: 29).

Duffy and Mangharam question the application of postcolonial analysis to modern travel writing, arguing that, as economies such as China take on roles of global dominance, new power dynamics are emerging. However, they acknowledge touristic travel reproduces the “dominance/subordination of the visitor-host relationship” (2017). It is important to note travel writing and visual art carried out within a postcolonial setting may be “informed by imperialist attitudes and ideologies” (Thompson, 2011: 136), as cultural attitudes persist long after the structures and institutions that rely upon and uphold them crumble. Furthermore, artefacts that support ‘soft power’ and neo-colonialism may emerge as Western economies attempt to sustain “political and economic dominance over the rest of the world” (Thompson, 2011: 136). Increasing global competition may in fact encourage writers and ideologues to fall into problematic patterns of discourse.

This ideological encoding may not be conscious or intentional, and it may not be direct. Signs do not operate in isolation. Images and text are comprised of collections of signifiers, so meaning is subject to diffusion, wherein close proximity between concepts results in a bleed-over. For instance, Jacobs (2014) argues that due to repeated association between the sign “school violence” and particular attacking behaviours, the phrase has come to be associated almost exclusively with physical violence, which minimises and ignores other forms of violence. Likewise, Lido (2006) and Dietrich et al (2006) illustrate how readers presented with a story that mentions particular people with mental illness or asylum seeker status engaging in negative activities are more likely to perceive all mentally ill people or asylum seekers as a source of higher risk, despite compelling statistical evidence that this is inaccurate.



These phenomena occur when there is little reliable evidence to support the narrative and even when the link is not explicitly causal. This diffusion of meaning is likely to occur in travel writing and cover images, which share commonalities with journalism and photojournalism, affecting audience perceptions of the cultures and peoples depicted. However, as Stasch points out, “images are more foundationally representations of the culture of the photograph makers and viewers than of the culture [of those depicted]” (2011). This analysis, therefore, will focus on making visible the implicit aspects of these representations, bearing in mind that these photographs are selected and processed by the publishing company, and therefore may be framed in ways the photographer may not have intended.

Once embedded, semiotic associations are difficult to shift. Travel literature and photography, which both construct and carry meaning, might represent a reader’s first or most enduring introduction to a new culture or land. In lieu of direct experience, travel artefacts provide the reader with visual references and narrative frameworks that mediate otherwise unknown places and populations. These artefacts are therefore in a prime position to create, exacerbate or challenge existing semiotic associations, and, by doing so, forge, strengthen or break down colonial discourses.

Methodology

Despite their ubiquity, there are few semiotic analyses based specifically on book covers, although the work of Genette is instructive (2009). This, and the work of theorists who have analysed semiotic coding in other, text-adjacent visual mediums, will be utilised here. For instance, Parameswaran (2015) unpacks how animal images are used to represent India on magazine and non-fiction book covers, drawing out convincing arguments about race, racism and postcolonial history. Likewise, Oswald (2012) and Harrison (2002) apply visual semiotic methodologies to advertising artefacts. These texts provide a model for the following analysis. A framework, based on Parameswaran’s focus on specific imagery (tigers and elephants) and Hu, Zelenko, Pinxit and Buys’ (2019) practice of breaking down artefacts into visual criteria, is employed to categorise the book covers according to their main criterial aspects.

As the background photograph and title are dominant features of the book covers, their content and signified meanings are given precedence. Book titles are analysed word-by-word, and as complete phrases, and the resonance of each word and phrase is examined against existing academic discussions of possible signified meanings, with a particular emphasis on post-colonial critical discussion.

Cover images are evaluated to establish what objects and subjects are visible, and how these objects and subjects are placed in the overall composition of the image and in relation to the viewer. These are disaggregated in line with Hammerich and Harrison’s semiotic categories of “icon”, “index” and “symbol” (2002). The icon category includes those images that resemble an existing conception of what is represented, e.g., a photograph. Icons sit in contrast to “index” images which bear no similarity to what is signified, but operate due to a recognised relationship between sign and signified (Harrison 2003), e.g., the cover indexes the contents of a book, due to the established relationship between cover and text, and to symbols, which gain meaning from convention rather than visual similarity or an established relationship. This system of categorisation is useful but not mutually exclusive; a sign may simultaneously fulfil any combination of roles as icon, index and symbol. For instance, the cover of *Dark Star Safari*



(2002) is an icon-sign of several elements, including a train, a forest and a rising (or setting) sun. It also acts as an index-sign for the contained narrative, and as a symbolic-sign for the act of journeying, travel, human movement and Africa as a conceptual space and geopolitical entity. The unstable and culturally dependent status of index and symbolic signs makes them fertile ground for cross-association and subjective interpretation. For instance, the colour red (as in the title font of *Deep South*, 2019) signifies danger and is a sign of warning to western viewers. However, in some Asian cultures, red is a sign of good luck (Burrows, 2016). Like the meanings embedded in the individual words of book titles, key objects of symbolic significance (trains, buildings, bodies) are singled out for further discussion.

A new category is also created to operationalise Harrison's notion of "interpersonal metafunction" in order to look at what is *not* present, as well as what is depicted. When discussing representational metafunctions (what the image is about, whether it shows people, places, objects and narrative links between objects), Harrison (2002) argues that the interpersonal metafunction of an image is one of its most important signified concepts. The viewer is invited to form a parasocial relationship with the represented human subject(s) in particular ways; an image of a father holding a baby, for instance, may be designed to evoke tenderness, sympathy and recognition of shared humanity.

