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# **The Representation of Mongolia in Contemporary Travel Writing: Imaginative Geographies of a Traveller's Frontier**

**David J.S. Tavares**

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Geography

Department of Geography  
Faculty of Arts  
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# Abstract/Résumé

This thesis adopts a hermeneutical framework in order to undertake a discourse analysis of the representation of Mongolia in five works of contemporary travel writing. It argues that this travel writing is characterized by a discourse that reflects and reproduces an 'imaginative geography' of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. Evidence of this discourse can be found in sets of collective, cohesive representations that cross-cut the works studied and have the effect of naturalizing a very particular conceptualization of Mongolia as a travel destination in an age of globalization and mass tourism. This research adds to the growing body of geographical scholarship on travel writing, but departs from it by considering contemporary works rather than ones from the colonial period.

À partir d'un cadre herméneutique, cette thèse propose une analyse discursive de la représentation de la Mongolie dans cinq récits de voyage contemporains. Elle montre que ces œuvres sont caractérisées par un discours qui reflète et reproduit une géographie imaginaire de la Mongolie en tant que *frontière* pour voyageurs aguerris. Le discours de chacune de ces œuvres est traversé par un ensemble cohérent de représentations collectives qui a pour effet de naturaliser une image particulière de la Mongolie en tant que destination de voyage à notre époque de tourisme de masse et de mondialisation accélérée. Cette recherche se veut une contribution au nombre croissant de travaux sur la littérature de voyage et ouvre un nouveau chantier qui s'intéresse plutôt aux récits contemporains qu'à ceux de l'époque coloniale.

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# Introduction

The travel writer seeks the world we have lost – the lost valleys of the imagination

– Alexander Cockburn

The epigram above speaks volumes about the themes discussed in this thesis. Key to the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing is the notion that travel to Mongolia offers the opportunity of going back in time to an exotic, mysterious kingdom that has staved off the homogenizing influences of twentieth century globalization. Mongolia is depicted as a traveller's frontier, a last place where one can go to escape the modern age and travel in the romantic tradition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century's 'great' explorers. It is a place that speaks to a golden age of travel, to a time of journeys and adventures that have since been eclipsed by package holidays and risk free indulgence. Equally relevant is the second half of the epigram for it suggests that an imaginative geography – the way a place or people is conceptualized and understood by a collective psyche – is implicated in the representation of peoples and places in contemporary travel writing. Indeed, as I argue in the pages and chapters that follow, an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier is both reflected and perpetuated in contemporary travel writing.

However, I am getting ahead of my self here. I should really begin by explaining why I have chosen to write a thesis concerning contemporary travel writing about Mongolia and then provide a concrete statement outlining my central argument. In the West,

Mongolia has long been associated with the vast empire carved out by Genghis Khan and his army of nomadic herdsmen during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During that period, Western travellers such as Giovanni Carpine, William of Rubruck and, more famously, Marco Polo, all visited distant Mongolia and returned to Europe with accounts of their travels. However, with the fragmentation and collapse of its empire beginning in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, Mongolia's influence on the world stage waned and so did its interest in the eyes of Europeans. This remained the case until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when European explorers began mapping Central Asia and 'plundering' its cultural treasures (Hopkirk, 1980). The discovery of well-preserved dinosaur fossils in the Gobi Desert drew the attention of natural history museums that mounted a number of high profile, and very fruitful, expeditions to Mongolia around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, these activities and those of other Westerners were forcibly ended in 1924 when, following a revolution, Mongolia became the world's second communist state and a vassal to the USSR. Thus, locked away between Russia and China for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mongolia remained to some degree inaccessible to Westerners who, as tourists, had become regular visitors to almost every other corner of the world.

With the fall of Mongolia's communist regime in 1990 and the subsequent 'opening' of the country to Western travellers, travel writers, ever on the search for 'new' destinations, flocked to Mongolia. Perhaps cognisant that it was only a matter of time before tourism infrastructure was developed and Westerners began arriving *en masse* only to erode the country's exotic appeal that brought them there in the first place, numerous travel writers published books recounting their travels among the nomads of the Mongolian steppe. This travel writing is undoubtedly helping to define how contemporary Mongolia is incorporated into the collective imagination of the West now that interchange between the two is

occurring. This is especially so if one considers that for most of the twentieth century few people in the West had frames of reference for Mongolia save the historical ones mentioned above. Indeed, Mongolia provides such a compelling case study precisely because of the clear distinction between pre 1990 and post 1990. Before 1990 the body of Western travel writing about Mongolia was largely confined to a small number of exploration and expedition narratives published prior to 1924. Since 1990 Mongolia has been the subject of well over a dozen travel books and countless more articles and short narratives, not to mention works published in languages other than English. How these recent works portray Mongolia for Western readerships through representation is the core subject matter of this thesis.

My central argument is that contemporary travel writing about Mongolia is characterized by a discourse that reflects and reproduces an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. This discourse, I argue, can be evidenced in sets of collective, coherent representations that cross cut all the works of travel writing I consider in this thesis. For example, Mongolia is framed as a recently opened land whose exotic appeal remains, for the moment, unadulterated by the homogenizing process of globalization. In a world increasingly characterized by cultural hybridity and global interconnectedness, Mongolia is depicted as a place forgotten by time and untouched by progress. It is described by travel writers as an anachronistic space where the romantic notion of 'travel', with its inherent hardships and adventures, can still take place away from the pre-packaged, artificial world of 'tourism'. The similarities between how such representations are structured and transmitted throughout the works under consideration point to a common discourse that naturalizes a very particular conceptualization of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. Far

more than a remote wilderness in Central Asia, the Mongolian 'frontier' is a social construction that betrays imaginative geographies of the country and what it means to the Western travellers. In other words, the Mongolian 'frontier' is not only a place created through representation, but also a space within which the experience of place is negotiated.

I begin the thesis with a chapter that reviews academic literature relevant to the geographical study of travel writing and situates my research within this body of scholarship. In Chapter Two I use the concept of genre to delimit a set of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia that will act as my principal objects of study throughout the remainder of the thesis. I also provide an introduction to the works under consideration and explain the interpretive framework I have adopted for their analysis. Chapters Three to Five constitute the analytical portion of my thesis. Here I seek to convince the reader of my central argument with direct reference to the body of travel writing that constitutes my principal object of study. Each of these chapters is organized around a central theme that ties in to that of the following chapter such that the three chapters form part of a linear argument that is summed up in a conclusion following Chapter Five.

# Chapter One

## Geography and Travel Writing: A Review

### A Brief History

Writing and travel have always been closely connected, especially since the sixteenth century when documentation became an integral part of, and driving force for, travel (Hulme and Youngs, 2002: 1). Gregory suggests that travel writing is geography in the most literal sense of the term whose breakdown into 'geo-graphy' yields 'earth-writing' (Gregory, 2000a: 857). Furthermore, if one considers travel writing as “a form of cultural cartography that is impelled by an anxiety to map the globe, centre it on a certain point, produce explanatory narratives, and assign fixed identities to regions and the races that inhabit them”, then geography and travel writing are intimately related (Porter, 1991: 20 in Crush, 1994: 259). However, contrary to what one might expect, geography as a discipline has, until recently, not undertaken a serious and sustained study of travel writing.

In a variety of forms and guises, travel writing has been generating popular interest since the European age of exploration, during which time travellers began writing accounts that described the places and peoples they had encountered on their forays into the unknown world beyond Europe. Much of this early travel writing, and of the subsequent travel writing produced during the expansion and consolidation of Western Europe's colonial empire, was authored by professional and amateur geographers who had close ties to learned

institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society. Thus, the travel writing of Alexander Von Humboldt or Sir Richard Francis Burton addressed the public at large and the geographical scholar alike, leading Chevalier (1988) to describe it as “para-geographic”. Indeed, during the period in question, travel writing was a preferred medium through which to diffuse geographical scholarship. This scholarly emphasis was often confirmed by the presence of figures, diagrams, indices, footnotes, appendices and bibliographies, not to mention sometimes extraordinarily dull prose, that all contributed to individual works resembling a treatise in geography or some related discipline (Dann, 1999: 162).

However, as travel became easier and increasing numbers of people began journeying abroad and recording their experiences, travel writing began to lose its perceived scholarly rigour. For example, the body of travel writing about Egypt from the mid to late 19th century discussed by Gregory (1999) was authored largely by artists and moneyed aristocrats who had little or no association with the discipline of geography. Their works were aimed at the broad public, rather than at geographers. Increasingly the medium of travel writing and the discipline of geography diverged, the former becoming the domain of popular authors and the latter the preserve of academics who disseminate their ideas through the preparation of scholarly publications.

From the time that travel writing ceased to purvey geographical scholarship, geographers had little or nothing to do with it. However, as an exemplary record of the cross-cultural encounters between Europe and the rest of the world, travel writing became an increasingly rich, if unacknowledged, source of information from which geography and other disciplines could potentially profit as objects of study (Clark, 1999: 2). Having said this, cultural geography’s early preoccupation with analyzing observable data (1920’s -

1950's) and later with applying measurable, quantitative approaches to geographical phenomena during the positivist period (1960's - early 1970's), meant that travel writing, with its inherent subjectivity, was not likely deemed a worthy object of study (Hugill and Foote, 1994). Indeed, much the same could be said about geography's relationship to literature (Brosseau, 1994).

It took theoretical shifts in the social sciences and humanities during the 1970's (dubbed the 'cultural turn') to broaden the scope of geography beyond its boundaries as a spatial science and cause geographers once again to consider travel writing as part of their discipline - this time as an object of study rather than a medium for conveying scholarship. Of particular importance during this period was the advent of humanistic and radical geographies, both of which engaged literature and other sources traditionally dismissed as 'subjective' in order to further their respective theoretical agendas. However, it was the emergence of a 'new cultural geography', which seeks to find middle grounds between humanistic and radical perspectives (see Duncan, 1994), which proved most significant in paving the way for the current interest in travel writing within geography. Its concern with issues of representation and the role of geography in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of meaning, created a sub-field for which travel writing is an eminently suited object of study (Cresswell, 1996: 12; Gregory, 2000a: 857).

The result has been that over the past twenty years geography and related academic disciplines such as history and anthropology have begun to produce an increasingly large, often interdisciplinary, body of criticism resulting from their engagements with travel writing (Hulme and Youngs, 2002: 1). It is now widely accepted that travel writing "belongs to a wider structure of representation within which cultural affiliations and links -

culture itself - can be analysed, questioned, and reassessed (Holland and Huggan, 1998: VII)". Furthermore, this unprecedented level of scholarly attention acts as a timely acknowledgement of how a longstanding popular interest has conferred upon travel writing a responsibility with regard to its role in "finding the terms for - or coming to terms with - other cultures and natures" (Duncan and Gregory, 1999: 1).

### **Approaching Travel Writing From A Cultural Geography Perspective**

Crush argues that the exercise of travel writing is one that brings narrative order, significance, and meaning to a place or people (Crush, 1994: 257). In effect it translates landscape into a moral text. Duncan and Gregory elaborate on this act of translation by commenting that

Just as textual translation cannot capture all of the symbolic connotations of language or the alliterative sound of words, the translation of one place into the cultural idiom of another loses some of the symbolic loading of the place for its inhabitants and replaces it with other symbolic values (Duncan and Gregory, 1999: 5).

It is important to emphasize the relational aspect of this translation. Pratt's "contact zone" perspective places emphasis on how subjects are created by their relation to each other (Pratt, 1992: 6). Constructions of an 'Other' are predicated on conceptualizations of the 'Self', which themselves are challenged and refined in relation with the 'Other'. Therefore, the moral text being inscribed in the form of travel writing can be regarded as the product of an encounter. This encounter, which invariably results in an exchange, is generative and heavily influences the process of translation itself. The resulting moral text cannot therefore be regarded as a 'true' depiction of an unaffected reality (Campbell, 2002: 263). Instead, the

translation can be seen as producing a “space in between,” a representation that takes on a reality of its own (Duncan and Gregory, 1999: 4).

The notion that travel writing is not a transparent and unproblematic depiction of peoples and places, but rather a complex site of representation that illuminates inter-cultural dynamics and relations, is central to geographers' interest in studying it. Barnes and Duncan highlight the cultural specificity of representational descriptions of the world and how the people and places “we represent are inevitably stamped with our own particular set of local interests, views, standards, and so on” (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 3; see also Duncan and Sharp, 1993: 473). To them, writing about peoples and places reveals as much about ourselves as it does about the worlds being represented. This is in part due to the fact that in the process of translating otherness into our own language, conceptual frameworks, and categories of thought, we categorize and classify the Other in relation to ourselves (Cloke, 1999: 50). Thus, for many geographers the analysis of representations in travel writing has been a vehicle through which to highlight the larger discursive formations employed by the West when interacting with the remainder of the world. It is not surprising therefore, that their work has drawn heavily on Michel Foucault's writing concerning the relationship between power and discourse, and the body of post-colonial scholarship that surrounds Edward Said's theories on Orientalism.

### **Main Themes in the Geographical Study of Travel Writing**

The majority of recent academic work on travel writing, both in geography and related disciplines, has focused on the body of works produced by European travellers during the eras of colonial expansion and consolidation. Scholars have widely regarded the

encounters described in these works as having contributed massively to the creation and entrenchment of global cultural and geopolitical relationships (Gregory, 2000b: 247). Attention has been primarily devoted to reflecting on the colonial experiences described in travel writing from this period through a lens of post-colonial theory. On a broad level, travel writing has been analyzed as “an ensemble of textual practices that can be made to disclose the characteristic gestures of an ‘imperial stylistics’” (Duncan and Gregory, 1999); as a key player in the construction of colonial and post-colonial identities (Sharp, 2002: 155). Pratt's (1992) influential study deserves special mention, given that her concern with the ways travel writing produced the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory is representative of other works on colonial travel writing.

On the role of colonial travel writing in identity construction, a central theme has been the process by which writing the ‘foreign’ helped construct clearer definitions of what characterized ‘home’. This, it has been argued, led to a dichotomous situation in which the ‘Self’ was (and is) defined in relation to the characteristics of ‘Other’ cultures (Crang, 1998: 60). Once again Said (1978) is credited with groundbreaking work in this area. Blunt explains how Said's thesis ‘Orientalism’

Relates to the production and reproduction of myths and imagined geographies constructing the inferiority of other people and places. This in turn reinforced and legitimated perceptions of Western superiority, so that the self is defined through its construction of an ‘Other’ (Blunt, 1995: 7).

Indeed, it has been argued that the very idea of the West and Western-ness arose from the cultural exchanges and interactions during the age of exploration (Gregory, 2000c: 246). The importance of this concept to the study of travel writing is highlighted by Sharp who

describes how “much of the work undertaken on representations of others in travel writing and other texts has analysed and critiqued the imagined geographies that are produced through structures of Orientalism both in the colonial past and into the neo/post-colonial present” (Sharp, 2002: 155).

In keeping with Said (1978), writing the ‘Other’, it has been widely argued, involves representations that are composed of, and characterized by, relations of power (Clark, 1999; Gregory, 1995; Duncan and Sharp, 1993). According to Gregory, Said “describes landscapes and cultures being drawn into abstract grids of colonial and imperial power, literally displaced and replaced, and illuminates the ways in which these constellations become sites of appropriation, domination and contestation” (Gregory, 1995: 448). Studies of colonial travel writing have sought to highlight these networks of power and privilege by looking at the way in which people and places have been represented by explorers and travellers of the period.

In addition to acknowledging its role in the purveyance of culture-specific mentalities, the construction of ‘Otherness’, and the reflection of intercultural power dynamics, a number of geographers have also looked at travel writing from a gender perspective. Here again the focus has been on travel writing from the colonial period, the broad concern being to study how works reflect the position of women within, and in relation to, colonialism (Hulme and Youngs, 2002: 8). Duncan and Gregory describe how

Particular attention has been paid to the articulations of travel, gender and sexuality and the routes by which travel writings modulated and registered the changing constitution of travelling subjects; and here the masculinism of traditional histories of ‘exploration’ has yielded to a principled recovery of the complex subject - positions of both men and women travellers (Duncan and Gregory, 1999: 3).

Scholars have also seen the study of travel writing from a gender perspective as a way of broadening the discipline of geography itself, which has traditionally overlooked or downplayed the role of women in a number of contexts (Blunt, 1995; Blunt and Rose, 1994; Mills, 1991). According to Campbell, this attention to gender within the broader framework of colonialism has provided a substantial body of criticism on the gendered nature of thought and the 'situatedness' of knowledge in general (Campbell, 2002: 264).

Although there are far too many studies on travel writing from a gender perspective to review here, a number of representative works are worth mentioning. Blunt uses Mary Kingsley's travel writing to address what she sees as four inseparable questions:

The distinctive characteristics of travel writing by women; how these reflected and reproduced spatial differentiation, notably between spheres of patriarchal and imperial power and authority; how the subject positions of women travel writers were constructed in terms of difference, primarily along lines of gender, race, and class, and how such constructions varied over space and time; and how women's journeys represented only one moment in their travels and subsequent writings (Blunt, 1995: 9).

Essentially, these questions are investigated in an attempt to position Mary Kingsley's travels and travel writing within the broader context of travel and imperialism. Mills (1991) looks at how colonialism and colonial power are negotiated in texts by women who, she argues, were conventionally seen as symbols of home and purity rather than as part of the colonial expansion. In an argument refuted by Clark (1999), she claims that the attitude of women travel writers during the colonial period was surprisingly homogenous and easily differentiated from the works of male travel writers by the attention given to cross-cultural personal relationships and the presence of a less authoritative narrative voice. However, as Shurmer-Smith and Hannam point out, although nineteenth century women travel writers

were somewhat successful in challenging the established norms within their Western societies, in effect they did little to challenge those of the places through which they voyaged (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1996: 26). Harper (2001) adopts a slightly different approach by looking at natural history travel narratives in order to discuss issues of 'authority' encountered by women as they struggled to gain recognition as legitimate scientists in an increasingly professional field.

The relationship between male and female spaces in colonial travel writing has also been studied. Clark (1999) argues that while the heroic qualities of the traveller would seem to characterize travel and travel writing as a male domain, the absence of control and the vulnerability of unpredictable encounters suggest qualities more associated with the female realm. For him the female travel writer is as ambivalent a character as her male counterpart. Finally, Phillips (1997) considers gender in writing about travel and adventure from a male perspective. His concern is with the creation of masculine spheres and their inherent qualities and contradictions.

### **Travel Writing and Ethnography**

Another theme that geographers and others have considered as part of their engagement with travel writing concerns the relationship between travel writing and ethnography. Although in the grand-scheme of geographically oriented scholarship on travel writing this theme has not been afforded disproportionately greater attention than the ones discussed above, I have chosen to deal with it in greater detail because of its importance to my analysis in Chapter Four. The inclusion of this theme under a separate

subheading, therefore, is a reflection of its importance to this study rather than a comment on its relative importance to geographical scholarship on travel writing.

Rubies writes that “the description of peoples, their nature, customs, religion, forms of government, and language, is so embedded in the travel writing produced in Europe after the sixteenth century that one assumes ethnography to be essential to the genre” (Rubies, 2002: 242). In fact, as Clifford points out, the origins of ethnography can be traced to early travel writing and the former only emerged as a distinct genre from the latter with the advent of the concept of fieldwork (Clifford, 1997: 66). According to Duncan, early ethnographers adopted the term ‘fieldwork’ in order to add an aura of professional legitimacy to their descriptions of peoples and cultures based on personal presence and primary observation (Duncan, 1993: 2). However, continues Duncan, the descriptions and representations of peoples by nineteenth century travellers, colonial administrators and missionaries were also considered factual and accurate – legitimized in effect - because of the first-hand observational experiences claimed by this set of authors. As Pratt describes it,

This strategy of defining itself by contrast to adjacent and antecedent discourse limits ethnography’s ability to explain or examine itself as a kind of writing. To the extent that it legitimates itself by opposition to other kinds of writing, ethnography blinds itself to the fact that its own discursive practices were often inherited from these other genres and are still shared by them today (Pratt, 1986: 27).

