
Reviewed by Robert Sayre (Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée)

This compendium of “keywords” is, as suggested in the introduction, neither an encyclopedia nor a dictionary, although it has something in common with both. It takes as its point of reference Raymond Williams’s celebrated, seminal work that explores words of crucial socio-cultural significance in the history of the English language: Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1976; revised, expanded edition: 1983). While the scope of Williams’s work was all-inclusive, at least within the anglophone sphere, later publications inspired by his example have focused on particular fields, and Keywords for Travel Writing Studies is one of them. The book is published in the series “Anthem Studies in Travel”, of which the editor is Charles Forsdick, a professor at the University of Liverpool who is one of the editors of the volume under review as well.

As the editors point out, the appearance of this book is part of the recent “mobility turn” in the humanities and social sciences. They define travel writing, indeed, as the “textual recording of a variety of practices of mobility” - a definition that reflects the recent tendency to broaden the notion of what constitutes travel (and travellers). In the introduction and some entries the question of the extension of the term, and its relation to mobility, comes into play. One of the entries is on the word mobility itself. The book in general eschews closure and prefers to leave discussions open-ended, but the phenomena of migration and diaspora are clearly included in the subject area (there are entries on both) whereas those involving involuntary movement (of enslaved people, for instance) seemingly are not. Thus, while broadening the definition of travel, the book appears to stop short of identifying it entirely with mobility. Reference is made to the traditional opposition between “travel” and “tourism”, but the distinction is relativized and tourism is included within the purview of the book. A wide variety of specific types of travel and tourism are treated, and although the concentration is on “real life” travel the distinction between that and fictional travel is also problematized. Fictional texts come into play in many of the discussions, and there is an entry for “virtual travel”.

The structure chosen by the editors for this collection is an alphabetized series of relatively numerous entries (100), each of which is however rather brief (approximately 1000 words). The individual entries are followed by short bibliographies (a maximum of five references) related to the term treated, supplemented by a general bibliography of almost 50 pages at the end. The entries are written by multiple contributors, 41 in all. The contributing authors are women and men in equal numbers, but their nationalities vary considerably. More than half are from countries of the UK, and most of those are English. A sizable contingent (5) are from the United States. Australia and New Zealand have one entry each, as do several European countries: Holland, Finland, Denmark and France. Japan (1) and Hong Kong (2) are also represented. As this enumeration suggests, the anglophone element is predominant, and the editors freely acknowledge in the introduction that the volume is “Anglocentric”. They claim, however, to have made a concerted effort to widen discussions so as to include other languages and cultures, and to a significant degree they can be said to have succeeded. There is a particularly strong presence of French references, doubtless at least in part because a number of the English contributors are teachers of French. A large majority of the contributors have written between one and three entries each, but several have authored a greater number, Charles Fosdick taking the largest share (9).
The entries, which are not only single words but also sometimes short phrases (e.g. “Contact Zone”, “End-of-Travel” and “Monarch-of-All-I-Survey”), were not chosen, we are told in the introduction, by a quantitative method (“digital frequency testing”, in particular), but rather through a series of discussions over several years among the editors and others. While such an approach runs the risk of being reproached for its subjectivity, the editors feel that the nature of the subject matter calls for it. The advantage of the approach is surely that it allows for more creativity in the selection, and although readers will doubtless find some entries more germane and fruitful than others, to this reviewer’s mind the choice of terms offered covers the terrain quite well and in an interesting fashion.

More than half of the terms included are general ones that as such have no special relation to travel – words such as Aesthetic, City, Fiction, Identity, Politics, Time, and War, to mention only a few. In these cases, the term is usually cursorily introduced in its broader applications and then more thoroughly brought into relation with travel. At the other end of the spectrum, only about a tenth of the words are mainly or entirely specific to the subject of travel (Beaten Track, Grand Tour, Tourism, and Travel itself), in some instances referring pointedly to recent developments in the area of travel studies (Dark Tourism, Extreme Travel, Traveller/Travellee, Vertical Travel). In between are a large number of words that, while having other applications, maintain especially strong links with the theme of travel (Adventure, Border, Exotic, Islands, Nomadism, Primitivism, Trade, Transport).

The editors indicate in the introduction that each entry aims to explore three “interlacing chronologies”: the historical evolution of meanings of the words, critical/theoretical developments involving understanding and analysis of them, and the temporal span of important textual examples, which may run from antiquity to the present. Although the three dimensions are indeed present throughout the entries, the length limitation imposed on the entries means however that they cannot always be fully explored in equal measure.

The approaches of the various authors differ considerably, but the volume overall is strongly interdisciplinary and many discussions reflect the theoretical concerns current in Anglo-American critical discourse: psychoanalysis, anthropology, feminism/gender studies, and postcolonial studies. A more unusual, and innovative disciplinary intersection is with disability studies. In addition to the “mobility turn” the choice of entries reflects most of the other major « turns » in contemporary cultural studies: the “affective”, the “sensory”, the “spatial” and the “ecocritical”. A multitude of important recent works in travel studies are referenced throughout the work, but two stand out in the seminal significance attributed to them: Mary-Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes and Edward Said’s Orientalism (with secondary reference to Culture and Imperialism). Although English-language citations predominate, attention is paid also to some important French contributions: texts by Claude Levi-Strauss, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Didier Urbain and Marc Augé.

The aim of the editors of this volume is to “federate”, to suggest and encourage the creation of connections, and to contribute to the ongoing development of a field they see as now stabilized, but still open. For this they are to be praised, and they have succeeded in their aim by offering a rich, stimulating and informative overview through the medium of the “keyword”. The relatively high price of the hardcover version of the book – it is not for the moment available in paperback – may make it difficult to afford for some individual students and scholars, but it is in any case to be highly recommended for ordering by university libraries.

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