The covers of the most recent Penguin editions can roughly be categorised by the proximity or absence of human figures. The No Interpersonal Metafunction set (NIM), includes those covers where humans are entirely absent. In contrast, the Distant Interpersonal Metafunction (DIM) set incorporates wide shots that place people in the "far social distance" and "public distance" (Harrison, 2002). Subjects in this set are far enough from the 'position' of the viewer that their expressions and facial features are difficult to distinguish, but close enough that their body language is visible. Finally, the Close Interpersonal Metafunction (CIM) is comprised of those books that feature medium-close and close-up images, such as portraits, which allow for a simulated interpersonal relationship to be established between subject and viewer. These categories interlink with Dann's conceptualisation of "people zones", which features in his semiotic analysis of how native peoples are depicted in relation to travellers, which will be expanded on below (Dann, 1996).

As an example, the categorisation and broad-strokes analysis of one book cover looks like this: [see Fig. 2].

The categorisation of these images will enable comparisons to be made between subjects and locations. Locations are particularly important, as the book covers will be grouped according to the geographies and societies they depict. Any commonalities detected in those book covers that depict cultures traditionally assumed to be 'subaltern' will be discussed, as well as any divergence from those covers that show developed, Western environments.

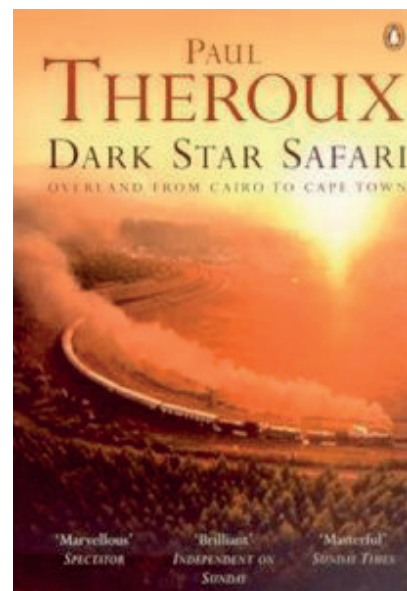


Fig 1: *Dark Star Safari*
(Theroux, 2002)

Image criteria	Icon meanings	Index meanings	Symbolic meanings
Background photograph	Landscape	Indexes book content and setting	Accuracy, realism, 'reality'
Natural environment	Forest	Forest interior, plant life, lumber, natural resources, biome, animal life	Wilderness, nature, isolation, the natural, growth, life, the state of being lost. Antitheses: the unnatural, civilisation, cultivation, control over nature
	Setting/rising sun	Night/day, warmth/cold, light	The passing of time, endings/beginnings, impending obscurity/illumination, revelation/concealment, birth/death, liminality
Human technology	Train	Travel, transport, industry, related sensory experiences (scent, sound), vector of human movement, speed	Development, human ingenuity, accessibility, colonial projects, industrial progress, adjacent: sexuality, penetration, paradoxical modernity/nostalgia, mobility (social as well as physical), pathmaking/waymaking, the permeation, traversing and taming of space and place
Human architecture and products	Train tracks, smoke	As above. Additional: pollution, pace, air, wind resistance	Additional: markers of presence, permanent occupation, impact on environment
	Possibly depicts settlement in background, but this is indistinct due to lack of focus		Inconclusive. Permanent settlement de-prioritised.
Human subjects	None (NIM set). Interpersonal metafunction absent (Harrison, 2002)		Uninhabited land, terra nullius, "Paradise Contrived" (Dann, 1996)
Penguin logo	A penguin (cartoon, stylised)	Penguin company, other Penguin products	Brand identity, history of company, literary significance, brand mythology
Textual criteria			
Author name	Identifies Paul Theroux	Cultural associations with anglophone name	Author salience (prominent type)
Book title	Dark	Night (close-coupling with sunset motif)	Darkness, obscurity, associations with colonial notions of "darkest Africa"
	Star	Night (close-coupling with sunset motif)	Paradox (a dark star?), light, illumination. Given negative valence by previous adjective
	Safari	Travel, leisure, movement, animal life, landscape	Adventure, exploration, discovery, controlled encounters with the unusual, the dangerous
Subtitle	Identifies place and mode of travel (Africa, overland)	Indexical associations with the African continent, e.g., foods, musics, languages, tourism images	Africa-as-symbol based on viewer associations
Publicity quotes	"Marvelous" - Spectator, "Brilliant" - The Independent, "Masterful" - Sunday Times	Indexes supposed quality of product. (Masterful in particular is an interesting descriptor, implying mastery, connoting control over medium and subject).	Forges symbolic association with other brands and their values and status (brand association)

Fig 2: Table showing broad-strokes analysis of *Dark Star Safari* (Theroux, 2002).

Analysis: Empty Lands and Terra Nullius

It is clear the Penguin covers of Theroux's books display a cohesive visual language. They signify, in their use of photographs, a form of verisimilitude, in contrast with the stylised and cartoonish artwork of books like *Notes from a Small Island* (Bryson, 2015) and *Neither Here, Nor There: Travels in Europe* (Bryson, 2015), also published by Penguin through an imprint. This aesthetic decision is tied to textual content; the latter titles trade on openly humorous tones. Caricature, therefore, is appropriate. It is less apt for Theroux's work, which is more inclined toward sustained seriousness.