Indeed, the romantic notion of discovering a place or people and bringing it to order for readerships is a motif that has always linked travel writing and ethnography despite the latter’s attempts to distance itself from the former (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 24).

This is in part evidenced by the fact that the first person singular, the narrative I, has always been a feature of ethnographic writing in much the same way as it has in travel

writing. True, the ratio of narrative to description is far higher in travel writing vis-à-vis ethnography. However, its presence in ethnographic texts plays the “crucial role of anchoring...description[s] in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork” (Pratt: 1986: 30). A sub-genre of ethnography, the “self-reflexive fieldwork account”, relies far more on narrative and is far less easily distinguishable, structurally at least, from travel writing. Pratt writes that personal accounts of field experiences have been a feature of ethnography throughout the twentieth century and, although often dismissed as self-indulgent, trivial or even heretical by disciplinary purists, have continued to appear and command wide-spread attention from anthropologists and the public alike (Pratt, 1986; 29). Pratt points out how, given the fact that ethnographers often compose a fieldwork account as a complement to an earlier, more formal or scholarly ethnographic treatise, the fieldwork account provides an

Important forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential, and political. The discourse of the cultural analyst can no longer be simply that of the ‘experienced’ observer, describing and interpreting custom. Ethnographic experience and the participant-observation ideal are shown to be problematic. [...] With the ‘fieldwork account’ the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait. The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at centre stage. He or she can speak of previously ‘irrelevant’ topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants. These matters (long discussed informally within the discipline) have moved away from the margins of ethnography, to be seen as constitutive, inescapable (Pratt, 1986: 14).

The fieldwork account is also characterized by a sense of the exotic, of adventure and travail, and often presented as a journey of progressive unveiling, all of which are common features of travel writing.

In the end there is no prescriptive basis for differentiating between travel writing and ethnography. As Rubies argues, the very plurality of forms found within the umbrella term of 'travel writing' means that ethnography will be central to some, secondary to others, and sometimes altogether absent (Rubies, 2002: 243). Borm describes travel writing as 'para-ethnographic' and stresses that travel writing can be read for its ethnographic content in much the same way that ethnographic accounts can be read for the travel typology they might contain (Borm, 2000: 79). Indeed, Clifford has said that certain travel writers often demonstrate characteristics more in tune with ethnographers and vice versa:

Some writers who could be classified as travellers stayed for extended periods abroad, spoke local languages, and had complex views of indigenous (as well as creole/colonial) life. Some classified as ethnographers stayed relatively short times, spoke languages badly, and did not interact extensively (Clifford, 1997: 71).

However, Holland and Huggan do identify recurring differences in method ("travel writers are *bricoleurs*, unashamed dilettantes; ethnographers are research scholars") and audience ("travel writing is written for a lay readership; ethnography aims at a specialized audience"), and, one could add, intent (Holland and Huggan, 1999: 12). The way in which travel writers and ethnographers manage their positions of privilege and power might also prove a fundamental distinction between the two:

Travel writers and anthropologists both occupy positions of power - granted largely by the economic differences between their own societies and the societies they visit - that allow them to establish an often unwarranted authority over their subjects. While travel writing tends to advertise the "special status" of the traveller as a privileged outsider - privileges that are merely confirmed when the outsider attempts to "move in," to "go native" - ethnography tends to downplay these privileges and to obviate the cult of personality, claiming instead to rely on a different kind of authority, conferred by the proven truths of science (Holland and Huggan, 1999: 12).

Thus, travel writing and ethnography share common origins and often overlap in their approach to describing peoples and places. According to Clifford, it would seem that in contemporary times the boundaries between the two forms of writing are becoming increasingly difficult to define as “a renegotiation of key relations that have constituted the two practices and discourses” takes place (Clifford, 1997: 65). The similarities between travel writing and ethnography has meant that the two forms of writing have been subject to academic critiques that are characterized by similar theoretical stances. Anthropologists have focused on the literary qualities of ethnographic texts to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of the representations they embody and “question the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience” (Clifford, 1986: 2). They have also reassessed ethnographic writing in light of post-colonial theory to reveal how it contributed towards maintaining and perpetuating the structures of domination, power, and privilege that characterized colonialism (Asad, 1973; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In the words of Marcus and Fisher, this research has placed “anthropology at the vortex of the debate about the problem of representing society in contemporary discourses [and] reveals much about...general intellectual trend[s] as well” (1986: vii). Therefore, when analyzing travel writing in general and its ethnographic content in particular, this body of scholarship on the poetics and politics of ethnographic writing is a relevant and useful source that can act as a complement to work done specifically on travel writing.

### **The Importance of Studying Colonial Travel Writing**

Academic focus on travel writing from the colonial period has been described by Pratt as part of a larger scale effort to decolonise knowledge within the social sciences and

humanities (Pratt, 1992: 2). Duncan and Gregory claim that it has raised “urgent questions about the politics of representation and spaces of transculturation, about the continuities between a colonial past and a supposedly post-colonial present, and about the ecological, economic and cultural implications of globalizing projects of modernity” (Duncan and Gregory, 1999: 1). Furthermore, this scholarship has emphasized that although the age of empire (at least in its most obvious guise) is past, the legacy of its world-view continues to determine how Westerners relate to the remainder of the world. It points out that much of our understanding of peoples and places is inextricably linked to a racist and imperialist past (Crang, 1999: 77).

Duncan and Sharp argue that because colonial imaginative geographies, and the representations of peoples and places that emanate from them, have become ‘naturalised’ over time, it is important to constantly confront them through the examination of media (such as travel writing) where they are to be found (Duncan and Sharp, 1993: 474). Duncan sees even the most virulently colonial discourses as worth deconstructing in order to help us understand our own stance vis-à-vis the world:

It is important that we examine representations such as those which nineteenth-century Europeans held of Africa, precisely because they seem so false, so preposterous, so despicable to us today. We must not forget that such representations in their day were seen, by Europeans at least, as scientifically true, persuasive and moral. What from our late twentieth-century site of representation seems a gross distortion of reality, for them appeared as mimetic representation. Only when we seriously explore those representations which we find self-evidently false can we begin to question the representations which we find self-evidently true. Only then will our own sites of representation become visible to us (Duncan, 1993: 54).

Some authors see the awareness that comes from the analysis of colonial travel writing as a step towards creating a world that is not structured by a binary opposition between the West

and the Rest (Driver, 1999: 211). Pratt (1992), who wrote perhaps the most seminal deconstruction of colonial travel writing, calls for post-colonial travel writing to be a vehicle for political commentary and witness in an effort to escape the grasp of colonial world-views such as the ones evident in the travel writing considered by her study.

### **Geography and Contemporary Travel Writing**

Given the above, it is not difficult to understand the zeal with which geographers have engaged colonial travel writing and the poignant and relevant nature of their output. However, the overwhelming propensity towards studying colonial travel writing has resulted in a significant lack of studies by geographers that address the ever-increasing body of contemporary travel writing\* (Gregory, 2000a: 858). This is not to say that all areas of academia have overlooked contemporary travel writing. Indeed, recent years have seen the publication of numerous studies on 20th century travel writing authored or edited largely by literary critics (for example Hulme and Youngs, 2002; Russell, 2000; Korte, 2000; Blanton, 1998; Holland and Huggan, 1998; Kowalewski, 1992; Fussell, 1980). Furthermore, two academic journals dedicated to the study of travel writing from a largely literary perspective (*Journeys* and *Studies in Travel Writing*) often include articles on contemporary travel writing. These studies have ranged anywhere from hypertheorized deconstructions of travel as a metaphor for displacement to naively untheorized celebrations of travel as freedom (Holland and Huggan, 1998: viii). While interesting and useful to geographers, this body of scholarship is no more than tangentially geographical in content and then only because it

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\* Usually defined as travel writing produced since the early 1960's, or be it after the period of colonial dissolution (which reached it apex between 1957 and 1963).

deals with themes (such as travel and the experience of place) that are inherently geographical. This is not to say that geographers cannot draw on these works or even use them as a starting point, just that they are not, and do not purport to be, geographically oriented scholarship.

In terms of work on contemporary travel writing that is more explicitly geographical, one could begin a survey by looking at the articles by Brown (1999) and Sharp (1999), both of which are included in Duncan and Gregory's edited work (1999). Brown considers the 'geographies of desire' in the works of author Neil Miller while Sharp analyses the representation of Provence in Peter Mayle's immensely popular travel narratives *A Year in Provence* and *Toujours Provence*. As an aside, it is interesting to note how representative Duncan and Gregory's *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (1999) is of geography's engagement with travel writing: eight out of the ten articles included deal with colonial travel writing and only two (those mentioned above) deal with contemporary travel writing.

In a stimulating piece of scholarship, Crush (1994) examines the representation of Johannesburg and the various ways in which the city is 'framed' in the works of three contemporary travel writers. Sensitive to geographic, literary and theoretical approaches to the travel writing under examination, Crush succeeds in highlighting how the works he is considering produce and depict the different faces of Johannesburg for their readerships. Sharp (2002) investigates how *Empire of Signs* (which occupies a grey area between travel writing, literature and literary theory) by Roland Barthes subverts the structure of Said's 'Orientalism' from within. Finally, and more from a tourist studies perspective than geography per se, Krist (1993) and Dann (1999) both deal with the relationship between travel writing and tourism. Dann's (1999) deserves particular mention for his detailed

examination of how three contemporary travel writers cultivate themselves as travellers who occupy different spaces and places from the much maligned 'tourist'

In addition to identifying the lacuna that exists with regard to geographical studies on contemporary travel writing, I feel the need to briefly critique what I view as an important issue vis-à-vis the body of geographical scholarship on colonial travel writing. My concern lies in the 'top-down' approach taken by many scholars who use travel writing merely to support pre-packaged post-colonial theory. Indeed, perhaps one reason why colonial travel writing has received so much attention is that it readily lends itself to deconstruction using post-colonial theory. In my opinion, studying travel writing strictly along theoretical lines tends to highlight far more of what *we* bring to a given work rather than what the work in question brings to our understanding of a particular context, place or issue. This gives rise to what has been called a 'hermeneutical circle' in which what is sought is found. An alternative would be what Brosseau calls a "dialogical relationship" in which the agency of a text is acknowledged and actively studied (1994: 349; see also Crang and Thrift, 2000 and Hubbard, et al, 2002). This approach proposes to examine the way in which each text generates its own geographies rather than having it act simply as a proving ground for preformulated research hypothesis (Brosseau, 1995: 90). It is clearly something that should be borne in mind when studying contemporary travel writing, which, despite what some might say, cannot be fully discussed within the context of post-colonial theory. Rather, when investigating contemporary travel writing, it becomes necessary to consider other theories and issues of contemporary relevance such as globalization and post-modernism.

In my view, increasing the level of attention awarded to contemporary travel writing could yield valuable contributions to the field of cultural geography. In opposition to Pratt

(1992), and as indicated above, I believe contemporary travel writing may not be inextricably bound to, and entirely mediated by, the imaginative geographies produced during the colonial period (in Crush, 1994: 262). Of course this is not to say that evidence of colonial discourse, structures and patterns are not often evident in contemporary travel writing. Neither do I agree with Clark that the main interest of contemporary travel writing lies in its attempts to create an acceptable, or perhaps less culpable, post-imperial voice (Clark, 1999: 10). I maintain that just as travel writing from the colonial period generated imaginative geographies that sedimented over time to become concrete, real and influential, so, too, is contemporary travel writing constructing world-views based on new sets of encounters, preconceptions, and ambitions. Indeed, contemporary travel writing is a congenial genre for our age of mobility that is essentially characterized by nomadism, migration, displacement, and deterritorialization (Korte, 2000: 143-4). For a cultural geographer interested in these issues it is difficult to conceive of a more relevant object of study.

Thus, my study derives its principal disciplinary contribution from engaging contemporary travel writing as the object of study rather than colonial-era travel writing, which has traditionally proved a far more popular focus for geographical scholarship. However, I believe the thematic emphasis I choose to place in my approach to this relatively novel object of study also constitutes a disciplinary contribution. I effectively try and move away from a strictly Post-Colonial reading of contemporary travel writing that focuses on the power relationships – with their implications of control, exploitation and subjugation – found in the representations of peoples and places in travel writing. Instead, I explore the imaginative geographies of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing with a greater

emphasis on different themes such as contemporary travel and tourism, globalization, and the role of place and mobility in the constitution of individual subjectivities and group identities. This is not to say that I deliberately avoid Post-Colonial theory or commentary, rather that it does not structure my study as in the case of many other geographical works on travel writing. By choosing to place the thematic emphasis where I have, I hope to highlight the relevance of contemporary travel writing as an object of study for exploring themes and theoretical pathways of current importance to cultural geography.

# Chapter Two

## Methodological Considerations and Interpretive Framework

### Toward a Definition of Travel Writing

In the introduction to this thesis I referred to a profusion of travel writing about Mongolia that has been published since the fall of this country's communist regime in 1990. However, the variety of forms and styles, genres and sub-genres that are evident within this body of writing, not to mention the sheer number of works, makes it necessary to establish parameters aimed at identifying which works to include in the present study and which to exclude. Thus, I will begin this chapter by discussing the contours and characteristics of travel writing as a literary genre with a view to then delimiting, typologically, the set of travel books that will constitute my primary objects of analysis. Having done this, I will provide a brief introduction to the selected works and furnish some biographical information on their authors. I will conclude the chapter with an outline of the interpretive framework with which I will approach my analysis of the representation of Mongolia in the works under consideration.

It is widely agreed that travel writing is a hybrid literary form that is notoriously difficult to classify (Kowalewski, 1992; Pratt, 1992; Blunt, 1995; Dann, 1999; Korte, 2000). According to Fussell, the simple fact that two words are needed to describe a form of writing

– as in the case of ‘travel writing’ – points to the elusiveness of a concrete definition (Fussell, 1980: 202 in Dann, 1999: 162). So blurred and fluid are the boundaries between travel writing and many literary genres and sub-genres, that the jury is out as to whether travel writing itself is characterized by sufficiently uniform conventions as to warrant being referred to as a genre unto itself. Indeed, as a “raffish open house” with an “omnivorous appetite for writing of all kinds” (Raban in Kowalewski, 1992: 7-8), travel writing can bring together aspects of the memoir, the novel, the letter, the journal, the ethnography, the confessional narrative, the history, and many other forms of writing not to mention combinations of the ones already listed (Kowalewski, 1992; Blunt, 1995). However, as Kowalewski points out, it is the very hybrid qualities of travel writing that lead to unusual and unique commentaries and speaking positions with respect to unfamiliar landscapes and cultures, and they are therefore precisely the qualities that make travel writing such an interesting object of study.

The inherent plurality and diversity of forms that fall under the banner of travel writing does not mean that a definition, however broad or subjective, of what exactly constitutes travel writing should not, and cannot, be sought. To begin with, I would agree with Kowalewski and Korte that first-person non-fictional narratives characterize travel writing in its ‘purest’ form (Kowalewski, 1992: 7; Korte, 2000: 9). Thus, even though narration may be intermingled with description, exposition or prescription, travel writing is defined by a narrative core that tells the story of a true journey conducted by the autobiographical subject of the text. Both Kowalewski (1992) and Blanton (1998) have argued that foregrounding the narrator is central to the study of travel writing:

The reliance upon narrative voice in this genre remains crucial because more than its episodic ‘plot’ or momentary characterizations, what shapes a travel

book's imaginative texture is its narrative intelligence. Modern travel classics [...] are worth studying less for the facts they may contain than for their elegant, inventive, sometimes cranky styles of personal witness. One of the primary pleasures (and, at times, irritations) of reading travel writing consists of following the contours of a writer-narrator's varying responses – now marvelling and appreciative, now caustic and perversely unresponsive – to the landscapes or people he or she encounters (Kowalewski, 1992: 8-9).

On her part, Blanton (1998) highlights the importance of narration to travel writing by sketching the evolution of travel writing in light of changes to the narrator's place in the narrative. The fact that the narrator, as I mentioned above, is the autobiographical subject of the text relating his or her exploits and experiences in the first person, means that an element of autobiography or memoir is almost always inherent to travel writing. This is most apparent in reflective passages that deal with the meaning or importance of a particular travel experience to the narrator/traveller's own identity constructs.

As purportedly non-fictional, works of travel writing are usually read as 'true' accounts. However, according to Korte, they also have an inherent element of fiction that comes from the recreation of travel experiences in textual form, often long after the experiences being related took place (Korte, 2000: 10). As a result a number of scholars have sought to highlight links between travel writing and the novel. For instance Hulme and Youngs have described how, especially in its first person form, the novel has often shared with travel writing "a focus on the centrality of the self, a concern with empirical detail and a movement through time and place which is simply sequential" (Hulme and Youngs, 2002: 6). Furthermore, the recounting of travel experiences in textual form often involves the production of plots and plot lines whose repeated patterns constitute tropes, a common feature of the novel as well (Korte, 2000: 10). Moreover, as Adams point out, similarities between travel writing and the novel also stem from the historical use of the former as an

important source of ideas and inspiration for the latter (Adams, 1983 in Kowalewski, 1992: 13).

Perhaps at this point it would be productive to consider what travel writing is not in order to illustrate how the above criteria can be used to exclude forms of writing that I (and others) believe should not be classified as travel writing. Firstly, guidebooks are not travel writing: they are not characterized by a narrative core, they do not share any of the above characteristics with the novel (or exploit fiction in any other way save perhaps through the use of selected quotes to transmit the 'feel' of a place), and, although the information they contained is the product of first hand experiences and research, they are not autobiographical (Dann, 1999: 163). Secondly, newspaper travel supplements cannot be considered travel writing under the definition I am adopting. Somewhat like guidebooks, the main purpose of these is usually to "manage the unfamiliarity and infrastructure of foreign climes for the tourist" and not tell the story of a journey (Dann, 1999: 162). Although they may be narrated in the first person, newspaper travel supplements are rarely characterized by reflexive autobiography or memoir, and then only as a device to tell the reader 'here are the kinds of sentiments this destination can be expected to engender'. Moreover, travel supplements are as likely to be chronological as not and they are not often characterized by a plot as such. Thirdly, novels whose principal theme is travel (such as *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac) do not fall under this definition of travel writing because they purport to be, and are generally read as, works of fiction in which the narrator is a creation of the author and not usually the author him or herself (although there may be close parallels between the two).

Thus, although travel writing has been described as a hybrid body of writing due to the diverse array of forms and styles that fall under its banner, there is a set of characteristics by which it can convincingly be defined as a distinct genre (Korte, 2000: 180). I believe that the definition I have adopted covers most works of travel writing at the core of the genre, although it admittedly (and purposefully) excludes a broad array of writing that is often referred to as travel writing simply because it deals with the theme of travel. Travel writing, in my view, is a body of writing that approaches the theme of travel using a common set of conventions (those described above) rather than a term that describes any piece of writing, independent of genre, that deals with the theme of travel. Like other literary genres, travel writing has a distinctive 'core' that includes works that are prototypical of the genre. Moving outward from this core, one encounters an increasingly grey area where works begin to resist easy classification as travel writing and instead begin to resemble allied genres.

