

Dissertation Description

Rewriting Alpine Orientalism: Lessons from the Canadian Rockies and Austrian Alps

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Oriental reds and golds, ignorant natives, and the conquest of virgin peaks: such descriptive language was widespread amongst Western travellers writing about mountain destinations. How this language gave form to mountains as idealised places of vacancy and timelessness and reified mountain people as exotic objects and figures of backwardness – how it survives in modern mass tourism and how it is resisted today in writing about mountains – are the subjects of this dissertation, a revealing account of Orientalist discourse that has defined Western thinking about, and trading with, high places.

When one thinks of Orientalism, one does not immediately think of cold, high places, or of imaginings projected onto European landscape. Yet the symbolic transformation of mountain regions through Orientalist discourse is a global phenomenon, and one that evidences the proclivity within (late) modernity to capitalize on the landscapes and cultures of alpine regions by turning them into values, forms, and figures. This dissertation examines Orientalism as it hits mountains and considers the resistance to Orientalism as imagined by contemporary writers in English Canada and Austria in a transatlantic study that spans centuries, genres, and geographies. Basing its argument on the Canadian Rockies and Austrian Alps, the dissertation traces the epistemic violence implicit in the hegemonic rhetoric and representation of mountains in the global circuits of mountain tourism. For this purpose, it analyses more than eighty accounts of travel writing published between 1828 and 1950, which generously frame what David Spurr calls “the modern period of European colonialism” (1993: 1), and four exemplary contemporary works of mountain fiction from such writers as Angie Abdou, Thomas Wharton, Elfriede Jelinek, and Felix Mitterer, illustrating the modes and modalities of writing and resisting what this dissertation calls ‘Alpine Orientalism’.

Comparing and contrasting representations of Canadian and Austrian mountains in literatures from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, this dissertation develops an analytical framework capable of analysing the particular colonial codifications written into and onto mountains as well as the interventions that write back to the business with mountain tourism, engendering a critical reading that responds to such interventions. Geared towards this overarching aim, this dissertation answers the following questions: what codes and concepts have been utilised by travel writing to create mountains as a pleasure periphery? To what extent are the generalising assumptions that form the discourse on mountain travel an echo of the aspirations of imperial expansion, and where does the tourism industry reiterate imperial images and rhetoric in promoting their business with mountains? What is the instrumental role of writing within an alpine (counter-)discursive field? How do contemporary authors engage in and approach the discursive codifications from the vantage point of a lived alpine reality? How do those writers reject, reclaim, revision, and rewrite those codifications? In what ways does the literature produced by these writers operate akin to the general idea of postcolonial ‘writing back’, and where does that writing transcend the postcolonial field, respond to the widespread criticism of an undifferentiated postcolonial critique, and map out literary moves that distinctively undermine the hegemonies at work in mountain tourism?

Drawing on and contributing to the theories and methods of postcolonial, tourism, and mountain studies, this dissertation explores questions of mountains, representation, and travel in an international and interdisciplinary setting. In the process it breaks open established theoretical canons and transfers them into unorthodox terrain. By exploiting the contact zones between disciplinary traditions, literary genres, national settings and temporal frameworks, the dissertation shifts perspectives on how postcolonial theory can be deployed, how the genre of *Anti-Heimatliteratur* can be rethought, and how the literary space of mountains can be read transnationally. This is achieved while negotiating central themes in Canadian studies such as (1) the literature and history of tourism in Canada, (2) colonial and recreational explorations of the Rockies, (3) the Canadian national parks movement, and (4) the colossal project of the Canadian Pacific Railway. This dissertation's critical engagement with representations of the Rockies is deeply intertwined with questions of Canadian nation building and the nation's specific postcolonial condition addressing such topics as belonging, multiculturalism, settler colonialism, and wilderness.

Although the dissertation engages with a variety of research traditions and ways of reading and despite the fact that the author also incorporates methods from the historical sciences and draws on principles from the natural sciences, activating her own training in the biological sciences, the interdisciplinary study never loses sight of the special significance of literature and the literariness of imaginative texts in contributing to shaping the cultural, ecological, and social real of mountain spaces.

This dissertation shows not only that mountains matter, but that mountain literature matters, and matters most, in establishing and challenging mountain mass tourism as a cultural economy. When this planet was hit with a global health crisis in early 2020, mountain destinations were Covid-19 hotspots and in remarkable ways revealed to us what is wrong in the world today. In a time when physical travel is once again increasingly replaced by armchair travelling, this dissertation helps understand the critical role that representations hold in establishing and challenging realities. The fact that this dissertation approaches the difficulty in the material hopefully is not just a celebration of CanLit's theme of survival but a powerful symbol of postcolonial hope in this current moment.

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