Shapiro hints at the discursive power of photography when he writes: "*it is thought to be an unmediated simulacrum*" (1988, my emphasis), arguing it is viewed as a more authoritative and 'real' mode of visual communication than alternative forms. Spreading awareness of digital photo-manipulation may have weakened this perception over the last thirty years (see Gunning, 2004), but the crucial aspect here is evident in Shapiro's use of modifiers. The 'truth' of any



photograph is a mediated truth. Photography is a process of selective creation; the photographer exerts considerable control over the depicted environment and, from there, the book designer exerts further control over the selection and presentation of the photograph. As Lemke suggests, this selection process takes place in a context of “what might have been” (1990: 188). In every case, the background photograph is chosen in lieu of a thousand-and-one other possible images.

The written signifier of Theroux’s name is prominent, rendered in large font over the cover image and often above the title. This foregrounding constructs an impression of the author’s salience, both as a commercial entity and as a creative force. This suggests Thompson is correct when he states it is “assumed that we will find the author [...] as interesting as the place they are visiting” (2011: 15). This is Theroux as a brand, and the prominence of his name signifies the individual travel books are part of a cohesive oeuvre. However, none of the covers seek to create a direct author-to-reader interpersonal (parasocial) relationship, for instance by simulating direct eye contact between subject and viewer, as per Harrison (2002). Instead, the composition of the photograph places the viewer in the perspective of the solo traveller; this implies we, through reading, will undertake the journey *as* a traveller, rather than, as is the case, following Theroux through his subjective narrative.

“Travel,” writes Theroux, in *On the Plain of Snakes* (2019), “is less about landscapes than about people” (2019: 304), but, in a stark divergence from this, the Penguin front covers often erase the human element, featuring images that are overwhelmingly concerned with landscape. Human figures are frequently distant, or, unlike the author, who is represented through written signs, rendered entirely invisible. This is by no means universal practice in writing that explores cultural difference: the 2004 edition of *Maps and Dreams* (Brody), features an intimate portrait of an indigenous person, the close up shot revealing age lines, clothing, hair and a richly expressive face, signifies the subject’s embodied humanity and lived experience, and establishing “emotive meaning” (Feng and O’Halloran, 2012). Nor do all editions of Theroux’s books conform to this pattern; the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of *On the Plain of Snakes* features an image of the author (2019), while the Mariner Books edition of *Dark Star Safari* (2004) depicts a group of people in the middle-distance.

In contrast, the Penguin covers of Theroux’s books do not attempt this. Thus, the people of Mexico (*On the Plain of Snakes*, 2019), Patagonia (*The Old Patagonian Express*, 2008) the African Continent (*Dark Star Safari*, 2002, *Last Train to Zona Verde*, 2014), Asia (*Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, 2009), *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (2012) and the southern states of the USA (*Deep South*, 2015) do not appear. Iconic animal figures are entirely absent, unlike the evocative tigers and elephants analysed in Parameswaran’s work. Flora, rather than fauna, is a dominant motif, while technology implies but also obscures human presence. Most of the covers include a sub-heading that identifies the travel destination, or the place featured in the cover photograph. *On the Plain of Snakes* (2019) is subtitled “A Mexican Road Trip”, while *Riding the Iron Rooster* (2011) is subtitled “By Train through China”. Therefore, viewers do not necessarily need to utilise information from within the body text of the book to identify the region represented on the cover.

The covers of *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train Through China* (2011), *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (2011), *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (2008) and *The Kingdom by the Sea: A Journey Around the Coast of Great Britain* (1984)

include distant figures and constitute the Distant Interpersonal Metafunction set (DIM). The sole Penguin book cover published in the last 30 years to offer a close-up, clearly interpersonal image is the 1992 edition of *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific*. This is the only example of Close Interpersonal Metafunction (CIM).

It is tempting to identify a colonial dimension to these aesthetic choices, which echo Pratt's identification of "promontory descriptions" and the "estheticis[ing]" of landscapes "discovered" by the imperialist explorer (198-199, 2007). Some of these regions consist of developing economies, where the lives of inhabitants are shaped in sharp contrast to (and also by) the comparative social and geographic mobility and economic power of powerful westerners. Residents may face barriers that restrict their movements and their quality of life. Theroux and his subjects are alert to this imbalance. For instance, one interviewee bitterly observes: "All Canadians[...] Gringos, gringos, gringos[...] Arabians[...] But if a Mexican wants to go to their country — hah!" (2019: 197). Theroux writes about the complex and intersecting histories and cultures within Mexico, noting the densely populated cities, the multiplicity of languages, foodstuffs, religious practices and personal perspectives. And yet, the cover and title of *On the Plain of Snakes* signifies unoccupied wilderness rather than urban space or a contended borderland.