### **Selection of Works Under Analysis**

In keeping with the above, when selecting the works of travel writing to use as my primary objects of study, I only considered non-fictional, autobiographical first-person narratives that constituted a textual rendition of travels in Mongolia since 1989. I also decided from the outset only to consider books and not short narratives of the sort that might appear in literary travel magazines. My reasoning for this was threefold: Firstly, by virtue of their length and scope, books provide more material from which to highlight representations. Secondly, dealing with books and short narratives would make comparisons between works difficult because the presence of plot lines, tropes and descriptive passages would naturally

be more restricted in the latter than the former. Thirdly, books (especially successful ones) are generally read by larger and broader-spectrum audiences than specialist magazine articles and therefore have a potentially greater influence on public perceptions. Using these criteria, I identified sixteen books of travel writing published in English about Mongolia since 1990 (Table 1). This set of books, in keeping with travel writing more generally, is characterized by a plurality of forms and styles. Therefore, in an effort to select which books would constitute my objects of study, I applied a series of filters aimed at identifying a smaller, more manageable subset of books which could be considered similar enough for the purposes of comparison.

Table 1. Travel books about Mongolia published in English since 1990. Bold entries indicate books chosen as principal objects of study.

Author	Date	Title	Location	Publisher
Allen, B.	1998	Edge of Blue Heaven: A Journey Through Mongolia	London	BBC
Angus, C.	2003	Lost in Mongolia: Rafting the World's Last Unchallenged River	?	Broadway Books
<b>Becker, J.</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>The Lost Country: Mongolia Revealed</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>Hodder and Stoughton</b>
Bull, B.	1999	Around the Sacred Sea: Mongolia and Lake Baikal on Horseback	Edinburgh	Canongate
Cahill, T.	1997	Pass the Butterworms: Remote Journeys Oddly Rendered	New York	Villard
Calfee, J.	2003	Spirits and Ghosts: Journeys Through Mongolia	New York	PowerHouse Books
Crane, G.	2000	Bones of the Master: A Buddhist Monk's Search for the Lost Heart of China	New York	Bantam Books
Kessel, D.	?	Into Mongolia	?	?
Lawless, J.	2002	Wild East: Travels in the New Mongolia	Sussex	Summersdale
Man, J.	1997	Gobi: Tracking the Desert	London	Pheonix
<b>Middleton, N.</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>The Last Disco in Outer Mongolia</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>Pheonix</b>
Saragerel	2000	Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism	?	Destiny Books
<b>Severin, T.</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>In Search of Genghis Khan</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>Hutchinson</b>
<b>Stewart, S.</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>In the Empire of Genghis Khan: A Journey Among Nomads</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>Flamingo</b>
Waugh, L.	2003	Hearing Birds Fly	London	Abacus
Warmbrunn, E.	2001	Where the Pavement Ends: One Woman's Bicycle Trip Through Mongolia, China...	?	Mountaineers Books

To begin with, I decided to exclude any books that also concerned themselves with describing travel in countries other than Mongolia or whose focus was not on travel within

Mongolia exclusively. This eliminated Bull (1999) and Angus (2003) both of which describe expedition style journeys that began in Mongolia but continued north into Siberia. The former recounts the author's horseback trek around the 'mythical' Lake Baikal, while the latter is an account of a pioneering descent of the Yenisey River by raft. Warmbrunn (2001) includes portions on Mongolia in her travel writing but her focus is regional, describing the people, places, and events that marked her 5000 kilometre bicycle trip across Asia. Finally, Cahill (1997) was excluded because his book is a collection of travel stories, only one of which deals with Mongolia specifically.

Next, I excluded what I call 'special interest' travel writing whose focus is on a particular facet of Mongolia. Thus, Man's (1997) description of the Gobi Desert and his travels through it was excluded because his book is largely a natural history oriented account of Mongolia's southern desert. The book is first and foremost about the plants, animals and landscapes of the Gobi. That these lie within the boundaries of Mongolia is of secondary importance. Similarly, Sarangarel (2000) is concerned with taking the reader on a journey through Shamanism in Mongolia rather than a journey through Mongolia per se. Once again Mongolia as a whole is of secondary concern.

Finally, I also excluded several books for different reasons in order for my final list to include travel writing that is sufficiently similar for the purposes of comparison. Lawless (2000) was excluded because it is a collection of anecdotal reportage based on the author's spell as editor of the UB Post, a Mongolian English Language newspaper, rather than a strictly narrated account of the author's experiences and observations. I excluded Kessel (date unknown) for the simple reason that, despite my best efforts, I was not able to obtain a copy of this book for consultation. Finally, I excluded Allen (1998) and Calfee (2003). In

both of these books the text is present largely in support of a photographic record, which itself constitutes the core of the book. Put more simply, these are picture books in which supremacy is given to a visual rather than textual form of expression. Indeed, Allen (1998) was published to accompany a BBC television series broadcast in the same year. While analyzing photographs is in itself an interesting way to study representations, my concern in this thesis is with text, not image (see Schwartz and Ryan, 2003).

Having excluded the works above from my initial list of sixteen, I was left with Severin (1991), Becker (1992), Middleton (1992), Stewart (2000) and Waugh (2003). In addition to being characterized by an autobiographical narrative core and purporting to be factual accounts, these five books share a key commonality: their primary *raison d'être* is to describe the experiences and observations accrued during the course of a journey to a place and space whose boundaries can best be delimited by the appellative 'Mongolia'. In other words, the subject and focus of these travel books is first and foremost 'Mongolia' and the experience of it on the part of the writers in question. They re-present textually what the authors saw while gazing on, and negotiating with, a geographical entity that they themselves describe as Mongolia. As such I propose these five travel books (highlighted in Table 1) as the primary objects of analysis for my study on the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing.

### **An Introduction to the Books and Their Authors**

The author of *In Search of Genghis Khan*, the first of the five books to be published, Tim Severin is one of England's most successful post-war travel writers. Severin, who has written at least fourteen books of travel writing, has built a career on writing books in which

he retraces historic or legendary voyages, including those of Marco Polo, St Brendan of Ireland, Ulysees, Jason and the Argonauts, Sinbad the Sailor, and Alfred Russell Wallace. A graduate in history from Oxford University, Severin's "enjoyment and enthusiasm for his travels are always highest at moments when he can connect what he sees or experiences with past places, events, and discoveries" (Christianson, 1999: 256). Severin's books have reportedly sold well and gone through multiple printings and translations although they have received little scholarly attention (Christianson, 1999: 264). *In Search of Genghis Khan* recounts a journey that saw Severin join a UNESCO sponsored, Mongolian run expedition that sought to recreate the route of an extraordinarily efficient medieval communication system (the 'Orto') by which messages were transmitted by riders on horseback across the vast distances of the Mongol empire. Disillusioned with the behaviour of the expedition's leader, Severin leaves the expedition after several weeks to pursue his own itinerary in Western Mongolia, from which material for the second half of the book is derived. *In Search of Genghis Khan* received mixed reviews. One reviewer describes Severin as an easygoing travel companion and a literate writer who produced a "fascinating and rewarding" book (Cahill, 1992: 37). In stark contrast, another reviewer claims that Severin's depiction of Mongolia is one characterized by loosely drawn stereotypes, caricatured individuals and untrustworthy, opinionated historical and cultural observations (Salomon, 1994: 368-369). I will leave the reader to form an opinion of his or her own upon reading my analyses of Severin's book in the chapters that follow.

In the words of its author, Nick Middleton, *The Last Disco in Outer Mongolia* (1992) is a "before and after book" in the sense that it describes two separate trips to Mongolia, the first when he was a graduate research exchange student in 1987 and the second for the

purposes of organizing a wildlife adventure holiday for a British tour company in 1990. Middleton's book skips back and forth between the two trips and vividly and humorously recounts his experiences of travelling in Mongolia before and after communist dissolution. Throughout his book, Middleton comes across as a bemused, somewhat sardonic, young Englishman with an eccentric penchant for quirky, off-beat experiences and encounters. It therefore came as a surprise to learn that Middleton is a lecturer in physical geography at Oxford University (with an enviably long list of academic publications to his name) and an environmental consultant who has worked with major organizations including the IUCN, UNEP, EU, and WWF. However, more in keeping with the Middleton we meet in *The Last Disco in Outer Mongolia*, he is also the author of three other works of travel writing whose titles (*Kalashnikovs and Zombie Cucumbers: Travels in Mozambique*, *Travels as a Brussels Scout*, and *Ice Tea and Elvis: A Saunter Through the Southern States*) suggest a casual tone in line with the book I propose to study. Most recently, Middleton hosted a BBC documentary entitled *Going to Extremes* in which he travels to the hottest, coldest, wettest and driest places on earth.

Jasper Becker's book *The Lost Country: Mongolia Revealed* (1992) is somewhat different from the other four books under consideration. Betraying Becker's background as Beijing correspondent for *The Guardian* newspaper from 1985 to 1990, his book is an uneasy mix of travel writing and reportage. Although *The Lost Country* fits the definition I adopted for 'travel writing', it lacks the chronological sequence of the other books and is instead organized according to thematic chapters ("Choibalsan and the Years of Terror", "Buddhism", "The Shamans", etc.). Within each chapter the author combines relevant historical/political/anthropological data and anecdotes with his first-hand experiences,

observations, and findings, (concerning the theme at hand) which he accrued over the course of five separate trips to Mongolia. As the book's subtitle suggests, the idea that the author is 'uncovering' or 'exposing' hidden facets of Mongolia through first-hand research is ever-present in *The Lost Country*. Becker's journalistic background also shows through in his propensity towards conducting lengthy interviews with Mongolians notable for their expertise in his areas of interest. From the reviews I read, it would appear that *The Lost Country* received a cool reception from critics who pointed to the book's many exaggerations and overstatements, factual inaccuracies, and typological errors that, in the words of one reviewer, "leave the reader adrift in a curious mixture of fact, fiction and muddle, which cannot fail to undermine confidence in his book" (Sanders, 1992: 30; see also Swift, 1992: 12; Bawden, 1993: 66-67).

*In the Empire of Genghis Khan: A Journey Among Nomads*, by Stanley Stewart (2000), is perhaps the most well known and widely read of the five books I propose to study. It won the prestigious Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and received widespread critical acclaim. In the book, Stewart, a writer for the Sunday Times and the Daily Telegraph, travels the length of Mongolia on horseback immersing himself in the nomadic culture of the country's rural inhabitants for whose lifestyle he harbours a particular fascination. Having read the book, it is hard not to agree with one reviewer who describes Stanley Stewart as

An extremely talented travel writer, whose powers of description of people and places are exceptional. In a personal way that is unassuming, charming and most adaptable, he seems to attract characters, incidents and adventures like a magnet wherever he goes. They are experiences that would take a lucky few a lifetime to accumulate. His keen sense of humour is infectious, and he wears his learning lightly" (Funnell, 2002: 375).

*In the Empire of Genghis Khan* is Stewart's third book, his second, *The Frontiers of Heaven: A Journey Beyond the Great wall* (1996), having also won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. According to the publisher's blurb, Stewart was born in Ireland, grew up in Canada and lives in London.

Published in 2003, *Hearing Birds Fly: A Nomadic Year in Mongolia* is the most recent of the five books. The book is based on author Luisa Waugh's year spent as an English teacher in a small village in the Altai Mountains of far Western Mongolia. In it she chronicles the daily life of the village and its inhabitants as well as the lives of the nomadic herders whose *gers* are peppered across the barren mountains surrounding Tsengel. *Hearing Birds Fly* is also an introspective book in which Waugh reflects on her own life in Tsengel and what it means to be living there. It is an unassuming travel book written in flowing prose that received little critical attention during its first six months in print. Luisa Waugh is English and this is her first book.

Given that I will be referring to these five books on a continual basis throughout the remainder of the thesis, I have decided to reduce congestion on the page by employing an abridged referencing format when citing them. Instead of using the parenthesized author-date-page format, I will simply provide the author's initials followed by the page number from which a given excerpt was taken, both in parentheses. For example, a quote from page 121 of Stanley Stewart's book *In the Empire of Genghis Khan* will be referenced: (SS 121). Abbreviations for the other authors will be JB (Jasper Becker), TS (Tim Severin), NM (Nick Middleton), and LW (Luisa Waugh).

## Interpretive Framework

As posited in the introduction, representations of Mongolia in the works of contemporary travel writing under consideration constitute a coherent discourse that produces and reproduces an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. These representations and the discursive formations they create and recreate as part of a mutually constitutive system reflect cultural and social patterns in the realm of western travel during a time characterized by ever increasing globalization. Therefore, by undertaking an interpretive analysis of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia I am at once investigating how conceptualizations of geographical space are transmitted through travel writing and how travel writing offers an especially translucent window into cultural and social patterns. It is clear that this study is rooted in the ideas of Michel Foucault, which have encouraged geographers to focus on the relationships between discourse, knowledge, meaning and space:

Disrupting any straightforward separation of text and a 'prediscursive' real world, Foucault's ideas of developing a critical genealogy of knowledge became widely (though not uncritically) adopted by geographers seeking to expose the importance of text in shaping the contours of everyday life (Hubbard et al, 2002: 132).

However, although Foucault (1972) provided the epistemological basis for this study, it is the work of Edward Said on which it most self-consciously based. More specifically, I have picked up on Said's (1978) theorization that issues of representation are crucial to understanding discourses within which knowledge and meaning are constructed (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). According to Said, representations of other places and peoples are embedded in the language, culture, and institutions of the representer, and therefore

implicated with a great many things other than the 'truth' or 'reality' (which are representations themselves).

Given the above, it should be no surprise to the reader that my approach to analyzing the representation of Mongolia in the travel writing under consideration will not be through the application of a standard 'content analysis' methodology. A basic technique for examining text widely used by social geographers, formal content analysis involves determining the importance of, and subsequently searching for, certain features or characteristics in a given text (see Riessman, 1993; Forbes, 2000). Most content analyses are undertaken to provide quantitative information concerning the manifest content of the text. Instead, my study adopts a discourse analysis approach, a way of analyzing texts that considers rhetorical content in relation to its effects, which in my study concern the creation of 'realities' through the 'construction' and documentation of difference (Hubbard et al, 2002: 132). My approach approximates that of other cultural geographers who have engaged travel writing (see Chapter One) in that it assumes there is no pre-interpreted reality that writing reflects, but rather that writing is constitutive of meaning through representations of the unfamiliar (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 2).

In seeking to interpret the way representations reflect and reproduce discursive formations that are implicated with an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a travellers' frontier, it is clear that my study is firmly rooted in the hermeneutical spirit of inquiry. A hermeneutic approach implies a creative process of interpretation underscored by the researcher him/herself. In geography and allied disciplines, critics of hermeneutic inquiry have described it as a "corrosive relativism in which everything is but a more or less clever expression of opinion" (Geertz, 1988: 2). However, as Duncan and Ley point out, "[w]hat is

seen as avoidable bias by the positivist is acknowledged by the hermeneutician as an inescapable part in the formation of knowledge” (Duncan and Ley, 1993: 8)\*. Furthermore, it is important to stress that in geography hermeneutical inquiry is grounded (often rigorously so) in social/cultural theory, in disciplinary texts, the choice of which reveals the positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the objects of study. With this in mind, I have developed a ‘hermeneutical framework’ that identifies theoretical concepts around which I will structure my analysis. I see this theory as an ‘interpretive lever’, a tool to highlight and pry open representations of Mongolia in the texts and discuss the discursive formations through which they are constituted and reconstituted. As I alluded to above, the most important of these theoretical concepts in terms of its role in structuring my analysis as a whole is Said’s notion of “imaginative Geographies”. Therefore, I will discuss this concept at some length before briefly identifying the other theoretical concepts that are relevant to more specific aspects of my study.

### Imaginative Geographies

Shurmer-Smith and Hannam argue that “all places are imaginary, in the sense that they cannot exist for us beyond the image we are capable of forming of them in our minds” (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1994: 59). The imagination therefore is inextricably associated with the assignation of meaning. As Cosgrove explains:

Imagination is neither purely of the senses, which align us with nature, nor purely of the intellect, which separates us from nature. The work of the imagination is neither purely *reproductive* (that is, determined by sense data

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\* According to Barnes, “the spirit of hermeneutical inquiry, that is, the recognition of the importance of interpretation, open-mindedness, and a critical, reflexive sensibility, is as great as it has ever been and certainly evident in the discipline’s recent interest in the poetics and politics of representation” (Barnes, 2000: 716).

from the external world on which it depends) nor purely *productive* (that is, an image making negation of that external world). Rather, imagination plays a symbolizing role, seizing on sense data without reproducing them as mimetic images and “metamorphosing” them through its metaphorical capacity to generate new meaning (Cosgrove, 1994: 388).

To continue with Cosgrove, the imagination constructs meaning in the present by synthesising the past and the future, both of which are themselves symbolized imaginative constructs given that they are either no longer, or have not yet become, sense data (Cosgrove, 1994: 391). Thus, a traveller imagines a destination based on past conceptualizations and representations of the place as well as the desires, demands and aspirations he or she ascribes to it. Together they create an imaginative geography of the destination.

It is important to stress that imaginative geographies are more than individual perceptions. While each individual experiences the world in a particular fashion, the images constructed are often derived from and shared by other members of the culture to which he or she belongs (Driver, 1999). In fact, the term imaginative geographies was coined by Said (1978) to describe what he called (borrowing from V.G Kiernan) “Europe’s collective day-dream of the Orient.” So coherent, bounded and sedimented was this “day-dream” that he termed it a discourse, a system of statements by which the Orient was ordered, understood, known. According to Said, the discourse of Orientalism was supported and reinforced by scholarship, imagery, literature, doctrines, and colonial administrations. These legitimized a *limited* vocabulary and representational structure through which the Orient became known and with which it became inextricably associated (Said, 1978; Jackson, 1989; Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). The residual message here, and the one I believe most important to my

study of travel writing about Mongolia, is that imaginative geographies in part govern the way we *know* a place and people.

A further point put forward by Said, and one that has subsequently received wide attention in academic literature, is the notion that imaginative geographies assign meaning in a process of relational identity construction. As Crang explains it, imagining the 'foreign' helped construct a notion of the 'home' culture through a process of 'Othering', whereby the 'Self' is defined in relation to the characteristics of an 'Other' culture (Crang, 1998). According to Jackson, for Said:

The Orient provides Europeans with their deepest and most recurring sense of the 'Other'. [...] Said's most radical insight, and the point he develops at length, is that the Orient was almost a European invention: A place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences. The European sense of self is, in part, premised on the existence of another, different world, largely a product of its own imagination. East assumes West; the Orient assumes the Occident. The two geographical entities support and reflect each (Jackson, 1989: 149).

The notion of the Orient as a space composed of images, ideas, and experiences that contrast to those in Europe led Said to identify a series of binary oppositions created and sustained by the discourse of Orientalism. While the Orient is portrayed as irrational, disorderly, feminine, despotic, and timeless, Europe, in direct contrast, is seen as rational, orderly, masculine, democratic and progressive (Gregory, 2000c). Thus, because they are constructed relationally, the study of imaginative geographies can lend insight into the self-perceptions, identity constructs, and social processes at play within the group or culture that generated them. Imaginative geographies are indicative and constitutive of the 'Self' more so than of the 'Other'. This is necessarily so given that imaginative constructions of the

'Other' are often based on minimal or nonexistent assessments of the places and peoples whom they conjure (Bruner, 1991; Gregory, 1999).

According to Said, the imbrication of imaginative geographies with the production of knowledge highlights a power relationship in which domination is achieved in the process of knowing the 'Other' (Lewis, 1996: 16; Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999: 49). As Gregory posits, imaginative geographies are not involved "simply in demarcating 'our space' from 'their space' ...but [in] 'our' *reaching into* 'their' space and imaginatively – and eventually materially – *appropriating* that space and claiming it *as 'ours'*" (Gregory 2000c: 322; italics in original). The space becomes 'ours' because it is only allowed to exist *as we know it* (Said, 1978: 32). This argument goes beyond the interpretation of imaginative geographies as culturally and socially mediated ascriptions of meaning onto places and peoples described in the preceding paragraphs and introduces a political dimension to the concept, which was an integral part of Said's (1978) agenda. Indeed, "it quickly becomes clear that we cannot think about concepts of foreignness without realizing that there are complicated power relations involved in the construction of the category and that to consider a place and its people as foreign is to exclude them from an assumed (Western) normality" (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1994: 17). Said widens the playing field even further:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas and forms, about images and imaginings (Said, 1994: 7 in Gregory 2000c: 302).

In addition to structuring people's understanding of the world, imaginative geographies also help to shape their actions (Driver, 1999). We have already seen how, according to Said, the discourse of Orientalism was an integral part of European material

culture, in that it was articulated in, and perpetuated by, literature, the visual arts, academic scholarship and colonial governments. Phillips looks at how narratives such as Robinson Crusoe inspired individuals to embark for existing and potential colonies in search of excitement and adventure (Phillips, 1996). More than reflecting the age of empire, these narratives helped to construct it. In travel, imaginative geographies help determine how particular places become “signposted so that tourists can find them as ‘sites’ and locate them within an imaginative landscape where they become meaningful as ‘sights’” (Gregory, 1999: 116). Over time these become itineraries that to a large extent condition the expectations and experiences of future travellers (Gregory, 1999; Moutafi, 2000). Thus, imaginative geographies are consequential, they are ‘real’, not so much in the sense that they are accurate reproductions of the world, but that they influence the way we negotiate, experience and interact with places and peoples (Driver, 1999).

As I have already put forward, I believe that contemporary travel writing about Mongolia reflects and reproduces an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a ‘travellers’ frontier’. In order to support this assertion, my objective is to analyze the discursive formations, the limited vocabulary and representational structure, which reflect and perpetuate this imaginative geography in the works in question. Thus, the concept of imaginative geographies is central to my hermeneutical framework because it frames the interpretive analysis and structures my research question.

#### *Additional Theoretical Concepts and Their Application*

My engagement with the work of Edward Said is not confined to his theorizations on “imaginative geographies.” In Chapter Four I consider his discussions on the effect of

representations of the Orient on notions of time and temporality. Said argued that the 'discourse of Orientalism' acted to fossilize the Orient, causing it to become a static, unchanging entity in the minds of Europeans (Said, 1978 and 1985). I argue that the discourse in which Mongolia is conceptualized as a traveller's frontier has the comparable effect of removing contemporary Mongolia from the stream of linear time and cognitively placing it in a fossilized past where time is cyclical and the usual changes associated with progress do not take place. Thus, Said's work provides a natural starting point from which to argue the presence of discursive formations that posit Mongolia as a travel destination unchanged by the globalizing influences of the twentieth century.

In order to discuss these discursive formations, I employ two additional areas of theory. Firstly, I draw on the concept of 'normative geographies', which explains how social and cultural units develop prescriptions as to what belongs in a particular place or space and what does not (Shields, 1991; Cresswell, 1996). A person or group's normative geography effectively defines what is right, just and appropriate within the context of a particular moral landscape. I use this idea to structure an argument that in contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, modernity in its many manifestations are conceptualized as being 'out of place' in the Mongolian landscape, whereas, conversely, tradition and history are seen as being 'in place'. Secondly, I consider a body of theory that is concerned with the poetics and politics of ethnographic representations. I use this to support a line of argument in which I describe how the presence of ethnographic-style descriptions evoke an allochronic discourse, a system of thought and practice that removes its referent – the culture being described – from the stream of time in which the author and his culture exist (Fabian, 1983).

Another important body of theoretical literature I employ in this thesis is concerned with the cultural history of travel. In Chapter Three I draw on this writing to trace the notion of the 'traveller's frontier' from its imperial origins to the present day in an effort to contextualize my discussions during the remainder of the thesis. Still in Chapter Three I show how certain features that are always associated with the notion of 'travellers' frontiers' are also associated with Mongolia in the travel writing under consideration. In Chapter Five I supplement the body of theoretical literature in question with related scholarship concerning the social differentiation between 'travellers' and 'tourists' within the broader realm of travel discourse. I also introduce theory pertaining to the influence of place on subject formation in order to argue that the experience of Mongolia is an important source from which the writers in question derive an identity as 'travellers' as distinct from 'tourists'. Furthermore, in Chapter Five I discuss how the notion of 'authenticity' and the concept of 'intertextuality' (the co-presence of other texts within a given text) can also be used to highlight discursive formations in which Mongolia is conceptualized as a frontier destination for 'intrepid travellers', but not 'tourists'.

#### *Framework for Textual Analysis*

Scholarship, such as mine, that seeks to interpret textual representations and situate them in a particular realm of socio-cultural action must be sensitive to the ways in which the textual medium they are analyzing conveys representations. In his discussion of geography and the novel, Brosseau points out that geographers have widely regarded the novel as an unproblematic resource "that yields information in an almost transparent fashion" (Brosseau, 1995: 89). In order to move beyond this simplistic approach, he proposes that more time

should be spent on the text itself, on analyzing the way in which novels express and generate given geographies (see also Hubbard et al, 2002). This, in part, means being sensitive to the effect of form, structure, style, language, and literary devices (among other things) on the representation of places and spaces, peoples and societies (Brosseau, 1994: 347-8). While I am not analyzing novels in my thesis, I am analyzing literary texts that, like the novel, transmit representations in more subtle ways than through straightforward passages describing geographical entities or phenomena. Consequently, I have developed a textual analysis framework that will help me to highlight relevant representations embedded in the fabric of the texts under consideration. I see this framework as a sort of 'analytical toolbox' from which to draw selectively depending on the aspect of text I am concentrating on at a given time. For the purposes of explanation, this textual analysis framework, or 'toolbox', can be divided into three parts: narrative, rhetorical and structural.

The first part includes analytical 'tools' that are relevant to the narrative aspect of the text. More specifically, when appropriate, I consider the role of 'tropes' and 'framing' in the representation of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. By 'tropes', I mean recurring plot-lines or narrative formats that are common to the different works under consideration. On various occasions I highlight the presence of such patterns in an effort to show how the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier is the product of a discourse that is not specific to a given work, but characterizes all of the books being studied. The term 'frame' or 'framing' (although a number of meanings have been proposed), can be used as an alternative to the word 'context'. Whereas 'context' alone suggests that the backdrop to actions and events is a given, 'framing' suggests that context is actively produced and constructed in texts (Hawthorn, 1994: 105). Furthermore, framing implies an element of

inclusion (that which is contained within the border of the frame) and exclusion (that which is not admitted within border of the frame). Thus, I use this idea to argue that Mongolia as a travel destination is not a given context within which the travel narratives occur, but rather a place that has been actively framed to produce a particular context. This specific 'context', I argue, arises in part from an imaginative geography of the country as a traveller's frontier that influences, and in large measure defines, the descriptive and experiential record that follows.

The second part of my textual analysis framework covers concepts that concern the rhetorical aspect of the texts. By this I mean the stylistic devices that are used to convince the reader of the legitimacy and plausibility of the representations that characterize the texts under consideration. More specifically, I consider the use of language and phraseology in the creation of imagery that has overtones relevant to the representation of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. I analyze how tone reflects discursive formations by suggesting particular attitudes and speaking positions in relation to Mongolia. In several instances, I also look at the effect of hyperbole in creating totalizing representations that leave little room for being questioned or disputed by the reader. These stylistic devices all function to establish a narrative authority that naturalizes and normalizes the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. They in effect persuade readerships to conceptualize Mongolia in the same way as the texts have done; they make us believe that language is being used in a strictly mimetic fashion.

The third and final part of my textual analysis framework considers a more structural aspect of the texts. Here I am referring specifically to the relational construction of meaning. For example, in Chapter Three I show how the framing of Mongolia as a travel

destination is associated with imperial travel discourse and, significantly, disassociated with contemporary discourses of a hybrid, globalized world. In this example Mongolia is conceptualized in relation to one discourse as much as it is conceptualized in opposition to another. I argue that large portions of the texts in question are structured according to such relational constructions of meaning. The representation of Mongolia as an anachronism, discussed in Chapter Four, is also relational in that it presumes that other parts of the world, namely the West from which the travel writers hail, is progressive and free from the shackles of history. This relational structure is once again exemplified by the discussion in Chapter Five in which I examine how the subject positions and identity constructs of the travel writers being studied are textually constructed as binary opposites to those associated with the classic 'tourist'. Furthermore, using intertextual references as evidence, I show how they are also defined by association with imperial travellers and explorers from the so-called 'golden age of travel' when the world was largely unknown to Westerners.

This textual analysis framework provides the 'tools' for prying apart the architecture of the text in order to get at the multiple ways meaning is conveyed therein. My intention is to employ this textual analysis framework to highlight representations in the text that can then be informed and discussed with reference to the more theoretical/conceptual side of my interpretive framework. Thus, the two sides of my interpretive framework supplement each other and allow for a reading of the works under analysis that acknowledges their inherent complexity as textual objects of study.

# Chapter Three

## Imagining Mongolia: Framing the Destination as a 'Traveller's Frontier'

*...the very name Outer Mongolia has a special call on the imagination.*

– Jasper Becker

### On the Notion of Travellers' Frontiers

On one level the notion of a 'frontier' ties in neatly with the concept of imaginative geographies. Although Turner (1894) used the term 'frontier' to describe the "temporary boundary of an expanding society at the edge of substantially free lands" and applied it to his study of the development of the American West, he acknowledged that the term has another, less tangible, dimension (in Bohannan: 1967: 6). Far more than a physical place to be settled, for him the frontier was also "a state of mind", "a form of society", and the "meeting ground between savagery and civilization" (in Bohannan: 1967: 6-7). This definition is by no means unproblematic given its obvious colonial overtones. The notion of 'free lands' is implicated with processes of erasure, particularly in the frontier context to which Turner was referring. Moreover, the binary opposition drawn between 'savagery' and 'civilization' reflects a worldview based on a moral structure that defines hierarchies of race and culture, in the process legitimizing acts of subjugation and exploitation. However, this

definition is useful to the study at hand in as much as it indicates that the term 'frontier' describes a cognitive construct as much as it describes a physical place. Indeed, a recent study by Nugent and Ridge shows how the frontier of the American West was an idea, myth or mental construct as much as it was a migrating region for settlement (Nugent and Ridge, 1999; see also Smith, 1950). Thus, in a sense, frontiers are always the products of imaginative geographies, they are a specific socio-cultural conceptualization inextricably linked to a particular place at a particular time.

During the so called age of empire when Europeans began travelling across the globe in large numbers, travel took place in a context composed of seemingly limitless travellers' frontiers, a profusion of little known places both physically and cognitively on the margins of Europe. Indeed, the existence of frontiers in which to travel was so important to European (and especially Victorian) travellers that to have somewhere "beyond the end of telegraph cables and mail-boat lines", as Joseph Conrad once put it became a necessary ingredient of travel (in Macfarlane, 2003: 193). Shurmer-Smith and Hannam explain how "[t]he great expansion [...] which accompanied the early stages of imperialism prompted a genre of Western mythologies which focused on the idea of 'lost worlds' and 'hidden cities', to such an extent that tangible places on the margins of the British Empire began to be endowed with quasi-mystical appeal" (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1994: 62). Such places of the imagination created by travellers and articulated in their travel writing beckoned to other travellers. Over time certain frontiers became well travelled and their allure diminished in the eyes of travellers who had already set their sights on that mysterious place rumoured to exist beyond the snow capped peaks on the horizon, or where mapped regions gave way to blank spaces. Even assuming that one frontier was replaced by another as the

former 'fell' to travel books, maps, science and colonial administration, the perceived loss of each imagined frontier soon began to have a cumulative on the European psyche:

The Victorians were in many ways the unknown's most implacable foes. Yet even as they worked so energetically to eradicate it, they began also to feel the need for the continued existence of inaccessible places – places of great imaginative potency (Macfarlane, 2003: 192).

For example, in the build-up to a high profile expedition to summit Everest in 1920 – the frontier most en-vogue at the time – newspaper editorials carried a tone of lament. The Evening News wrote that “[s]ome of the last mystery of the world will pass when the last secret place in it, the naked peak of Everest, shall be trodden...” (Macfarlane, 2003: 194). Similar tones of lament grew in both volume and frequency as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed and the process of globalization took over from the adventurous traveller as the most ‘implacable foe’ of the world’s imagined frontiers.

Krist writes of how the “wide-ranging influence of Euro-American popular culture [...] has seriously undermined the particularity of many places on the globe, and those great homogenisers – television, radio and newspapers – have virtually annihilated the ignorance of the larger world that once kept regional essences pure,” and, I would add, a source of mystery and desire for travellers (Krist, 1993: 593). In our increasingly homogenized and hybrid world of global culture where time and space are ever more compressed, it is not hard to see how the imagined frontiers of the Victorian era so crucial to notions of travel are becoming more difficult than ever to conceptualize. Kowalewski quotes John Julius Norwich to make this exact point:

Half a century ago, any young Englishman prepared to venture beyond the shores of Western Europe could lay claim to the title [of traveler]; patience, resourcefulness and robustness of digestion were the only qualities needed.

A year or two later he could return, the pride of his family, the envy of his friends: a trail-blazer, a hero. Alas, those days are over. Everybody goes everywhere – or nearly everywhere – buying their air tickets with their credit cards and being met by airport buses, secure in the knowledge that their hotel reservations have been confirmed, that the rent-a-car firm is expecting them, and that it will be perfectly safe to drink the Coca-Cola (Kowalewski, 1992: 4).

Indeed, it is perhaps mass tourism, a product of globalization, which has done most to eliminate or at least significantly reduce the existence of classic travellers' frontiers. Although the vitriolic critiques of mass tourism are too many to summarize comprehensively, it is fair to say that it has been regarded by many as an ever expanding juggernaut that threatens to turn every place and indigenous cultural expression into a self-conscious, contrived, and profit-motivated product. From this perspective the tourist is part of an inconceivably large yet "sense-less mob" that partakes in pre-packaged, 'inauthentic' experiences suited to indiscriminating and unadventurous tastes (Buzzard, 1993; Dann, 1999). The 'tourist' is also the object through which the 'traveller' defines him or herself in a classic example of relational identity construction (a point to which I shall return in chapter 5).

As a result of the processes above, it has become increasingly more difficult for people to find tangible places to imagine as the 'quasi mythical' frontiers that formed an integral part of travel during the age of empire. This of course does not mean that people no longer have an interest in, or drive to seek out, such travellers' frontiers. On the contrary, "the contemporary mood would dictate a nostalgia for the time when travel was truly travel, when there were boundaries between known and unknown, civilized and uncivilized, when escape was still possible" (Leed, 1991: 285). This nostalgia is played out in contemporary travel writing, which is characterized by the "bitterness and disillusionment of contemporary

philosophical travellers weaned on the literature of the heroic age of European discovery [...] with its conception of uncorrupted beginnings beyond the periphery, its acceptance of the unknown as the source of the novel, a domain of possibility” (Leed, 1991: 286). These contemporary travel writers have a noticeable urge to get off the so called ‘beaten track’ and search for frontiers, for what Minh-ha calls the small “micro-deserts” that remain tucked away from tourists and the wider influences of globalization (Minh-ha, 1994: 22).

In undertaking the search for new frontiers (of the old kind!) contemporary travel writers are perhaps also responding to a sense of individual loss that is often associated with globalization. Taylor (1991) writes of how modern life seems to lack a heroic dimension, a higher sense of purpose, passion.... Historically, travel has often been seen as a repository of these intangible aspects of life, and was the medium through which many Europeans (mostly men) sought sources of meaning, and even immortality in the form of their accounts (Leed 1991: 286). That mass tourism and globalization have effectively foreclosed this possibility is something they are not readily prepared to accept. One must of course bear in mind that contemporary travel writers are not alone in being disillusioned by this state of affairs. Their travel writing is popular precisely because a significant portion of the Western public is keen to read books in which they can find “evidence that the world is still heterogeneous, unfathomable, bewildering, [...] that the spirit of adventure can hold off the threat of exhaustion” (Holland and Huggan, 1999: 204). Indeed, a rather uncharitable view sees astute travel writers as simply ‘cashing-in’ on the West’s growing fears of homogenization (Holland and Huggan, 1999: 204).

Thus, the notion of ‘the frontier’ has long been implicated with travel and travel writing. I contend that the way Mongolia as a travel destination is textually “framed” in

contemporary travel writing is a product of this enduring relationship and provides an ideal example through which to highlight the recreation and perpetuation of frontier imaginative geographies in the world of travel today. For the remainder of this chapter I will argue that the way Mongolia is framed as a travel destination in the introductory chapter(s) of the works under consideration suggests an imaginative geography of the country as a 'traveller's frontier'. My focus is on the introductory chapter(s) of the books because in travel writing these are generally concerned with constructing an image of the travel destination for the readership, with setting the stage (or context) for the ensuing narrative that will intermingle descriptive representations of the destination with a record of the traveller's experiences. I will identify a series of tropes, images and characterizations common (in one way or another) to all of the works under analysis and propose that together they frame Mongolia in light of a particular set of characteristics which suggest that the country has been conceptualized as a frontier travel destination.

### **Heading Back of Beyond: Framing Mongolia as a Travel Destination**

#### *'A Mysterious and Remote Land of Adventure'*

From the discussion above it is possible to isolate a set of characteristics associated with what could be called the 'classic traveller's frontier'. Firstly, such places are seen as remote, both in terms of geographical distance from Europe and in terms of not being concretely understood, categorized and incorporated by the European consciousness. Secondly, and at least in part due to their having been located on the periphery, they are imagined as inherently mysterious, mythical even. Thirdly, they are perceived to naturally engender adventurous travel, largely as a result of the first two points. In introducing

Mongolia for their readerships the travel writers in question all imbue their destination with these characteristics. This has the effect of depicting Mongolia as comparable to the prototypical frontiers of the age of empire and contributes to framing the country itself as a modern day version of the classic traveller's frontier.

I begin my analysis with Becker who opens his book by conjuring-up an image of Mongolia as an "enormous and forgotten land [where] the wolf still stalks the wild horse across a treeless plain and where the eagle hangs in a blue sky searching the bare mountains for the shy argali sheep that no shepherd has ever tamed" (JB 1). He populates this landscape, rather fantastically it must be said, with "bloody conquerors", "wandering tribes", "shamans", and "mystic kings" (JB 1). Bringing himself into the picture, Becker describes how he sometimes stood atop the Great Wall outside of Peking (where the reader learns he once lived) gazing north to where, beyond the horizon, China gives way to Mongolia. There lies the possibility of escape to "grand and empty lands" which contrast sharply with the "crowded, regimented and oppressive place" that, for him, China has become (JB 2). Standing on the Wall, he daydreams of camping by the ruins of Karakorum, once the world's most important city, and travelling for days on end "seeing nothing more than the distant flocks of [an] ancient race of shepherd warriors" (JB 2). Thus, Becker's introduction clearly posits Mongolia as being at once mysterious, remote and a place for him to enact his fantasies of adventurous travel.

The (over the top) fanciful tone and imagery employed by Becker to introduce his destination is almost outdone by Middleton. Basing himself on a slightly different conceptualization of Mongolia than Becker, that of the remote communist backwater, the first page of his preface invites the reader to suspend disbelief and imagine him or herself as

Tintin, the “intrepid boy journalist” of the Belgian comic strip. He then constructs a fantasy in which as Tintin:

You are traveling to some far-off Asian republic in search of an ancient Buddhist scripture that contains a vital clue needed to unravel a plot of international intrigue. You arrive in a small aeroplane with funny markings and Cyrillic writing on the fuselage. As you circle the runway, your travel-weary brain takes in the treeless hills that sparkle here and there with streams apparently petrified like icicles in their channels.