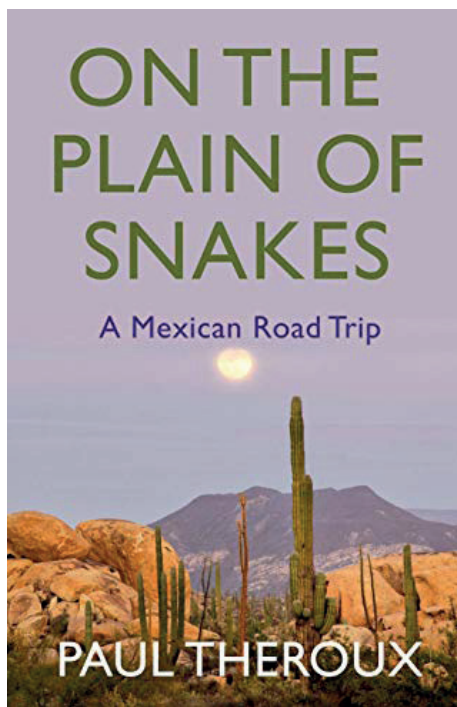


Fig 3: *On the Plain of Snakes*
(Theroux, 2019)

by desert, an image that signifies isolation, danger, primitivism and extremes of nature. In contrast, western environments, as in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, are signified by locations shaped by human activity: picturesque beach huts are set in an orderly line, their shapes symmetrical and their exteriors painted white with colourful accents. *Pillars of Hercules* includes shore-side buildings.

The desert image foregrounds cactus and wind-smoothed yellow stone, purpling mountains sit in the middle-distance below a lilac sky lit by a cloud-fogged sun. The composition of the image frames this as a space for the traveller to move into, as unclaimed territory, and this carries uncomfortable echoes of frontier narratives and the myth of the empty New World. It is a "Mexico [...] reduced to stereotypes" (Theroux, 2019: 151), and it erases already disadvantaged peoples from the visual narrative. The semiotics of absence are powerful; the myth of terra nullius ("land of no one"), fed into manifest destiny, an ideology of white western supremacy that, in part, fuelled the colonisation of North America (Dodge, 2013). This ideology was used to justify mass slavery and indigenous genocide, and is still deployed today to defend aggressive economic intervention and land-annexation in Africa by the global north (Giesler, 2015; Makki, 2011). In this case, the cover image operates both as synecdoche for the far larger and more varied geography of Mexico, and also as a reductive metonym, wherein a multifaceted country and culture are symbolised



The cover of *Deep South*, which sits within the NIM set, incorporates a derelict shop front. The implication is, in contrast with Africa, Mesoamerica and Asia, European and North American environments are occupied, stamped with permanent architectural reminders of the resident culture.

Analysis: Engines and Elegies

Several covers feature the sign of a train passing through an environment. The cover of *Last Train to Zona Verde* (2014) displays a locomotive in silhouette, while *Dark Star Safari* (2002) depicts a train curving through a shadowy, half-lit forest. *The Old Patagonian Express* shows the eponymous vehicle surrounded by a forest in daylight. The photographs are all taken from a distant perspective, again foregrounding an expanse of wilderness. In contrast, the cover image of *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* (2012) takes a closer perspective that emphasizes the bulk of the machinery. The first three conform to what Kress and van Leeuwen term the “action image” (2006). Though the image is an abstract, static snapshot of fleeting reality, the vector of the trains suggests travel across the landscape and, effectively, across the page. These images signify movement and an obvious juxtaposition of technology and nature.

Here, the presence of humanity is implied but not shown; transportation and technology acts as an indexical link: where there is a moving train, there may be passengers. Therefore, human presence is questionable and any people ‘present’ are in a state of transit. Indigenous and other resident peoples are absent. The forest takes on a parallel role to the Mexican desert-scape; though, this time, the photograph positions the viewer as witness to both wilderness and movement through the wilderness. This, again, has colonial connotations. The railway and train are examples of complex, and contradictory, multi-layered signs. On one hand, the image of the train is rooted in strong associations with white, western technological ascendancy and modernity. The invention and expansion of rail travel in the 19th century shifted “perceptions of geography and the globe itself” (Papalas, 2015), tightening the world and offering access to otherwise remote regions. The train signifies a particularly masculine, muscular technological vision, evoking speed, power, penetration and “colonial acquisitiveness” (Jones, 2018). As a form of mass transit, it indexes notions of class, contrasting the stateliness of the first class experience with poverty, evoked by images of packed compartments and roof-riding passengers.

Yet, despite the early vision of the locomotive as a symbol of white, European-American rationalism, progress and imperialism, the train has been co-opted and re-imagined; McCombe (2011) notes how the USA railroad offered “cross-racial identification”, cultural transportation, employment opportunities and escape for disenfranchised black people (although he expresses ambivalence on this front), while Jones notes the deconstruction “of the train as a white ‘tool of civilization’” by Soweto poets, who expose the “absurdities of the apartheid system while simultaneously making train and train station sites of everyday black activity” (2015). In *Deep South*, (2015), Theroux himself acknowledges the levelling possibilities of rail travel. Despite this, in the case of the Penguin book covers, these competing and paradoxical symbolic associations are sublimated; the iconic sign of the train-as-transport predominates, and its indexing of architecture and infrastructure as a function of colonialism is cemented by Theroux’s writing when he discusses the “muscular” nature of train travel (2008: 167) and describes “the usual municipal preoccupations of a colonizing power — road mending, drainage, or permanent



buildings” (2008: 280). Trains and western-style architecture are clearly recognized within the text as hallmarks of colonialism, and the cover therefore fits the text.