The airstrip is guarded by impenetrable-looking military in khaki uniforms, stars on their epaulettes and fictitious insignia on their lapels. Dotted over the runway are a dozen large troop-carrying helicopters, their five rotor blades drooping like a grasshopper’s tentacles. Across the tarmac the terminal building looks rather East European and out of date. As you step out on to the runway, you have to squint because of the bright sun shining from the wide blue sky which is the backdrop.

The air is crisp and mountainous. In the Tintin adventure the country is called Sylvania; in the Marx Brothers film the name is Freedonia; in real life you have just arrived in Outer Mongolia (NM ix-x).

This passage constitutes a powerful representation that again imbues Mongolia with the characteristics of a classic traveller’s frontier. By comparing travel to Mongolia with a Tintin comic sequence, Middleton immediately associates Mongolia with a space of adventure (where challenges and heroics follow each other in rapid succession) that finds its closest parallel in fiction. Several pages later we learn that Middleton’s actual arrival in Mongolia was accompanied by “an emotional cocktail of excitement and trepidation” (NM x) further suggesting that his destination provides a context that would naturally engender such a response.

Like Sylvania and Freedonia, Middleton’s “far-off Asian Republic” of Outer Mongolia is an imaginative construction of a place beyond the relatively safe, predictable confines of Europe. Indeed, Middleton seems especially preoccupied with emphasizing

Mongolia as remote. He highlights how the country occupies “a special place in so many people’s minds as the most remote spot on earth, possibly even the last place god made” (NM x). The reader learns that it is the only country where the Queen’s Messengers (British diplomatic postmen) travel in pairs rather than alone. Disembarking in Ulan Bator, Middleton describes how “arriving at almost any other world capital I would be armed with a guidebook or sorts, a map of the city, a short list of cheap hotels to aim for and an idea of by how much I should expect to be ripped off for a taxi ride to get there” (NM xii-xiii). Not in Ulan Bator, apparently, for which guidebooks and maps were unavailable, and where taxis and hotels were either non-existent or at least not readily available to the traveller. Furthermore, like Becker, Middleton persists in referring to The Republic of Mongolia as “Outer Mongolia”, an outdated term whose use connotes the country as ‘back of beyond’.

Switching to Stewart, it becomes clear early on that for him Mongolia is a destination capable of offering up an epic adventure, on a scale only boyhood daydreams can invoke. He sees his travels to Mongolia as a chance to reconnect with the imaginary world of his childhood adventures that were played out in the backyard of his grandparents’ house in rural Ireland. He recalls how, upon returning home bloody kneed and dishevelled, his grandmother used to call him a “little Mongolian”, an admonition to which he attached a note of praise. Although the Mongolians were a mystery to him, he nonetheless wanted to live up to the recklessness and unruliness that the title seemed to suggest. His present journey in which he sought to ride across Mongolia on horseback, then, was “a question of loyalty to the careless boy in the Irish twilight. [It] was a journey of his choosing” (SS xx). As the projection of his childhood desires, Mongolia takes on the innocence, simplicity and

mystery of the childhood imagination, an observation Said (1978) made in relation to imaginative geographies of the Orient.

As a prelude to his trip, Stewart visits Hereford Cathedral to see the *Mappa Mundi*, perhaps the most important and most celebrated medieval map extant. Stewart is clearly impressed with this "piece of ancient hide covered with symbols and obscure passages of text, a geography of spells and wonders" (SS xx). He traces his travels across the map and from his description it becomes clear that his own journey to Mongolia has taken on some of the aura of a medieval foray into the mysterious and remote world outside of Europe:

My journey to Mongolia lay past the eastern end of the Black Sea where Jason's Golden Fleece was pegged out like a drying hide. To the north lay Scythia, the barbarian hinterland of the ancient Greeks, where two rather belligerent looking fellows could be seen threatening one another with knives. To the west are the Grifones, part of the nomadic traditions of these regions. They were said to use the bodies of their enemies as horse-trappings; a human skin can be seen thrown over a stallion as a saddle. Beyond the Oxus lies Samarkand, a rare city in these parts, looking like an Elizabethan sketch for the Globe Theatre. On the far bank of the Jaxartes are the Essedenes respectfully devouring their deceased parents, a practice they believed preferable to leaving them for the worms to eat. On a blunt peninsula enclosed by a turreted wall, a long and rather garbled account in dog Latin identifies it as the place where Alexander imprisoned the sons of Cain, a fearsome tribe who will break out at the time of the Antichrist. Not far away, on the island of Terraconta, was a race descended from Gog and Magog, a 'monstrous brood', the enemies of God, who would one day invade his kingdom.

I stood on tiptoes to examine my destination on the outer edges of Asia. In the top left corner of the map, at the furthest extremities of the known world, where Mongolia should be, between the borders of China and the dark Outer Ocean, the parchment grew darker and the figures fainter in zones that seemed to fade into twilight. A sketch showed men with horses' hooves: the land of the Hippopodes.

Since the days of ancient Greece it has been the conceit of settled people confronted with the horsemen of the steppes that their extraordinary equestrian prowess was not quite human, that the riders were in fact part horse. If any rumour of the Mongols had reached the map-makers perhaps it

was here with a race so fleet, so unruly and reckless, that they pranced like horses.

That was my destination, pale markings at the far end of Asia, on an atlas of the imagination (SS xxi-xxii).

Thus, as with Becker and Middleton, Stewart's Mongolia is imbued with the qualities of mysteriousness and remoteness, as well as being held up as an ideal setting for adventure.

However, Stewart goes further, explaining how his travels among the nomads of Mongolia represent "a journey across the uneasy frontiers between the sedentary and pastoral worlds, between the builders of walls and what the Chinese called 'a moveable country', people for whom settlement and the commitment of cities was a kind of betrayal" (SS xix). In doing so he represents Mongolia as the binary opposite of his world, a quintessential 'Other' that is so fundamentally different as to make it an object of intense fascination. To nurture this fascination Stewart must then travel, both literally and metaphorically, beyond the borders of his own 'world' and into another that is inherently mysterious and remote. Needless to say, such a journey would also entail an unavoidable, and in this case desirable, component of adventure, of danger. This is brought home to him when, in Istanbul, en route to Mongolia, Stewart visits Hagia Sofia and in that ancient church, which for him encapsulates the "ambitions and richness of cities" and the "desire to carve the aspirations of the human heart into some permanent form" (SS 13), he claims to have suddenly seen his "journey to Mongolia as a Byzantine might have done, a journey into emptiness, into some fearful void" (SS 13).

The dichotomy between the sedentary and the nomadic is a theme to which Stewart returns throughout his book, and it is clearly a key factor in his decision to have chosen Mongolia as a destination. As Leed (1991), Kaplan (1996) and Ure (2003) have all pointed

out, Western travellers have long been fascinated with nomadic cultures. In this Stewart is no different, although his writing reflects a highly introspective and nuanced perspective that resists direct comparison with the more standard romantic and naïve conceptualization of nomadism as an unfettered ideal of perpetual movement. Stewart is captivated by the irreconcilable gulf that he perceives separates the nomads of Mongolia and his world of bricks and mortar. He seeks to bridge this gulf and understand what lies beyond. This very ambition is a strong representation in which Mongolia becomes the ultimate traveller's frontier.

Somewhat similarly, Severin, who, as mentioned in Chapter Two, travels to Mongolia with the intention of determining to what degree the exotic lifestyle described by medieval European travellers to the court of Genghis Khan remains intact today, clearly expects travelling in Mongolia to be "like entering another world" (TS 5). He describes how the country is a complete mystery to the West where mention of Mongolia is most likely to evoke brutal barbarians, conquering hordes or even confusion with mongolism, the condition which restricts human development (TS 26). However, it seems that the same holds true for Severin himself who is hoping that contemporary Mongolia will offer him a portal to the age of Genghis Khan. Severin sees Mongolia as so remote that it does not even exist in the present, but in some intriguing medieval past.

Finally, we come to Waugh. She first arrived in Mongolia en route from Moscow to Beijing by train. Claiming to have had little background knowledge or sense of the country, she was nonetheless curious enough to schedule a short layover so as to spend a few days in its "remote capital, and glimpse the enigmatic steppe nomads in their felt *ger* tents" (LW 4). Even though she knew almost nothing about Mongolia, or perhaps because of this, the

country had already taken on an aura of mysteriousness and remoteness, enough that the prospect of travelling there made her at once “wary”, “excited” and “intrigued” (LW 4). Her short stay proved tantalizing and upon departure she became obsessed with returning to “this half-empty land of nomads” (LW 7), an emptiness that seems to have filled her imagination.

Thus, Mongolia in contemporary travel writing takes on the principal characteristics of the classic traveller’s frontier so nostalgically cherished by contemporary travel writers. In sum, it is framed as a mysterious and remote land that speaks to the romantic notion of adventurous travel. However, the niggling point remains that the travel books being discussed were written in the 1990’s, at the end of a century during which mass tourism and globalization were supposed to have made such traveller’s frontiers by and large defunct. The travel writers in question circumvent this by constructing a scenario in which Mongolia, due to geopolitical circumstances, escaped outside influences, became a forgotten backwater... and thereby retained imaginative potency as a traveller’s frontier.

#### *‘While the Going is Good’: The Trope of Timing and Timeliness*

As was discussed above, in the age of empire travellers’ frontiers rose and fell as new ones were imagined and old ones became well travelled only to lose their places in the popular imagination. Thus, it could be said that travellers’ frontiers have a limited life span and so timing is an essential consideration for any traveller intent on going beyond the limits of the worldly places that have been thoroughly documented by his or her culture and into the ‘frontiers’ beyond. In other words, one must go while the going is good. For all but one of the travel writers under consideration, the timing and timeliness of their travels to Mongolia is given significant attention while introducing their destination. As I will attempt

to demonstrate below, this strongly suggests that Mongolia's perceived qualities of mysteriousness and remoteness will erode over time so that it will cease to exist as a place of imaginative potency. Mongolia is framed as a traveller's frontier in part by placing emphasis on the significance of travelling there at a particular time, before the masses of tourists and homogenizing influences of globalization that are sure to follow.

Middleton, Becker and Severin all emphasise the degree to which Mongolia was inaccessible and off-limits to Westerners during its lengthy period as a communist state (1924 –1990). Middleton writes of how Mongolia was “sealed off from the outside world” (TS 86) while Severin remembers that when he first wanted to visit Mongolia in the 1960's it was completely impossible due to a “deliberate policy of inaccessibility” (TS 5). Becker claims that few Westerners were admitted to Mongolia since the 1920's after which “a blanket of darkness dropped over this vast region as it fell under communist rule [and caused it to] become a remote, forgotten hinterland” (JB 1-2).

With the relaxation of communist control in 1989, restrictions on travel were slowly lifted and it became easier for foreigners to gain access to Mongolia. The three authors in question all claim that this political context, coupled invariably with a stroke of luck, offered them a wonderful and unprecedented opportunity to travel in mysterious and remote Mongolia. Becker relates how the relaxation of controls meant that one foreign journalist was being allowed into Mongolia per year (a contentious fact as we shall see), and that he was lucky enough to be awarded this privilege in May of 1989 (JB 37). Becker goes on to describe his arrival at Beijing airport (“precious visa in hand”) on the day of departure to find that his flight was not listed and did not get announced, although luckily he managed to spot a small plane with a horse painted on it at the far end of the airport tarmac – Mongol

Air (JB 37). Throughout the early part of his narrative, Becker makes it clear that the timing of his travels makes him somewhat of a pioneer, a first Westerner behind the lines as it were. He writes "that by chance rather than intention I found myself unravelling a history which until now has been hidden or at least obscured beyond recognition" (JB 3). One example of this is his claim to have been the first to report, admittedly half a century late, the murder of 100,000 Mongolians during the rule of Marshal Choibalsan in the 1930's and 1940's (JB 83). Indeed for Becker, as for all of the other writers, an important part of their experience of Mongolia is predicated on being 'the first', a point I shall consider separately, and in greater detail, in Chapter Five.

Before moving on to Severin and Middleton, it is important to bear in mind that Becker's case (and presumably by extension Severin's and Middleton's as well) for being a 'pioneer' is wildly exaggerated and speaks more to their imaginative geography than to actual circumstance. The following passage, taken from a review of Becker's book by an eminent scholar, makes this abundantly clear:

Mr Becker [...] overstates the case for being a pioneer. On p.37 we read that 'before Mongolia's glasnost...no Westerners were allowed into Mongolia'. This is nonsense. Westerners began to gain admittance in the mid 1950's. Chips Smallwood [...] and I were there in 1958, since when there has been a constant stream of visitors from the West. For nearly thirty years now H.M. Government has maintained an Embassy in Ulan Bator. Western visitors have included tourists, scholars invited to stay in the country for months at a time, exchange students sent under the intergovernmental cultural agreement and sponsored by the British Council, British teachers of English at the University, business men and even fashion models who draped themselves over the monuments of Erdene Zuu in the mid-sixties. Mr Becker ignores his fellow journalists who have visited Mongolia over the last three decades and have written perceptively about the country – men like Rene McColl (*The Land of Genghis Khan*, 1964), David Bonavia or John Massey Stewart. Mr Becker is not really "one of the first Westerners back across the borders" as the publisher's press release has it, but rather a late comer, fortunate in his time (Bawden, 1993: 66).

This passage also illustrates the degree to which contexts for travel can be created by the textual rendering of imaginative geographies. One could of course assume that Becker was simply caught in a lie, but I would be more inclined to believe that he constructed a scenario that corresponded to his preconceived ideas of what it means to travel to Mongolia. The imaginative geography he held of Mongolia meant that he would naturally assume to be a 'pioneer' and not even consider that Mongolia had received a 'constant stream of visitors from the West' throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By textualizing his preconception, he not only reflects, but also perpetuates, an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier.

Upon receiving his invitation to participate in the UNESCO sponsored expedition to recreate the horse-relay communication system of the Mongol empire, Severin, like Becker, sees this as a "most wonderful opportunity," an "opening that no Westerner had ever been offered before" (TS 10-11). As I described above, and as if he were the first Westerner to enter Mongolia since the time of Genghis Khan, he immediately sets himself the goal of exploring traditional Mongolia and assessing the degree to which the way of life today has remained unchanged since the Middle Ages.

Middleton, whose book relates separate trips to Mongolia in 1987 and 1990, explains how he received the necessary visa for his first trip five years after his initial application. As a result of the delay, the original purpose of his trip (a doctoral exchange) was redundant, but he nevertheless decided to go because the "prospect of a trip to the land of Genghis Khan was too good to turn down" (NM 6). However, upon arrival he finds that his internal mobility is extremely limited and that the authorities are intent on confining him to the capital:

Getting out of UB in 1987 had been a major challenge. The restrictions on travel, both for Mongolians and foreigners, were overwhelming. The basic

premise was that if someone wanted to move he must be up to no good. [...] As Westerners, Bulcsu and I always came up against a seemingly insuperable barrier: why do you want to go? The simple reason that we were keen to see other arts of the country was not good enough. [...] We were in Mongolia to study, so why did we now want to travel? The idea of taking a short holiday at the end of a period of work was a total anathema to the authorities. To cap it all, we wanted to travel alone rather than in a group, which in itself was completely irregular.... All in all the evidence was overwhelming: everything pointed to the fact that here they had a couple of capitalist spies plotting the downfall of the Mongolian People's Republic and probably the entire Communist world into the bargain. And this is in a land of nomads (NM 54-55).

By the time of his second trip, these restrictions have been eased and Middleton is somewhat free to travel around Mongolia at will. On a number of occasions, he emphasises the degree to which this is a "transformation" from his first trip and how he is experiencing a sense of "disbelief" at being allowed the privilege of travelling in the countryside.

In addition, Middleton, Severin and Becker all highlight how their travels are so timely given the unprecedented changes occurring in Mongolian society as a result of communist dissolution. Middleton describes how in 1990 he witnessed a

Sense of energy and alertness, a great reawakening from the deadpan, crushing burden of Soviet domination. Mongolia in 1990 was rediscovering its roots. The Yellow Hat Buddhism, long repressed by the communists, was flowering once more. Genghis Khan, whose somewhat unsavory techniques of warmongering had not exactly endeared him to the authorities, was being resurrected as a great leader of men and a Mongolian who was proud to be just that. [...] Three hundred years of Manchu rule and sixty-nine years of Soviet imperialism had suddenly vanished and Mongolia was once more a place for Mongolians to decide what was what (NM 6-7).

Severin also identifies the period of his visit as a key time in Mongolian history and an ideal backdrop against which to conduct his search for the remains of medieval life in contemporary Mongolia:

The forbidden land of the past half-century had suddenly been thrown open to foreign view, and simultaneously the Mongols themselves were being given unparalleled freedom. [...] A huge upwelling of nostalgia for Mongolia's origins and traditions was taking place, and my own quest for the survival of the nomad world described by the medieval European travelers could scarcely have been better timed (TS 15).

Severin sees himself and his Mongolian riding companions as being engaged, each in his own way, in a search for Genghis Khan (TS 15).

The trope of timing is also prevalent in Stewart's book, albeit in a slightly different form from the three works on which I have been focusing in the preceding paragraphs. Given that his journey took place in 1998, Stewart cannot capitalize, legitimately or otherwise, on the idea that he is among the first travellers into Mongolia after decades of supposed isolation. Instead, he depicts the country as an anachronism, a *last place* where in this day and age one can *still* come into contact with a predominantly nomadic society. He first transmits this representation in the form of a dialogue between himself and a Quashgai Khan during an earlier journey to Iran. Sitting together in a tent filled with the accoutrements of nomadic existence high in the Zagros mountains, the Khan explains to the author how his people are the remnant of a once powerful tribe. Alas, those days are gone and the Khan cannot predict what the future holds for the nomads of Iran. He fears that it is the end of a way of life, which his people have practiced for centuries and that first came to the region in the train of Genghis Khan (SS xviii). At this point the conversation naturally shifts to Mongolia and allows Stewart to explain how Mongolians, unlike other peoples, still remain faithful to nomadism:

'The Mongols were a race of heroes,' the khan said. 'Nomads who ruled the world. And what had become of them? Vanished like all the others.'

'They have gone home to Mongolia,' I said.

[...]

'Where is Mongolia?' he asked after a time.'

'Beyond China'

[...]

'What do you think Mongolia is like now?' the khan asked.

'They are still nomads,' I said. 'Not like here where most people are settled. Mongolia is a nation of nomads, the last in Asia' (SS xviii).

A second excerpt, further exemplifies Stewart's conceptualization of Mongolia as a place that, in this day and age constitutes a final bastion of nomadism. In a sense, because of his fascination with nomads, Stewart has no choice but to go to Mongolia, since in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century he cannot find another place where nomadic existence has remained so intact and relevant. In the following passage, Stewart is reacting to an archaeologist's description of the brutal destruction of the city of Utrar by the Mongolians in 1218:

I struggled to think of mitigating circumstances. In the face of such damning evidence I felt I should mount some defence of nomads. But what was I to say: that they hated cities? In the end I said nothing, trailing after the archaeologist with silent complicity. In the wider scheme of things his anger was ridiculous. To Utrar and all the cities of the world have gone the victory and the spoils. The great historic conflict between sedentary and pastoral society, between the city and the steppe, has been won. Nomads, not the inhabitants of Utrar, are history's victims; the modern world has rendered their way of life at best anachronistic, at worst fatal. They have become an irrelevance, a curiosity. In Mongolia, nomads still proudly migrate with their flocks, their tents and their horses but to the test of the world they have the archaic appeal of Amazonian tribes with their blowpipes or Lapps chasing after reindeer. The fact that they had once been powerful only adds to their melancholy charm (SS 67).

Implicit in all of the above is that nomadism as a way of life is disappearing and that while it can still be found in Mongolia, the trend is such that in time it will probably disappear there as well. Mongolia is the final frontier of nomadism, and by default of any traveller that is drawn to this age-old way of life. The reader is left with the impression that Stewart went to Mongolia, as Evelyn Waugh put it, 'when the going was good'. In other words, he got in before it was too late and was among the last to witness a way of life that will cease to exist in the future. As such, Stewart's book becomes a chronicle of loss, a lament to the depredations of modernity and globalization on the traditional world.

Waugh is the aforementioned exception in that she does not place any emphasis whatsoever on the timing or timeliness of her travels in Mongolia while framing the destination for her readership. Given the preponderance of this theme in the other books, it would be tempting to dismiss Waugh's book as the exception that proves the rule as it were. Indeed, one could argue that Waugh's book, published in 2003, appeared at a time when Mongolia had already begun to wane as a traveller's frontier. By the time of her travels the country had already become a popular destination for adventure and cultural tourism, while in Ulan Bator the trademarks of globalization were ubiquitous. As I will show in the following chapter, Waugh attempts to distance herself from this new facet of Mongolia spatially by choosing to focus her travels in the wild and inaccessible Altai Mountains. However she does not attempt to do so temporally like the other writers under consideration.

I would not read any further into this if it were not for the fact that this exception occurs in the only book written by a woman and that a number of scholars have pointed to marked gender differences between men and women travel writers. The latter are apparently more concerned with intercultural personal involvement and relationships

whereas the former generally adopt the more authoritarian and grandiose stance of the imperial explorer (Mills, 1991: 21). Based in part on this, a case could be made that, as a woman, Waugh is less captured by the romantic, masculine notions of being among the first (Middleton, Becker, Severin) or last (Stewart) to travel in the mysterious and remote reaches of Mongolia than by forming bonds and interacting with the people she meets there. However, I think that this would be overly speculative given the other potential reasons I enumerated for the absence of the 'trope of timing' in her book. Moreover, as we will see in the following chapters, her work is characterized by the same discursive formations as the other four works composed by male authors. If her book had differed consistently from those of the other authors then perhaps there would be grounds for constructing a gender based argument to account for these differences. Yet, even then, in the absence of other works by female authors, it would be difficult to establish which differences are gender based and which are a product of Waugh's own agency as an individual.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have been concerned with exploring how Mongolia as a destination was framed for readerships in the introductory portions of the five works of contemporary travel writing under consideration. This framing, which I underscored as the product of particular imaginative geographies, can be considered an active construction of context in that it sets the stage on which the act of travel will take place. In other words the descriptive and experiential travel narratives that follow the introduction are based on the conceptualization of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. This is congruent with the idea that imaginative geographies are consequential, that they influence the way we negotiate,

experience and interact with places and peoples. In the following chapter I pick up on this notion by arguing that framing Mongolia as a traveller's frontier allows the travel writers in question to develop the idea that they are "regressively traveling to a Golden Age where a place and its inhabitants are frozen in time" (Dann, 1999: 169).

# Chapter Four

## **‘An Imaginative Passage into an Ancient Land’: Writing Mongolia as Timeless**

*“Here time itself seemed to be in a warp.”* – Tim Severin

### **‘A Kind of Pragmatic Fossilization’**

In this chapter I will argue that the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller’s frontier paves the way for representations of the country as timeless, as a destination where travel is not merely a spatial phenomenon, but also a temporal or chronological one. Some preliminary evidence has already been brought to light in the previous chapter. Certainly the past – history – was always present in the conceptualization of Mongolia as mysterious and remote. In addition, we saw how Severin imagined his whole journey as a search for what was left of the past in contemporary Mongolia, while for Stewart, Mongolia was a destination where he could come into contact with Nomadism, a way of life that featured prominently throughout world history, but which has now largely disappeared. These examples suggest that Mongolia, because it is being imagined as a traveller’s frontier, has the attribute of being rooted in the past, of timelessness, a destination for one who wishes to travel regressively through time to the aforementioned imperial ‘golden age’ when travel took place in the context of seemingly limitless frontiers. Indeed,

as I will argue in this chapter, the notion that Mongolia belongs to some past age is repeatedly reinforced in a number of different ways throughout the travel writing under consideration. Not only does this in itself add to the representation of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier (the main concern of this thesis), but it also constitutes the most potent image the reader retains of the country.

Said (1978) provides a natural starting point for the discussion at hand. He argued that the discourse of Orientalism, which took shape during the age of empire, represented the Orient as static and timeless, a monolithic entity with an unchanging history. Europe, in contrast, was seen as dynamic and progressive, capable of defining the course of history and effecting change (Said, 1978; see also Crang, 1998; Driver, 1999; Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2001). In Said's own words: "As primitivity, as the age-old archetype of Europe, as a fecund night out of which European rationality developed, the Orient's actuality receded inexorably into a kind of pragmatic fossilization" (Said, 1985: 93). In order to illustrate his point, Said highlights Western literature as an example of something whose relevance and identity is to some degree derived or at least re-evaluated within the context of the historical moment in which it is being engaged. In contrast, the Orient is frozen in time by a Western gaze that denies any possibility of interlocution or generative two-way engagement (Said, 1985: 92).

According to Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, it is almost as if the West does not wish to change a setting that, in its current form, is imbued with considerable imaginative potency:

The fabricated 'mystic orient' is thus often seen as a timeless place, built around notions of the eternal and the archetypal, but the timelessness is associated with the idea of the past as a tense, rather than as history as a process. It is as if we wanted to have a superficial and anachronistic view of

the East, conceived of as one place in one time so that we can construct our fantasies upon it (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1994: 46).

In fact, it was precisely the perceived timelessness of the Orient that made it appealing as a traveller's frontier to many Westerners during the age of empire. For example, as Makdisi (2003) has shown, Sir Richard Francis Burton regarded his travels to Arabia as an escape from the corrupting progress and civilization of Europe to a pure, undefiled Orient that he imagined as existing in a primordial state. Burton shunned any manifestation of modernity in the Orient and desired to experience it as a pristine refuge where he could test himself against the challenges posed by the savagery of its inhabitants and the harshness of the desert. Another example can be drawn from Gregory's (1999) study on European travellers/writers to Egypt in the mid-1800's. He describes how by "representing Egypt as an anachronistic space in which past and present existed outside the space of the modern, [the travellers in question] claimed to open an imaginative (and extraordinarily presumptuous) passage into an ancient land" (Gregory: 1999: 137).

At this point, I would like to make it clear that my objective in this chapter is not simply to propose that the timeless Orient of the western imagination described by Said holds true for the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing. Said (as well as the other authors whose work I referred to above) uses the term 'Orient' as a referent to the Arab Islamic Middle East, and the focus of his work is mainly Egypt and Palestine. To suggest that Western representations of Mongolia could be unproblematically grouped in with those of Said's 'Orient' would be to discount the specificity of imaginative geographies:

[C]onstellations of power, knowledge and spatiality cannot be transferred to other colonial or neo-colonial situations without (often considerable)

reworking. [...] The imaginative geographies that were used to display the Middle East were different from those that displayed south Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, or South America.... (Gregory, 2000c: 311; see also Lowe, 1991).

That Mongolia was never colonized by a Western European country makes it even more problematic to draw direct comparisons. Moreover, I am dealing with contemporary travel writing produced in the context of a post-modern, increasingly globalized world. In contrast, Said dealt with a much broader array of European cultural and scholarly output produced between fifty and one hundred and fifty years ago during a time when overt imperialism was the dominant context.

Nevertheless, the notion of a place being depicted as timeless or rooted in the past, which is so integral to Said's Orientalism, resonates strongly with the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing. This is especially so if one considers that in both cases the perceived timelessness acts as a draw on the imagination of Westerners. Thus, Said's work is a useful starting point for a chapter that seeks to investigate notions of time and temporality in Western representations of other places and peoples. From this point onward, however, I will concern myself with highlighting and discussing the textual strategies through which Mongolia is depicted as timeless in the contemporary travel writing under consideration (and how this in turn contributes to the construction of the country as a traveller's frontier) without seeking to draw repeated comparisons to Said's observations for validation. Said's work was specific to a geographical area and time period and while it has far reaching overtones relevant to the study of the representation of other places at other times, I do not see it as a 'blueprint' for the analysis that follows.

## Where Past is Present and Present is Past

Perhaps the most obvious way Mongolia is represented as timeless is through passages that explicitly posit an aspect of contemporary Mongolia as having remained ostensibly unchanged throughout history. These references permeate the five texts under analysis and suggest a preoccupation on the part of the travel writers with reinforcing the degree to which contemporary Mongolia remains rooted – indeed imprisoned – in the past. Although illustrative examples abound, the following selection should serve to demonstrate the point adequately.

At various points in their respective books, Stewart and Waugh depict Mongolia as a land bound by traditions and rituals. It appears that, to them, this has somehow confined the country to a cyclical time warp where everything is prescribed and little changes. According to Stewart:

Mongolia [is] addicted to faith. Bold\* described it as a medieval state, a land where it [is] more important to believe than to enquire, where received wisdom [is] rarely questioned. For centuries the nomads [have] lived under the spell of superstition and omens, of shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism (SS 99).

It is interesting to note how Stewart's use of the word "addicted" conveys the notion that Mongolia's attachment to the past is involuntary, crippling, and, perhaps, impossible to sever. In the same vein, Waugh describes Mongolia as a "land steeped in rituals" (LW 132), where a simple New Year's celebration takes on the aura of an "ancient rite" (LW 23).

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\* A Mongolian teacher from Ulan Bator and self-professed 'city man', Bold is Stewart's translator during the first part of the author's trek across Mongolia.

Mongolians are an innately conservative people where “men and women,” writes Waugh, “have their staunch hunter gatherer roles, and rarely deviate from what is expected of them, from the rules laid down even before they were born” (LW 54). In a world where tradition is being eroded by globalization (see Giddens, 2000), Mongolia, if these travel writers are to be believed, is still firmly governed by traditional practices and values.

Reflecting on a visit to a Buddhist temple outside Ulan Bator, Middleton muses that it was as if he had spent the day “in another time zone” (NM 46). The “haunting chants of the monks in their yellows silk robes and outrageous headdresses”, the intoxicating aroma of yak butter and incense, the prostrations of the worshipers on the wooden floor, all make him feel as if this is “a small pocket of the Middle Ages” (NM 46). Invited into a Monk’s cell, Middleton immediately sets himself the task of identifying the objects that would recall the twentieth century. Save for an electric light bulb, a box of matches and the iron on the bed frame there is nothing there to suggest that he had not been “transported back into the Dark Ages” (NM 48).

Like the other travel writers in question, Becker also depicts Mongolia as unchanged through time. At one point he rides into a broad valley and proclaims somewhat imperiously that it looked much as it would have done in the time of Genghis Khan eight centuries before (JB 194). However, Becker’s most curious approach is to suggest on several occasions that contemporary Mongolians act and behave in much the same way as the Mongolians of the Golden Horde. At a meeting with officials in Ulan Bator, for instance, he notes that everyone is drunk, which comes as no surprise to him because “the Mongolian hordes were noted for their tendency to overindulge and even Genghis Khan, while condemning it, took a fairly tolerant line” (JB 40). Mongolians drink heavily, a habit

that they have maintained since the Middle Ages. At least this is the idea Becker is presenting. Never mind that cheap Russian vodka, introduced during the twentieth century, coupled with desperate social conditions under communism must certainly have contributed to causing the high incidence of alcoholism evident in Mongolia today. For Becker, Mongolians are, and have always been, a nation given to alcoholism.

Severin, with his self-imposed mission of determining the degree to which contemporary Mongolia compares to that witnessed by medieval European travellers, outdoes all the other travel writers in drawing explicit connections between Mongolia's past and its present. Severin describes how today's Mongolia remains a sparsely populated landscape characterized by the occasional nomadic dwelling, a felt *ger* tent, which has been the home of Mongolian herdsmen since before the time of Genghis Khan (TS 28). The valleys through which he rides are still the "nomad's paradise of open land, lush pasture and sweet water" that acted as a cradle for the epic migrations of the Turks, Huns, and Mongols two thousand years before (TS 127). A distant ensemble of tents looks like the site of an impending medieval tournament (TS 128). Severin describes his Mongolian riding companions as "taciturn, hard bitten...herdsmen who must surely have been no different from the original riders of Genghis Khan" (TS 11). One in particular, Gerel, has a "fierce-looking face...framed by jet-black hair which was long and greasy, and [a] menacing appearance accentuated by a wisp of a Fu Manchu beard and moustache" (TS 31). Severin's reference to another rider, whom he does not like, is also revealing. This man's behaviour towards the herdsmen they encounter along the way reminds the author "of a medieval pardoner selling false indulgences and fake religious mementoes to gullible peasants" (TS 156). Even the horses the party is riding put on such an impressive performance that

Severin is left with no doubt that the Mongolian cavalry rightfully earned its reputation as being undaunted by any obstacle in its path (TS 114). He notes, “for the famed Mongol horses time has stood still, or like the modern culture of the people, even gone backwards...[o]ther breeds have long ago been developed for more stamina or speed” (TS 262). Finally, at the end of his book the sum evidence he has gathered leads Severin to conclude that Mongolia is little changed from medieval times:

I had seen how the essential elements of nomad life remained the same: the lack of a permanent home, the portability and simplicity of possessions, wealth calculated almost entirely in numbers of livestock, a certain attitude to the values of herding life with its sense of freedom, individual responsibility and the self-sufficiency of family units scattered widely across the vast land.

Among the *arats* I had found qualities that I had expected: the hardiness and endurance, and the hospitality. The ordinary Mongol herdsman still lives in a harsh and demanding environment that demands his perseverance and physical stamina and gives little in return. For many years the West’s leading expert on Mongolia was the scholar-traveller Owen Lattimore\* who coined the neat phrase that ‘the poor nomad is the pure nomad’. His judgment can be applied to the *arats* of modern Mongolia. The country is too poor to have overcome the basic limitations of herding life in the Dead Heart of Asia, and the *arat* is the exponent of what is in many ways a medieval lifestyle. He and his family now dress in factory made boots and clothes, eat of cheap imported crockery and use plastic products all the time. But the clothes and the crockery are little different from chinaware and cloth that his forebears purchased from the caravans out of China, and the felt tent he lives in, the saddle he uses day after day, the ropes of rawhide and twisted hair, the crude bits of metal he fits in his horses’ mouth are home-made and scarcely changed from their medieval patterns. His most prized possessions – the pink-topped snuff bottle of jade, ornate knife and steel, the fancy brocade jacket – still come from Chinese sources, just as they always have (TS 260).

As Shurmer-Smith and Hannam point out, “in contemporary society, with its acute awareness of unsettling rapid change, there is a reverence for the past and a desire to engage

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\* Owen Lattimore: British academic who devoted his career to the study of Mongolia. Arguably, his most famous work is *Nomads and Commissars: Mongolia revisited* (1962).

with it” (Shurner-Smith and Hannam, 1994: 56). This phenomenon is hardly unique to travel writing about Mongolia, indeed North Americans often travel to Europe to marvel at gothic cathedrals, renaissance *palazzo*'s and perfectly preserved medieval towns. The key difference is that in Mongolia the past is represented as alive, as still happening in the present. It is the past itself, rather than the relics it has left, that the travel writers in question are so eager to describe. Of course, Mongolia is not the essentialized setting it has been depicted as: Time has passed and things have changed as they are wont to anywhere. There may still be relatively few Coca-Cola signs and horses may be more common than motor vehicles in certain areas, but this does not mean that Mongolian society has not undergone drastic changes since the time of Genghis Khan. It is just that the travel writers are not interested in these changes; They seem to want continuity and in Mongolia where the most overt signifiers of globalization are absent, they can easily claim to have found it.

### **Normative Geographies of Mongolia**

To continue with this notion, it is possible to suggest that in the travel writing under analysis modernity and anything associated with it is 'out of place' in Mongolia. It simply has no room in the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. The concept that something or someone belongs in one place and not in another has been broached in social geography, most notably by Cresswell (1996), but also by Sibley (1995) and Shields (1991). Cresswell describes how expectations of what belongs and what does not lead to the construction of a normative landscape in which ideas about what is right and appropriate are reflected in space and place (Cresswell 1996: 8). The construction of such normative landscapes, he goes on to suggest, is underscored by ideological beliefs that are of

consequence because the geographical environment forces people to relate beliefs to actions (Cresswell, 1996: 16). In the context of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, the formulation 'ideological beliefs', which applies to Cresswell's social problematique, can be substituted with the term imaginative geographies, for these have the capacity to construct normative landscapes in much the same way. Indeed, I argue that imaginative geographies of Mongolia have led to the construction of a normative landscape in which modernity is seen as 'out of place'.

The best example is the treatment of urban Mongolia by the travel writers in question. Presumably the site where change and the very progression of time is most readily apparent, it becomes clear that urban Mongolia is not part of the normative landscape produced by the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. A disparaging, dismissive tone is adopted in descriptions of urban Mongolia suggesting that the travel writers resent it as a sort of intrusion or affront to their conceptualized ideal of the country as a travel destination. Middleton describes Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital city, as a "monotonous and boring" place of "faceless apartment blocks and drab buildings" (NM xiv) punctuated by "Dickensian factories" that cause the city to be perpetually blanketed in a haze of pollution (NM xiv-2). "Ulan Bator has lost virtually all of its oriental character and mystique [and] the colour and life of the place has been drained out of it" (NM 2). All in all, Middleton sums up, Ulan Bator is "a sterile, characterless city with about as much style as a military parade ground" (NM 5), "an East European clone [in a] wild Central Asian setting" (NM xiv). This is hardly the exotic, untouched place that would act as a lure for travel writers disaffected with a globalized world.

Becker continues along the same lines. A “funereal torpor” hangs over Ulan Bator, he claims of the city in 1989; there is a noticeable “lack of spontaneity, of people talking together in animation, of any kind of emotion except grudging patience” (JB 38). The Mongolians of Ulan Bator are also a far cry from the “ancient race of shepherd warriors” he had come in search of:

On the streets everyone was dressed like bankers after the Wall Street crash. They walked about with sedate respectability in black trilby hats, black leather shoes with woolly scarves tucked into dark grey woollen overcoats.

Could these really be the same people who had once called themselves the ‘Scourge of God’? And of whom the Queen of Armenia had said they were as ‘hellish of aspect, as voracious as wolves in their hunger for spoils and as brave as lions’? (JB 38).

Waugh’s initial impression of Ulan Bator is also of a “destitute Soviet metropolis...[with] vacant stores and [a] hideous army of scarred apartment blocks”, yet, unlike the others, she finds the place somehow compelling. After living there for two years, she came to see the city as a “living mosaic of history and ambition” (JB 8), an intriguing site of hybridity and transculturation. However, it is extremely telling that her book barely discusses Ulan Bator at all (the city is mentioned in no more than a handful of pages throughout) despite the fact that she lived there as long as she did. Rather, the entire book focuses on the ten or so months she spent as an English teacher in a mountain village located over a thousand kilometres from Ulan Bator. This is “what I wanted to see and write about” she claims of her time in the mountains (JB 192). As a result, Waugh essentially ‘writes out’ Urban Mongolia in preference for rural Mongolia, which is far less likely to overtly challenge the normative landscape produced by the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller’s frontier.