At the same time, travel writing — in common with travel and tourism advertising — trades on the ideal of unspoilt nature, utilising images that signify a “paradise on earth” (Kra- vanja, 2012) and “Edenic narratives” (Kneas, 2016) that minimise the impact of tourism on those landscapes. This is “paradise contrived” (Dann, 1996), an image of natural, idealised, uninhabited space. Of course, paradise contrived is anything but natural; it is constructed from carefully sculpted signifiers that fetishize the natural world while obscuring the distortions of tourism, industry and the “brute force technology” (Josephson, 2002) the traveller is likely to encounter on their way to ‘paradise’.

Frye argues the travel book functions as a picaresque or elegiac/pastoral “quest romance” (1973, 209). Both of these modes are signified by the cover image and titles of Theroux’s books. While linked with the industrial and post-pioneering aspects of colonialism, the repeated use of train imagery may also evoke nostalgia, argues Papalas (2015), having been superseded by other modes of travel. It would be a stretch to suggest that these images symbolise or are calculated to communicate nostalgia for colonialism itself, but there is a throwback element to both the mode of travel and the way the journey is linguistically mediated. Hints of risk, danger and darkness are evident in key textual signifiers: “snakes”, “ghost”, “dark star”, which hint at both classic adventure narratives, with their exoticisation and elements of the fantastic. Repeated use of the word “safari”, originally a word for ‘travel’ in Arabic-influenced Swahili etymology, has come, in the west, to signify exploration, observation and discovery, but also entertainment, a packaging of close but controlled encounters with nature. This highlights a paradox: these locations and journeys are portrayed as wild, possessing animalistic or supernatural properties, but they are safely contained for the benefit of the reader.

The title of *Last Train to Zona Verde* (2014) has elegiac overtones; ‘the last [noun]’ is a title trope that frequently occurs in narratives that valorise the past. By utilising these textual signifiers and by pictorially displaying a simplified vision of Mexico-as-wilderness, the East-as-wilderness and Africa-as-wilderness, the covers act both as calls to adventure and as invitations to “[seek] out the vestiges of a vanishing way of life, or a culture perceived as less complex and less stressful than the traveller’s own” (Thompson, 2001, 17). The latter, in reality, is a selective over-simplification of the host culture; rural and urban life is neither simple nor easy, and nor are the experiences of residents, indigenous people and immigrants.

Analysis: Human Absence and Activity

Those books that do depict human subjects also fall into subtle patterns that echo the binaries of dominance/subservience and imperial/subaltern. For instance, those that delve into developed and more affluent western settings are more likely to feature holidaymakers than those that focus on developing economies. These fall into the Distant Interpersonal Metafunction (DIM) set, as the subjects’ faces are often obscured, but there is clear signification of human presence, though the connection between human subject and viewer is weak. Half of these covers feature westernised economies: *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (2011) and *The Kingdom by the Sea: A Journey Around the Coast of Great Britain* (1984). The figures in these images are engaged in leisure activities and are found lounging on beaches.



In contrast, the figures that adorn *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train Through China* (2011) and *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (2008) are engaged in toil or travel. In the former case, a worker labours, bent-backed, in a paddy field. In the case of *The Great Railway Bazaar*, the 1995 edition depicts a turban-wearing rail worker and a conductor in a white hat, while the Penguin modern classics version (2008) shows passengers massing on a platform, and at least one vendor selling items from cart. This is a consistent pattern; people with dark-skinned bodies are depicted at work, observed and documented by the white traveller who transforms lives and labour into a form of entertainment. White, or light, bodies are depicted in leisure or repose, reflecting the privileged position of the white westerner in general. This position is underscored by the corresponding book titles — Britain is a “kingdom”, while the Mediterranean is described in terms of Ancient Greek myth, signifying both Herculean strength and early civilisation.

While the DIM covers show aesthetically pleasing, idealised scenes, with no obvious signifiers of poverty, conflict or industry (aside, perhaps, from fishing and tourism), they encode an imbalance between subjects. White westerners appear as individuals, as separate bodies, at rest and play. In contrast, it is difficult to distinguish between commuters, workers and leisure-focused passengers on the covers of *The Great Railway Bazaar*. We are presented with an “undifferentiated mass of humanity” which recalls the content of early colonial travel writing (Thompson, 2011: 140). The faces are shadowed and indistinct, the colours muddled, the sepia light suggestive of nostalgia. In this case, the viewer is an individual, but the viewed subjects are a not always afforded discrete identities. The tendency toward selective de-individualisation is echoed in the text. In *Kingdom by the Sea*, Theroux writes: “You read one book about China and you think you’ve got a good idea of the place; you read twenty books about Britain, even *English Traits* and *Rural Rides*, and you know you haven’t got the slightest” (1984: 13). Thus, cultures and societies depicted by outsiders fall — or are forced — into a limiting set of meanings and identities. The society that writes itself and depicts itself is freer to signify complexity, specificity, individuality and plurality. Theroux’s “good idea of place” is, in fact, a poorer idea of place.