In terms of 'writing out' urban Mongolia, Severin outdoes Waugh in spades. Other than to say that it is a "dismayingly ugly modern creation" (TS 5), he only mentions Ulan Bator in passing or in reference to an event of national significance that may have occurred there. The reader learns nothing whatsoever about the city, other than it is ugly. This is despite the fact that (as it becomes clear early on) Severin visited Ulan Bator on a number of separate occasions in preparation for his trip. The explicit objective of Severin's book is to show how little Mongolia has changed since the time of Genghis Khan, and perhaps because Ulan Bator would not advance his thesis very far, he simply ignores the city altogether. He extends this approach to almost every other city or town with which he comes into contact during the course of his horse-ride across the country. The only exception is the administrative centre of Bayan Olgi, which Severin impatiently describes in five short sentences before setting off for the Altai Mountains beyond. The town, we learn, is sprawling and featureless, and neither beautiful nor fertile as its Mongolian name would suggest (TS 204).

"[A] town built by people who hate towns" is how Stewart describes one of the first sizeable settlements he encounters in Mongolia (SS 88). For him, urban Mongolia is a world apart from rural Mongolia and represents a completely different space, one in which Mongolians cease to be Mongolians. In the town of Chulutt, for example, Stewart comes across a wooden building that is slowly being consumed by a fungus. He seizes on this as a metaphor for the way Mongolia's towns corrupt the nomadic ideal and writes of how herdsmen throughout the district of surrounding Chulutt assured him that the fungus infected people who came in contact with it, appearing as a black blight across their faces. Old men, says Stewart, would speak of a strange disease that affects those who live in cities (SS 173).

Ulan Bator, claims Stewart arriving there after months on the open steppe, is “so unlike anywhere else in the Mongolia that it is less a capital city than another country” (SS 228). Here, he writes, “a race of hardy nomads, a swashbuckling people who swept across the face of Eurasia conquering all the great civilizations of its age, [has] been reduced to a city of compulsive pen pushers and timid functionaries” (SS 233). According to Stewart, the ‘real’ Mongolia and Mongolians are not to be found in Ulan Bator (or any other town or city for that matter) but in the country’s vast steppes:

If Ulan Bator is Mongolia’s anchor in the modern world, most of its inhabitants are still moored to the countryside and the nomadic ideal. Over half a million Mongolians now live in UB, a quarter of the country’s population. But the drift to the metropolis has not brought the usual disdain for the less sophisticated life they have left behind. All Mongolians hanker for the steppes. The landscapes, the horses, the livestock and the round womb of the *ger* provide their identity however divorced they have become from them in the capital. Everyone understood that Ulan Bator was not Mongolia, and they could not truly be Mongolians in this place.

The arrival of relatives from the country with sheep carcasses, jugs of *airag* and news of the pastures were glorious occasions in their cramped flats. During the summer months parents were in the habit of sending their children to their grandparents in the countryside to fatten them like sheep. They felt the city made them weak and prone to illness, and that it undermined their confidence and their identity. Only the connection to the countryside could keep them healthy.

I had lunch one day in a modern restaurant with a friend and her six-year-old daughter who had just returned from a month in Arhangay with her granny. The countryside, according to her mother, had done the child a world of good. She had returned flushed and energetic and alert.

‘Just like a Mongolian,’ she said to me (SS 232).

There is no room for ambiguity in Stewart’s pronouncement: “All” Mongolians belong in the countryside, “everyone” knows Ulan Bator isn’t Mongolia, “only” the countryside can keep the nation alive both literally and figuratively.

As we have seen, there is a marked unease about urban Mongolia on the part of the travel writers in question. As portals to the outside world, cities could be of great significance for anyone interested in understanding (even superficially) how Mongolia and Mongolians have negotiated the multiple influences of globalization and what cultural and social phenomena result from this interaction. However, as Krist points out, many travel writers are uninterested in such sites of hybridity and transculturation because their journeys are primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world, rather than more outwardly projected investigations of the world (Krist, 1993: 598). This is clearly the case with contemporary travel writing about Mongolia: An imaginative geography of the country as a traveller's frontier creates a desired context for travel, a normative landscape in which certain elements belong and others, such as cities where change and 'modernization' are the order of the day, are quite simply 'out of place', incongruous. Mongolian cities are seen as a threat to a social order that has traditionally been based on nomadism and unnatural compared to the steppes whose survival pressures nurtured this way of life.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find a 'trope of escape' in which the travel writers seek to 'break free' from the confines of urban Mongolia and journey into the steppes beyond. Stewart suggests that when he is in towns or cities, his travels in Mongolia somehow adjourn until he is back on the steppes:

After five days in Chulutt I was delighted to be back in the saddle. In the ramshackle towns between stages, the journey seems to have stalled. I grew restless and fretful. I felt a fool lugging my saddle in and out of cheap hotel rooms like an out-of-work cowpoke. The arrival of fresh horses, pawing the ground, eager to be away, was the moment of liberation (SS 186).

Liberation, that is, from a milieu that is 'out of place' within his normative landscape of Mongolia and therefore causes him to become uneasy. Similarly, Waugh leaves Ulan Bator

for the Altai Mountains because she had come to Mongolia with dreams of “another life out on the steppe” (LW 10), yet had lingered in the capital for two years where she had been employed as a newspaper editor. Finding herself in grave danger of remaining “marooned in the realm of the Red Hero [the literal translation of Ulan Bator]”, she tries everything she can think of to find a way of moving into the countryside. Having accomplished her goal, she returns to Ulan Bator months later to renew her visa and experiences “culture shock” of the highest order (LW 109-110), which makes her hanker for a speedy return to a place that she had previously described as being “further than I’d imagined from Ulan Bator – in every sense” (LW 16). Middleton, whose first visit to Mongolia was closely monitored by what was then still a communist government, makes it a personal quest to go beyond the confines of Ulan Bator despite the best efforts of his minders to prevent him from doing so. “It was a fitting tribute [to] Ulan Bator”, he muses, “that our perseverance did eventually manage to get us out of the city for a day trip” (NM 56). In Severin’s book this trope is of course absent. As we have already seen, he writes out urban Mongolia and therefore has no occasion to describe his urge to escape it. Becker is perhaps the only real exception, although, I would suggest that this is at least in part due to the fragmented, journalistic approach to his narrative in which there is no linear progression between places. Therefore, he is never in the position to describe the place or space where he finds himself in the present in relation to where he has come from or is going to next.

Rural Mongolia, as represented in these travel books, is a timeless and unchanging place where the landscape and its inhabitants are very much ‘in place’ vis-à-vis the normative landscape produced by the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller’s frontier. A recurring image is of the rural landscape as a primordial place trapped in the

dawn of time, “an older starker world where the elements wield their chaos like unrestrained deities”, as Waugh describes it LW (61). The following sequence of excerpts shows how this descriptive trope appears throughout the body of writing in question:

Waugh:

The mountains ahead looked as though they were on fire, consumed in flames of violet, orange and scarlet. The sky above them was a riot dark, dark blue, purple, yellow and saffron, colours of wild laughter. The lake itself was molten silver, and in the far distance, God only knows where, a lone pyramid of rock or ice glowed translucent pink like an immense suspended crystal. Elemental fireworks. At that moment it was as though Princess [Waugh’s Mongolian friend] and I were the only people in this world: everyone else had vanished while the earth and skies were ablaze.

It was like looking at the earth for the first time (LW 42).

Middleton:

The driver and the gentleman placed rocks on the oboos and agreed that there were powerful gods in this place.

In front of us stretched the reserve. The white lake, on whose shores we would pass the night, wound its way behind a distant peak. Below us several other craters had been blistered out of the earth and from them wide tongues of lava spread out over the plains. Here and there fluorescent green pine trees had grasped a root hold, like vanguards of nature attempting to quell the ancient wasteland. But they had some way to yet. Horgo had a haunted atmosphere, as if this was primeval earth in residence.... (NM 88).

Severin:

When we emerged from the trees and entered the first of a succession of broad valleys, the overwhelming visual impact was the complete emptiness of the land. The valley stretched away into the distance. [...] It was completely deserted, just mile after mile of partridge-brown grassland sloping up on each side to the hills. On the upper slopes were more trees, widely spaced and bare. A few rocks broke through the thin soil, but otherwise there was nothing to catch the eye except the distant shapes of large birds of prey, falcons and eagles, wheeling and hovering over the steppe (TS 51).

Stewart:

From the air, Mongolia looks like God's preliminary sketch for Earth, not so much a country as the ingredients out of which countries are made: grass, rock, water, and wind. Undulating hills, smooth as felt, rolled away into grassy infinities. A river spilled a silver lace work of water across soft downs. The emptiness was startling. Mongolia made the sky, with its baroque clouds, seem crowded and fussy. A few trees appeared. Having stumbled into the wrong landscape, they clustered together in the lee of a hill, trying to keep out of the wind. For miles there were no fields, no roads, no towns, no buildings. The only signs of habitation were the occasional encampments of round white tents, which sprouted suddenly and mysteriously in the grass below like mushrooms (SS 85).

We were entering a landscape of elemental simplicity. The complexities of the mountains, the escarpments, the steep passes, the abrupt valleys, were unraveling into a country of languorous horizontals. Treeless, smooth as felt, and thick with wild flowers, long vistas of grass were draped between soft hills. With miles of nothing between them, the domes of *gers* echoed the gentle curves of the country. On distant hillsides, herds of horses galloped in slow motion (SS 139).

In these descriptive passages, the Mongolian landscape is dominated by the elements whose powers remain untamed or otherwise mollified by human activity. It is a prototype for the natural world before human intervention in the form of agriculture, urbanization, and mass resource extraction. As Severin puts it, the Mongolian landscape recalls what parts of Europe must have been like a thousand years ago (TS 136). Thus, journeying there is travelling regressively through time as much as it is travelling through space.

This is not to say that the Mongolian landscape is depicted as being devoid of people – it is just that the nomads who live there are represented as existing in the harmonious state that supposedly characterizes the relationship between pre-modern cultures and their environment. For example, in the two quotes from Stewart, above, the *gers* of nomadic herders are a seamless part of the landscape. In other words, they belong there; they are very much 'in place' within the travel writers' normative landscape of rural Mongolia.

Other such examples abound. At one point in Waugh's narrative the reader is treated to a scene in which the author, while listening to a group of Tuvans\* sing traditional songs, muses about how beautifully these 'fit' with the landscape itself:

The Tuvans lamented their homeland over the Altai, heralded their mothers, grieved over love and honoured their horses. Cracked with emotion and wrung with such fierce passion, these rang from the most beautiful and tragic songs in the world. They rang from the *khurim ger* across the rocky valley and the clear river, where they were surely absorbed into the spirit of the mountain itself (LW 134).

In the following passage Severin too attempts to convey how the Mongolian nomads are in the embrace of their landscape and how they in turn embrace it. The relationship is symbiotic, complete and as it should be:

Sometimes we eavesdropped on a herdsman clear across the valley, singing and hallooing at the top of his voice from sheer joy as he rode flat out over the summer pasture. He might have been going somewhere with a purpose, but just as often, when he came in sight, he was simply tearing across the superb countryside for the sheer pleasure of being alive in such wonderful surroundings and feeling his horse galloping away beneath him. Such moments explained why, despite its grim and utter isolation, the Mongolian herdsman are so intensely proud of their land. It was inconceivable to them that anywhere else could be as beautiful and bountiful as the mountain pastures in high summer (TS 146).

Even particular individuals or families are depicted as being perfectly 'in place' within their surroundings, such as in the next example drawn from Middleton's book. Note also how the self-sufficiency of the nomads being described and their lack of reliance on objects from the outside world clearly adds to the sense of harmoniousness being conveyed:

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\* The Tuvans are an ethnic minority that inhabit parts of Western Mongolia. They have their own language and culture, however, their nomadic lifestyle bears many similarities to that of the Mongolians.

The Batsagaan family were pretty self-sufficient in their valley in the Khangai. They cut trees for fuel, they ate from the products of their herd, many of their household implements Batsagaan had made himself, including a brand new wooden cart complete with wooden wheels, that he proudly showed me. The hue of the government in UB apparently made little difference to his life. It made no odds whether or not he could get a passport and travel to other countries, for example. He was a Mongolian, had never left his beloved valley in the Khangai, and had no desire to do so. He probably did not even know what a passport was" (NM 79; for a similar passage see LW, 257).

Thus, we can see that the physical landscape and its inhabitants appear to be very much 'in place' in relation to the normative landscape produced by the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. Rural Mongolia is depicted as a primordial, elemental landscape whose inhabitants are trapped in a closed system where time turns in on itself and churns endlessly without ever moving forward. Unlike urban Mongolia, here the modern age has not intruded to disturb the pre-modern harmoniousness between man and nature. However, according to Cresswell (1996), it is difficult to define what is considered right and appropriate in the context of a particular place without examining 'out of place' phenomena. Transgressions of a supposed norm, and reactions to these transgressions, serve to highlight normative geographies by underlining what is regarded as 'in place' by looking at what is not (Cresswell, 1996: 21). In other words, only by looking at instances in which aspects of modernity are described in relation to rural Mongolia is it really possible to claim the existence of a normative geography in which modernity is 'out of place'.

Western clothing, for example, is depicted as incongruous with rural Mongolia. Severin describes how "a dozen or so functionaries looked very out of place dressed in their utilitarian dark suits" (TS 44), whereas Middleton notes the same for a man wearing a mackintosh and pork pie hat (NM xiv). For Becker, a woman with spiky hair asking about a famous British rock star takes him so aback that it is a while before he cottons onto who she

is taking about (JB 43). In Stewart's book, the presence of a television in a nomad's *ger* is depicted as a serious transgression of for what one is 'supposed' to find in rural Mongolia:

One of the most enduring features of the Mongolian countryside was that you could travel a thousand miles without coming across a television. [...]...we rode down the valley to meet what I feared might be the only couch potato in western Mongolia (SS 102).

And later that same day...

In the midst of what appeared to be a blinding snowstorm three people, or possibly six, were singing traditional Mongolian songs. Orolobai was excited with the reception, the best in weeks he declared.

Mercifully it was not to last. After a few minutes the ghostly figures disappeared into a blizzard, and then the screen went dark. [...] I tried to hide my disappointment.

Later Bold and I lay on the banks of the stream and watched the constellations falling towards the west. The stars seemed close enough to touch. Nowhere in the world is their reception as perfect as in Outer Mongolia (SS 104).

Even motor vehicles, which Stewart describes as a "coming thing" in Mongolia, are out of place in a land supposedly "still convinced of the superiority of the saddle" (SS 88 and 191). For Severin, the modern tents of a Japanese expedition in the Mongolian mountains make it seem "as if visitors had landed from another planet" (TS 87)...and so on and so forth. These are but a few examples (of the many available) that illustrate how anything modern or of external origin is seen as 'out of place' in rural Mongolia. These examples testify to the existence of a normative landscape in which things that contribute to the timeless, essentialized character of Mongolia are represented as natural and correct and anything else as a transgression of what 'should' be found there, and what the place 'should' be like.

## On Ethnography and the Construction of a Timeless Other

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to return to the discussion in Chapter One concerning the relationship between travel writing and ethnography. The notion that an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier creates a normative landscape in which unchanged, primordial landscapes and time-honoured, historically rooted traditional lifestyles are favoured over anything that would suggest the presence of modernity, is further supported by a noticeable ethnographic tone apparent in numerous descriptions of rural Mongolia in the travel writing under consideration. Indeed, studies that have arisen from the recent concern over the 'poetics and politics of ethnography' (see Chapter One) have suggested a strong link between ethnographic description and constructions of time and temporality in relation to the object of representation. Using this body of scholarship, it is possible to argue, as I will, that adopting an ethnographic tone when describing aspects of Mongolian culture and society contributes to representing the country as a traveller's frontier where time has stood still and in which spatial travel also implies a form of time travel back to the golden age of exploration\*

To recall, ethnographic writing is generally an empirically derived account of a people or culture that emphasizes descriptive detail (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 18). Ingold argues that ethnographic writing is prone to describing 'genres de vie' other than our own (for ethnography is a Western science) in such a way as to make it appear that a particular culture's present is no different from what its past was or future will be, barring any external

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\* I do not wish to suggest by this paragraph that travel writing and ethnographies can be lumped together unproblematically or that a particular theory developed for the study of one applies equally to the other. However, in chapter one I dissected the relationship between two forms of writing and showed how (as I intend to do in this subsection) it is possible to read travel writing for its ethnographic content in much the same way as it is possible to read ethnographies for their narrative content.

intervention, that is (Ingold, 1996: 201). This, continues Ingold, denies the society of these cultures their intrinsic temporality and effectively removes them from the “time stream of history in which ethnographers and their own societies exist” (Ingold, 1996: 201). Representing a culture as timeless – caught as it were in suspended animation – has the effect of consigning it to a time that has long ago been left behind by the ethnographer and his or her culture. It is almost as if time is used to conceptualize Western notions of progress, development and modernity in opposition to the stagnation and underdevelopment of the primitive other (Fabian, 1983: 144).

As one of the most detailed studies on the concept of temporality in ethnographic discourse, Fabian (1983) deserves a more detailed examination. His book, *Time and the Other*, argues that:

Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse; it is a science of other men in another Time. It is a discourse whose referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject (Fabian, 1983: 143).

This, he claims, is a “scandal” given that the cultures being described by anthropologists – ethnographers if their work is based on empirical observation – are of course contemporaries and not petrified relics. However, by the nineteenth century early anthropologists had already “sanctioned an ideological process by which relations between the West and its Other, between anthropology and its object, were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space *and* Time” (Fabian, 1983: 147). The repeated enactment of this ideological process throughout the past two centuries, Fabian continues, sustained and naturalized a certain relationship between the West and its Other, one in which Time travel has often become a prerequisite as much as a result of travels in space (Fabian, 1983: 146).

Thus, to paraphrase the title of Lowenthal's (1984) famous study, the past becomes a foreign country as in the case of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing.

Having put the cart somewhat before the horse, let me retrogress and provide some examples of the ethnographic tone evident in the travel writing under consideration. Even though there are literally dozens of examples to choose from, I will restrict myself to one representative excerpt from each of the five books, which should prove more than sufficient to illustrate the presence of an ethnographic tone. I begin with Waugh who dedicates a large portion of her book to relating a period of two summer months she spent living in a nomad encampment high in the Altai Mountains. In page after page she describes in minute detail the daily tasks being carried out around her and in the execution of which her hosts on occasion invite her to participate. For instance, she includes two pages (LW 138-9) describing how felt, a material that Mongolian nomads use for countless purposes, is made from freshly sheered sheep fleece. The process is explained in almost procedural fashion as if she is preoccupied with accurately documenting this activity for the benefit of the reader. The only time she breaks away from her step-by-step explanation of the process it when she inserts snippets of dialogue which indicate that she is actually there watching what is happening in real time. She posits herself as a participant observer whose knowledge is empirically derived and as such her narrative position is very much in line with the field account, that sub-genre of ethnographic writing described in chapter one (see also Geertz, 1988).

Middleton, during his travels in the Khangayn region of central Mongolia, visits numerous gers belonging to the family units of nomadic herdsmen. He is clearly fascinated by their way of life and, like Waugh, concerns himself with describing what he observes in a

precise, objective way. In one case (NM 76), the reader is treated to a description of how sheep are slaughtered by Mongolian herdsman. Great detail is given on the way the cuts are made, the procedure for peeling the skin off the carcass, how the entrails are removed and what body parts are used for what purposes. Even the impact this way of slaughtering sheep has on the ultimate taste of the meat is broached.