Deep South (2015) bears the only cover in the No Interpersonal Metafunction (NIM) set to represent a space in a dominant economy, in this case the USA. This cover features iconic images of battered buildings and boarded-up windows which act as indexes for abandonment and economic failure. If the shops were in use, this might be an example of “paradise controlled” (Dann, 1996), where natives are depicted as vendors in service to the traveller, but their absence signifies this is no paradise at all. The title, *Deep South*, is suggestive. Like “darkest Africa”, it is a pre-existing but unofficial appellation. The connotations might be less obviously problematic than the latter phrase which Theroux, in his later work, recognises as a “demeaning African epithet” (2013: 29), but it may not be an entirely coincidental choice of descriptor. In addition to signifying immersion, *deep* implies a nadir; from here one must ascend to reach a normative status.

Deep South bears the example of text integral to the photograph: a sign that reads “PAS-TIME”. This phrase is rich in meaning; it alludes to the purpose of the building as a site of leisure, but also to a temporal paradox. The south, Theroux reveals in his text, is in many ways locked into its history of segregation, of antebellum slavery and is detached from progress by



relative poverty. It is clear several of Theroux's subjects mourn the passing of some aspects of southern history, glamourising and fetishizing antebellum architecture and class structure. Others struggle with the legacy of colonialism, experiencing generational poverty rooted in segregation and the slave trade. The reflection of the "PASTIME" sign in a puddle seems to hint at this: the past is not "dead, nor past" (Theroux, 2015: 79), it can be reflected and distorted. The drama of difference, here, is not based on exposing an audience to Othered and exotic nationalities, cultures and races, but on tension between Theroux's (and his imaginary readers') comparatively privileged experience and the experiences of their economically disenfranchised neighbours. The viewer, again positioned by the photograph as a traveller, is placed in a privileged position; they can choose to explore or escape these signs of poverty. The subjects encountered in the text cannot. And, like the inhabitants of Africa and Mexico, the dispossessed of the US south are rendered invisible.

It is interesting that, set beside narratives about Africa, Mexico and rural China, the USA, a nation suffused with myths of social mobility and economic power is depicted most directly as depressed, derelict and damaged. The foregrounding of North American poverty signifies the disruption of the American Dream and neo-liberal capitalist ideologies, and provides an introduction to a travelogue that shows a more nuanced, intersectional view of dominance and subordination and takes into account race, class, intra-cultural inequalities and internal politics. While the NIM and DIM covers uphold colonial and neo-colonial assumptions, the cover of *Deep South* breaks these down by exposing exceptions to the dominant US narratives. It marks a departure from the established pattern of visibility and invisibility, but this pattern-breaking strengthens the argument that grand narratives are more likely to be successfully contested by privileged insiders.

The single striking exception to this pattern is the 1992 cover of *The Happy Isles of Oceania*. This is the only image that foregrounds human faces. Three boys, bare-legged and bare-chested, are captured standing in water. It is a complicated cover, part action-image (one of the boys appears to be moving forward), part candid (the moving boy seems unaware of the camera) and partly posed. This is "paradise confused" (Dann, 1996), offering a point of contact with natives in an apparently locals-only zone.

As Kress and van Leeuwen explain, "The relation between the human participants represented in images and the viewer is once again an imaginary relation. People are portrayed as though they are friends, or as though they are strangers" (2006: 132). The portrayal here is considerably more intimate than on other covers, but the imagined relationship with the viewer is uncertain, partly because the depicted faces and bodies bear a blend of ambiguous expressions.

One boy smiles, perhaps welcoming, but his crossed arms imply self-consciousness. The other frowns, and his stance, one foot elevated on a rock, suggests a degree of territorialism. The photocomposition is, interestingly, quasi-aquatic, the lens part-submerged, the cover bisected by the water surface. This doubly signifies the meeting of two worlds, and it also indexes abstract notions of (cultural) immersion and a glimpse into a region normally distorted or obscured by its surface. The liminality of the ocean surface is a powerful and established metaphor for "division[...] connection, or [...] a surface of connection amidst division" (Steinberg, 2014: 34), and is suggestive of change, instability and fluidity, both physical and cognitive, a symbol of "the ultimate unmappability of identity and meaning" (Borg Bathet, 2014). Travel writing seems to

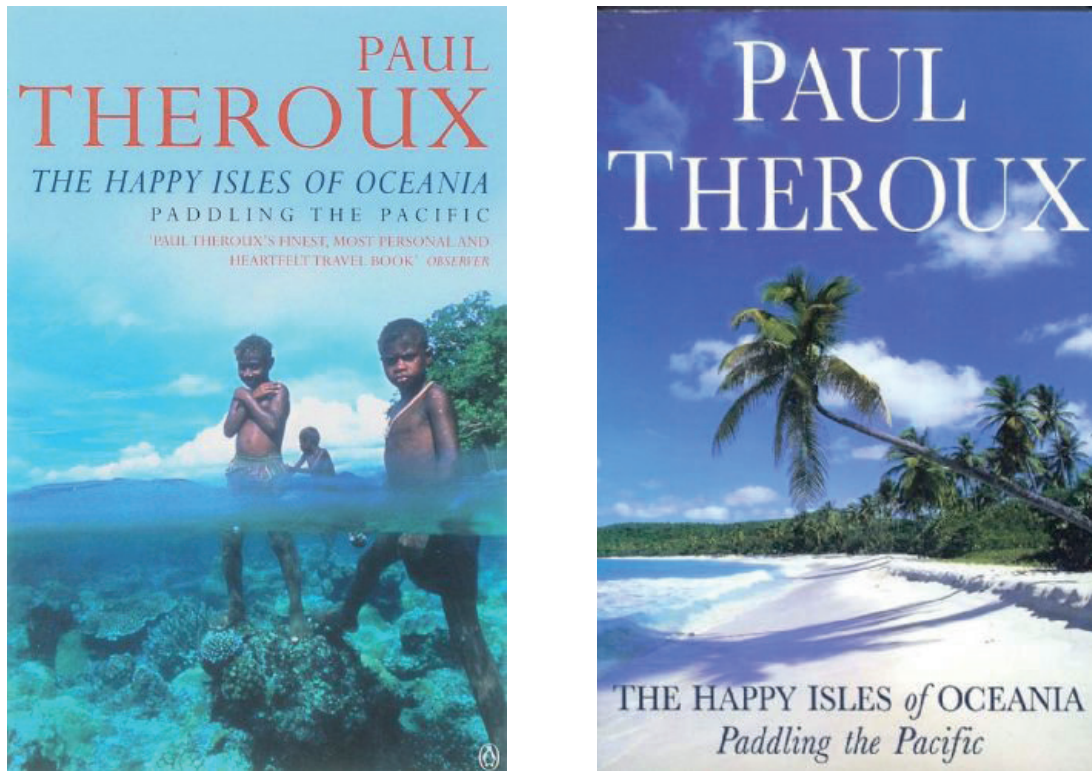


Fig 4: Side-by-side comparison of *The Happy Isles of Oceania* editions 1992 and 2012 (Theroux).

fix identity: Theroux's fleeting and often-unflattering impressions of his subjects are made more permanent by pinning them to the page. Like his writing, the immersed lens signifies discomfiting elements of voyeurism. However, the multi-layered photograph provides a complex, challenging perspective. Here, the subject-position of the traveller is destabilised and their primacy questioned. Unlike the other covers, where the perspective of the photograph allows the viewer to look down on the subjects from a "position of symbolic power" (Jewitt and Oyama, 2004: 135), this places the subjects at an advantage. They appear to lock eyes with the viewer, across time and space, creating a sense of counter-observation. The image is Edenic, suffused with blues and greens, but this is an inhabited Eden and the viewer is an intruder.

It is surprising this is the only cover to closely feature human figures. As Harrison points out, "the human face is one of the most powerful resources in visual imagery because people are "hard-wired" from infancy to study faces and their expressions" (2003), and human interactions are an integral part of the travel narrative. It is worth noting the most recent Penguin edition of *The Happy Isles* (Theroux, 2012), reverts to the paradise contrived mode, featuring an empty beach and a lone palm, that time-honoured sign of a desert (and deserted) island. Perhaps the composition of these book covers suggests, on an instinctive level, publishers believe readers prefer fixity and simple, controlled visions of paradise, an empty space waiting for a part-time Crusoe.



Text and Cover

In journalistic writing, there is protection against accusations of mischaracterisation if an article presents both “bane and antidote” (Quinn, 2018: 219). This concept can be extended to Theroux’s writing. His early works, such as *Great Railway Bazaar*, contain problematic statements that smack of inherited imperialist perspectives and go far beyond the subtler problems of pictorial representation. He exhibits a “pejorative and patronising” (Thompson, 2011: 133) attitude toward many cultures, including the Japanese, described as “flexing their little muscles, kicking their little feet, wagging their little heads” (2008: 336). His brief and dismissive immersion in Japanese life consists of attending a quasi-pornographic performance which could not have been better chosen to exemplify the Orientalist view of a culture steeped in “cruelty [and] sensuality” (Said, 1978: 4). In addition, Pakistani faces have an “angular beakiness” (2008: 89), Afghanistan is “barbarous” (87) and, in a Scroogian moment, Theroux muses “it is the simplest fact of Indian life: there are too many Indians” (142). His antipathy to the Japanese continues: in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* he writes they are: “little bowlegged people who can’t see without glasses” (238), and also that Samoans are “pathetic conformists” (482), “oafish, and lazy”, and their culture “degenerate” (484). Lisle (2006: 83-84) provides a similar catalogue of Theroux’s attitudes. These stereotypical details, which occasionally extend to less educated westerners, seem calculated to impose a hierarchical order with Theroux at the top and his subjects at the bottom. Brevity and sweeping statements are a hallmark of his whistle-stop travel-style; snap observations obscure broader, deeper and more complex realities, in much the same way the snap of a camera lens flattens a scene. Theroux is aware of the power of narrative control. In *The Happy Isles* (1992), when a chief asks Theroux not to write, he opines, “It was a fact... not a savage superstition. If he told a story, and I wrote it down, the story became mine” (263). Of course, Theroux still publishes (and therefore claims) the story. In these cases, the cover is more benign than the content.

However, it must be said, for all this, Theroux’s writing is far more expansive than the covers suggest. It is wide-ranging, traversing mountains, forests, rivers, coasts, urban and rural regions, borders, industrial zones and literary geographies. Unlike the covers, he foregrounds people, and while these vignettes are often critical and his observations limited, exoticised and sometimes eroticised, he is cognizant of human complexity. His work becomes more socially conscious with time, though there is a lingering sense of superiority. Harangued by an interviewee for his lateness, in *Deep South*, he is belatedly confronted with his own privileged status. Until then, it “never occurred to me that I would be perceived as entitled [...] because I happened to be white” (2015: 85). However, he demonstrates greater respect to his interviewees, and offers some space within the text for his subjects to, as Blanton suggests, “have their say” (2002: 29), even if, as the shaper and selector of what is signified, he retains a high degree of authorial control over his subjects. Cultural proximity may play a part in this; however, the increased sensitivity extends to his later travels in Central America. He attempts, falteringly, to participate, spending extended periods of time in one location, learning Mexican Spanish, and making efforts to understand and contextualise. In his discussion of the contentious USA/Mexican borderlands, Theroux discusses the neo-colonial tendencies of Mexico’s larger neighbour. He is aware he is “the intruder” (2019: 255). The people who ‘speak’ through him are diverse, representing a spectrum of classes, ethnicities, cultures and experiences, from Zapatista



revolutionaries, to transgender *muxes*, from multilingual writers and activists to underprivileged monoglot peasants. This is reflected, somewhat, in the format of the book. The centre pages include photographs that restore human faces to the visual story. These efforts may be lost on the casual viewer, however.

The problem of lost symbolism and buried signification is best illustrated through the cover photograph's "tight-coupling" with the title. The potent animal imagery of the snake is culturally relevant to Mexico. To a western audience, snakes are coded in negative terms: they are "monstrous" (Snively, 2018), in Judeo-Christian systems, they are at best a symbol of wisdom, but often signify danger, deceit and evil (Knowles, 2014). Thematically, this fits with the hidden dangers encountered or avoided by Theroux (drug cartels, corrupt police), but one has to read further to realise the true relevance of the symbol. Theroux writes about the creation myth of Quetzalcoatl, the life-generating snake-god, and the revered figure of the ancestor-serpent in several Mesoamerican belief systems. Likewise, the desert, in this text, is a multidimensional site, a place of death and deliverance for migrants, sometimes still, sometimes alive with flocks of flitting *mariposas* (yellow butterflies). Just as the title is inadequate when encountered in isolation, the desert image is an inadequate sign for Mexico as a whole, and also for the complexity of the desert space itself. Although the title image and text represents what Genette would call a "public paratext" (2009: 9), a more accurate decoding requires engagement with this, or other texts. The fact is, far more people will see the empty desert of the front cover than will read the book. The bane, therefore, spreads wider than the remedy.

Book covers operate as branding tools (Drew and Sternberger, 2005) and as adverts for the enclosed product. Branding, as Steenkamp notes, is an attempt to make a product distinctive to consumers, who may base their purchasing decisions on the reputation and recognition of that brand (2019). Both brands and signs, however complex, are incapable of accurately and wholly replicating a subject as multifaceted as a novel-length narrative, and as shifting and diverse as, for instance, a social group or an entire country. Instead, a process of encapsulation takes place wherein landscapes and people are translated, imperfectly, into textual and visual signs. Simultaneously, they are rendered into abstract commodities for consumer entertainment.

Branding, like the semiotic process itself, never provides "the whole object, but only ever its criterial aspects" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2005). In the case of a product (Steenkamp, 2019), the criterial aspects might be the size, shape, colour and logo. However, when the same process is applied by proxy to an entire landmass or culture, there is inevitably an arbitrary or conscious selection process, which guarantees omissions, limitations and simplifications. This may occur by design or, as I suspect in this case, simply because of practices that have, through long operation, become unquestioned convention.

Conclusion

Over time, Theroux's travel narratives have evolved from overt Othering to more open and inclusive dialogues. In comparison, the Penguin book covers of his work are remarkably uniform, continuing to exhibit covert, encoded signifiers of consumer privilege and lingering colonial attitudes. These are subtly integrated into book titles, which include individual words and phrases which have accrued stereotypical signified meanings, and through the selection, composition and deployment of particular images.



Broadly, patterns of western supremacy are embedded by positioning the reader as an analogue to Theroux the traveller. It is likely that, from the emphasis, in his early texts, on high literature from the western canon, his preference for Anglo-influenced manners, customs and for the company of people of his own class and tastes, that the imagined, ideal reader likewise has much in common with Theroux. It is therefore fitting that the composition of the book covers places us in a simulation of his position, which frequently — figuratively and literally — looks down on his less privileged subjects. However, though his writing cannot be all-reflecting, as it is built from a series of impressions and subjective observations, it does make space for people of different creeds, colours and classes within the text. A significant number of the accompanying book covers do not.

By way of speculation, it is possible the removal of the human element from these covers is a deliberate reach toward a form of neutrality and timelessness: if no natives are depicted, then the covers cannot be accused of signifying stereotypes. However, this has the troubling side-effect of diminishing the presence of those people who belong to a landscape, and to whom the landscape is home. The fact that, where people do feature, light-skinned westerners are consistently depicted as engaged in privileged leisure-focused activities compared to the ‘foreign’ subjects most often photographed at work, undermines notions of neutrality.

The photographs are undoubtedly aesthetically pleasing; the titles are evocative and the Penguin branding is restrained but distinctive. As commercial artefacts, they function as effective signs. As cultural artefacts, they suggest something simultaneously less and more. They flatten and reduce the landscapes and countries they commodify, but they also reveal more about the nature of western-centric travel writing than intended. They indicate that these covers are, consciously or unconsciously, devised to cater for a market that appreciates or expects to be entertained from a position of privilege. It also indicates the imbalances of historic travel writing are much diminished, but still persist today.

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