Like all the other travel writers, Becker devotes considerable attention to the *gers* of Mongolia's nomads. Not only does he describe the structure, the furniture and its organization, the decoration and artwork, the living arrangements and all that goes on in a *ger*, but also the traditions and mythologies associated with the standard Mongolian dwelling:

The *ger* has its own mythology and the posts symbolise the link with heaven and through them passes the past-present-future axis of the time. Mongols traditionally hang a purse of blue silk from the *tonoo* [the gap in the *ger* through which smoke escapes and sunlight enters] which holds a handful of grain as a totem of good fortune, a custom which has been forbidden under the Communists.

Legend has it that the first Mongol was born after a fair-haired man came through the *tonoo* and impregnated Alangua, the ancestral mother of the Mongolians.

The hearth, now a stove, also has special significance connected with ancient fire worship and is always to be treated with respect (JB 221).

In this example the tone of the narrative voice is one of authority that is lecturing the reader on the finer points of a supposedly pre-modern culture's belief systems and superstitions. This passage goes beyond the descriptive and experiential record of observations and anecdotes characteristic of standard travel narratives and into the realm of pure ethnography, which concerns itself with understanding the very structure of a culture.

Somewhat similarly, Stewart, who, I suspect, would never make a very good ethnographer because of his inability to distance his sense of humour from his writing for long, describes the ritual importance of the *Ovoo*, stone cairns which mark significant points in the landscape for Mongolian travellers. He describes their appearance and how they are the enactment of an ancient tradition that seeks to placate the spirits and ensure good fortune for travellers. Stewart explains the simple ritual that takes place each time a rider passes an *Ovoo* and runs through the eclectic mix of votive offerings that are strewn over each one he passes. To be fair, taken alone, Stewart's writing rarely recalls an ethnography because his narrative style is too casual and the use of irony and humour is far more in line with travel writing than ethnographic writing. However, taken as part of a body of work in which ethnographic undertones are very common, it becomes possible to isolate instances, such as the one above, in which Stewart, too, adopts this style of writing, albeit never to the degree of the other travel writers in question.

Finally, we come to Severin. At times one is apt to question whether his book is more of an amateur ethnography of sorts than a work of travel writing. Although the structure of his book is not the least bit scholarly, he often refers to his travels as "research" and, by inference, himself as a researcher. Throughout his book he describes in great detail the minutiae of Mongolian culture and society. The reader is treated to lengthy passages on such things as how Mongolian herdsmen hobble their horses, the structure and appearance of Mongolian saddles, the relationship between herdsmen and their horses, traditional workmanship and crafts, ceremonies (for everything from blessing riders, to sealing oaths, to purification), the snuff ritual, the patterns of decorative embroideries (my favourite!), the practice of making offerings to the spirits, and the different animal-based folk remedies used

by the nomads, to name just a few. Severin even describes the countenances of individuals he comes across as if trying to establish a typology of sorts to distinguish between Mongolia's various races:

Hojanias was to be our contact with the Kazakh nomads. He was a big, energetic bear of a man with a strongly Turkish face. His brown eyes were much rounder than the Mongol eyes we had grown used to, his skin more fair, and he had a far broader jaw and a higher bridge to his nose which made him look completely different from the *arats* [ethnic Mongolian herdsmen] who had been our companions earlier. No one would have mistaken him for a Mongol, even if he had not been wearing a brightly embroidered Kazakh skull cap perched on the back of his shaven skull (TS 206).

One wonders if Severin packed a pair of callipers along with his bridle and riding boots.

As Moutafi points out, anthropologists often used primitive societies as “a time machine through which one could travel back to the Western world's distant past and return, thereby, to the childhood age of humanity” (Moutafi, 2000: 207). The modern age has seen this approach adopted by disaffected travel writers and tourists who are motivated by nostalgia for pure, unadulterated peoples and places. As we saw above, in such cases the act of spatial travel is predicated on a particular imaginative geography of a place and people as timeless and therefore ‘time travel’ is a crucial component of the journey from the start. The ethnographic tone evidenced in contemporary travel writing about Mongolia is as an acknowledgement of this imaginative geography, which was first aired in the works of early European explorers, missionaries, traders and colonial officials (the so called proto-ethnographers), but which became sedimented through the works of ethnographers. By adopting an ethnographic tone in their depictions of Mongolian culture, the travel writers under consideration are evoking an “allochronic” discourse and thereby themselves representing Mongolia as a place rooted in a bygone age. They are also, it could be argued,

searching for a sense of 'authenticity' that is often associated with the culture of pre-modern, or untouched, societies, but this is something that I will discuss further in the following chapter.

Thus, the ethnographic tone that characterizes aspects of the works under consideration is but another way that Mongolia is denied its inherent temporality and represented as a timeless, unchanging place imprisoned in the past. This is very much 'a kind of pragmatic fossilization' given that it allows the travel writers in question to present the idea that by going to Mongolia they are travelling back in time to a golden age in which European travel took place in the context of unknown and exotic frontiers beyond the periphery. What Gregory said of Egypt holds true in the case of Mongolia as well: By representing Mongolia as an anachronistic space that exists outside the space of modernity, it becomes possible for these travel writers to open an imaginative passage to a time before imperial consolidation, globalization, and the tourism industry, changed the character of the world for European travellers altogether. Indeed, as an unchanging entity trapped in a cyclical time warp, Mongolia becomes the static backdrop to a textual stage on which fantasies of travel and exploration are constructed.

# Chapter Five

## Experiencing Mongolia: Geographies of Subject Formation

*But the old man had been contemplating me. 'You are the badachir,' he said, using a word that meant a lone itinerant. 'You have no home, no family, no commitments. That's why you have come to Mongolia. To be an outsider in your own land is more difficult.'*

– Stanley Stewart

### On Place and Subject Formation

During the course of the previous two chapters, we have seen how imaginative geographies of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier are produced and reproduced by representations in contemporary travel writing. Chapter Three investigated how the notion of the traveller's frontier is implicated in the textual framing of Mongolia as a travel destination. Chapter Four looked at how the imaginative geography associated with this textual framing also laid the groundwork for depictions of Mongolia as a timeless, unchanging entity that exists outside the space of modernity. The present chapter considers the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier by studying how it

influences, and is influenced by, the experience of Mongolia on the part of the travel writers in question. As we saw in Chapter Two, the travel writing genre is marked by a 'focus on the centrality of the self', which suggests that a traveller's experiences of place play an important role in informing or mediating his or her representations of that same place. In other words, I argue that imaginative geographies of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier are constituted and reconstituted in part based on the travel writers' experiences of Mongolia, not to mention the textual reproduction of these experiences.

As a form of perceiving or understanding place, imaginative geographies carry with them "all the hopes, accomplishments, ambiguities, and even horrors of existence" (Relph, 1997: 208). They represent a geography of life based on a combination of perception and experience that cannot be reduced to a series of nodes and grid references or otherwise understood through the practices of a strictly spatial science (Crang, 1998: 102). Consequently, the study of imaginative geographies can be regarded as a mapping of identities onto, and in relation to, particular places (Gregory, 2000c: 335). This is due to the fact that there is a strong connection between the way place is interpreted and the nature of a subject's self-identity and self-conception:

The very identity of subjects, both in terms of their own self-definition and their identity as grasped by others, is inextricably bound to the particular places in which they find themselves and in which others find them, while in a more general sense, it is only within the overarching structure of place as such that subjectivity as such is possible (Malpas, 1999: 176).

However, as Malpas points out, this does not mean that self-identity can be reduced to a straightforward identification of person with place. Rather, drawing on Proust, he writes that the way places are perceived and negotiated – 'actively engaged' to use his terminology – is what actually defines who or what one is. "Particular places enter into our self-

conception and self-identity inasmuch as it is only in, and through our grasp of...places...that we can encounter objects, other persons, or, indeed, ourselves” (Malpas, 1999: 177). Thus, he continues, the search for the self is often presented as a search for place that is characterized, as is clearly the case in contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, by a temporal aspect along with the more obvious spatial aspect (Malpas, 1999: 178).

Considering that the active engagement with place contributes to defining subject positions and identity constructs, one could logically argue that writing the experience of place documents a process of relational identity construction between subject and place. The process is relational in part because perceptions of place are produced and reproduced in the act of subject formation, which is itself mediated by particular conceptualizations of place. In the case of Mongolia, the subject positions of the travel writers in question are created, textually, with reference to experiences of Mongolia that are congruent with an imaginative geography of the country as the traveller’s frontier. In other words, the experience of Mongolia as described and reflected upon in the texts under analysis allows for the textual creation of subject positions that are compatible with the imaginative geography of Mongolia described in the previous chapters.

## Alone and Loving it: The Trope of the Explorer

The travel writing under consideration is characterized by a recurring trope in which the travelling subject\* posits him or herself as somehow unique, a pioneer, the first to see or do something. Furthermore, it appears that this trope is validated by, or at least implicated with, an associated trope in which the travelling subject experiences physical discomforts and hardships throughout the course of his or her travels in Mongolia. Thus, the reader is left with the idea that by enduring trials and tribulations the travelling subject manages to enter a space of exclusivity, distinction or privilege. One cannot help but draw parallels between this trope and the imperial conception of travel as a proving ground for young men (and some women) who would embark for the furthest extremes of empire in search of riches and recognition (see Chapter Three).

Severin, for example, repeatedly describes the physical hardships he faced while riding across Mongolia on horseback. “The hammering, jarring, flat run of the Mongol horses was...excruciating” (TS 125) and at the end of each day Severin “slumped to the ground in total exhaustion, grateful to be finished with the pounding agony of the ride” (TS 70). The author’s ears bled from chilblains caused by the relentless wind (TS 620), his body was constantly being “jolted and rattled” (TS 50), and his knees, spine and ribs ached (TS 125). However, these discomforts were something Severin willingly endured because they were part and parcel of the unique opportunity and experience of riding with Mongolian herdsmen:

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\* Since the travel writing under consideration purports to be non-fiction and is characterized by a first-person narrative voice, the reader assumes that the travelling subject is one and the same as the travel writer.

Here was the most wonderful opportunity for me to travel freely inside Mongolia, not just as an outsider following his own programme, but in the company of Mongols who were committed to rediscovering their own history. It was an opening that no Westerner had ever been offered before. I was quite ready to...concentrate...on the unique chance to participate in the traditional lifestyle of Mogol herdsmen and to test their age-old method of long-distance travel (TS 10-11).

The reader is led to believe that by accepting and being capable of enduring these physical hardships, Severin is able to capitalize on an unprecedented experience and become the 'first' Westerner to ride freely in the company of Mongolia's nomads. Severin's totalizing and hyperbolic statement – '*...no Westerner had ever been offered...*' – does not leave room for doubt and points to the concreteness of his imaginative geography of Mongolia as a frontier space in which he is a pioneering traveller. Severin is effectively writing himself in the role, or subject position, of an explorer who braves physical hardship in the endless search for new places and experiences beyond the margins.

Somewhat similarly, enduring the difficulties of travelling in rural Mongolia, albeit by jeep and not horseback, allows both Becker and Middleton to enter a space in which they are distinguished from other Westerners. Travel in rural Mongolia is not exactly a Sunday drive, if Becker and Middleton are to be believed. There is little or no petrol available and in spring the thawing ground becomes "an impassable quagmire" (JB 154). Middleton describes how the quality of the roads, if one can call them thus, leaves much to be desired: "The road degraded to become a series of pot-holes with occasional stretches of concrete in between and then disappeared altogether to become a series of pot-holes in a muddy track with occasional stretches of deeper pot-holes in between" (NM 62). Driving along such roads, speeds rarely exceed a crawl and even then the passenger feels as if he or she is "riding a bucking bronco" or "completing an assault course" (NM 62). The only reprieve to

this is when (the many) swollen rivers impede progression altogether and the traveller is forced to wait for hours until water levels have subsided (JB 161). However, by braving these trials and tribulations Becker is rewarded by discovering hidden valleys that “no Westerner” had ever glimpsed before (JB 210) and by stumbling upon evidence of large scale communist purges dating back to the 1930’s that, according to him, he is the first journalist to have reported on (JB 83-84). On several occasions during his forays into the wilds of Mongolia, Middleton meets nomads that have never seen a Westerner before and whose reactions towards him alternate between apparent lack of interest (he is told they are so nonplussed by him that they have no idea how to react) and wide-eyed shock, especially on the part of the children (NM 73, 100, 138). Thus, in both cases the notion of being an explorer, or pioneer is once again present. This is especially so in Middleton’s case, since his experience recalls the image of early European explorers coming into contact with indigenous people the world over and the associated dynamics that played out between adventurer and native during such encounters. This image is of course loaded with colonial undertones, not least because of the implicit relationship that was to develop between the two parties in terms of power and privilege.

The same interrelated tropes are evidenced in Waugh’s book as well. Life in the village of Tsengel, where she lived for a year, was not exactly rosy, a fact that the reader is constantly made aware of. The following passage exemplifies many that the reader is treated to:

I was very, very tired. Months of gradual weariness had crept up on me like a virus and I suddenly felt worn out. I was sick of hauling water and ice, chopping frozen wood and scrubbing my clothes. I couldn’t bear to crouch, shivering and naked in the tin bath any longer, and I hated that outside toilet, which was now slippery with black ice and sprouting stalagmites. Going to the loo at night was absolutely lethal, so I just squatted outside the *hasha*

[yard] gate like the children, clenching my teeth and buttocks against the cold. This constant, intense cold was the most exhausting thing of all. Our whole lives revolved around staying warm. Apart from when bathing I never took my clothes off, and didn't even change them very much any more. I pulled layers on top of more layers till I looked like the circus fat lady whenever I went outside. In the mornings the temperature made my eyes smart (LW 252).

Waugh describes how she longed for life to be easier, "to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, to lie in a full-sized tub of hot water, see my friends, take a lover, and be reunited with my mother and sister" (LW 253). Yet, at the same time, Waugh explains how enduring privations made her feel as if she had "earned" her experiences in Mongolia (LW 206). The sheer difficulty for a Westerner to live in Tsengel also meant that as long as she was willing to endure the above hardships, in all likelihood she would be the only Westerner in the village. In fact, Waugh seems to have based the validity of her experiences on the fact that she was the only foreigner in Tsengel. "I honestly believed", she writes, "that the *only* way I could *genuinely* experience living in the village was to be here on my own. Having another foreigner with me would have diluted things, made it too easy, if you like" (LW 190-191; italics mine). That Waugh believes there is 'only' one way to 'genuinely' experience Mongolia both reflects (and strengthens) a very particular conceptualization of Mongolia as a travel destination. Waugh even goes as far as to say that she would have felt the need to leave had another foreigner come to live in Tsengel while she was there (LW 206). Therefore, as a result of her willingness and ability to cope with the harsh conditions rural Mongolia threw at her, Waugh was able to lay claim to an experience that was "wondrous" and "exciting", but most importantly "unique" (LW 191).

At first glance, Stewart undermines from within the subject position of the intrepid explorer who willingly endures hardship and privation in search of experiences that will

distinguish him from the crowd. To start with, Stewart's experience of riding in Mongolia hardly resembles the jarring, exhausting nightmare described by Severin. Far from an equine instrument of torture, the first horse Stewart rode in Mongolia was an obliging chestnut gelding, made all the more comfortable by the big, spacious saddle the author had brought with him from London (SS 94). The landscape is accommodating, if not downright nurturing, the grass is luxuriant, water is plentiful and one campsite surpasses the next as the ideal place to rest after a long day's ride. Stuart acknowledges that his experience is somewhat different to that of other travellers in Mongolia:

Accounts of riding in Mongolia invariably contain a whine of complaint. The enormous distances, the continual diet of mutton, the uncomfortable gait of the short Mongolian horses, the extremities of the weather, the bleakness of the country, have troubled travelers from William to Przhevalsky\* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I cannot add to this literature of discomfort. In Mongolia I wondered if it was possible to be happier. When the horses were good, and the weather fine, I felt I was in paradise. In the movement of journeys there is a wonderful stillness. For four months I was untroubled by arrival (SS 170).

Yet the subject position this passage conveys, that of a rugged explorer who is at home in the wilderness and, as one reviewer described it, casually "sets off across a thousand miles of steppe as insouciantly as if he were embarking on a 10K charity walk" (Goodheart, 2003: 23), is simply a variation on the subject position discussed in the preceding paragraphs vis-à-vis the other travel writers. In effect, Stewart turns the 'trope of discomfort' on its head, but the image of the traveller/explorer is still projected, albeit from a slightly different angle.

At one point during his ride across Mongolia, Stewart comes across Rudy, a young German backpacker whose presence seems to constitute an intrusion on the author's

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\* William of Rubruck and Nikolai Przhevalsky: European explorers of Central Asia. Further information on these men is provided in the next subsection.

experience of Mongolia, an experience that, in line with the other writers, appears to be heightened by notions of uniqueness and exclusivity that stem from being the only Westerner in the land. From Stewart's description, Rudy emerges as the stereotypical backpacker who is easily identified by his clothing, even at a distance. Rudy sports the loose tie-dyed pants "*de rigueur* for young backpackers in Asia", an army surplus jacket and a batik handbag, not to mention an embroidered pillbox hat that, according to Stewart, suited the Hunza tribesmen who manufactured it far more than someone with a "long potato face, lank orange hair, and the kind of big European nose that gave Mongolian children nightmares" (SS 175). Shortly after meeting Rudy, Stewart muses how

One of the many pleasures of Mongolia is that it is far from the beaten tracks to which young backpackers generally adhere. At moments of difficulty I was always able to revive my spirits by reminding myself that I was thousands of miles from cafes with banana pancakes, threadbare Lonely Planet guides and notice boards full of people looking for other people they had met two months ago in India. My heart sank when I saw Rudy. His face lit up when he saw me, and I felt guilty about my lack of charity (SS 175).

Thus, Rudy intrudes on the domain Stewart has constructed for himself, but at the same time it is made abundantly clear that Rudy is 'out of place' in Mongolia since Stewart, who by contrast is very much 'in place', feels that he should be 'charitable' towards the young backpacker despite the fact that he resents his presence. The degree to which Rudy is 'out of place' in Mongolia is driven home in the subsequent pages. It appears that Rudy had paid an exorbitant fee to be driven to the village of Chulutt from Ulan Bator by an individual who had promised him the opportunity to live with 'real' nomads. The man had left him in the village with relatives who charged Rudy a daily fee for sleeping space in their *ger* and the "privilege" of watching their sheep. Having already stayed quite long enough for his liking, Rudy had no way of returning to Ulan Bator and spent his days in increasing

desperation while around him the inhabitants of Chulutt debated whether he had come to the village as a spy. Apparently, however, “most were content to believe that he was simply bonkers” (SS 176). Rudy, in turn, regarded the Mongolians of Chulutt as corrupted nomads whose only concern was the acquisition of money, his own in particular.

It is interesting to note how Stewart’s subject position is constructed partly in relation to that of Rudy the backpacker who is ‘othered’ by association to a group of Western travellers/tourists – ‘the backpackers’ – that Stewart is clearly trying to write himself out of. Stewart is very much at home in Mongolia, he is in the embrace of the landscape and its inhabitants, but not so far as to relinquish control over his person or travels. Rudy, on the other hand, is at odds with Mongolia and Mongolians, not least evidenced by the fact that he has been stranded, cheated and treated variously as a dangerous spy or insane foreigner. Indeed, and here we can draw the other four works under consideration back into the discussion, the two tropes described in this subsection and the subject position they imply can be read in the context of the strict distinctions between the activities of exploration, travel and tourism made in both popular and academic literature.

As Curtis and Pajaczkowska point out, these three forms of travel have been widely organized in a hierarchy that serves to distinguish between levels of commitment, difficulty, reward and exclusivity (Curtis and Pajaczkowska, 1994: 202). Exploration and travel (which can be lumped together at the top of the hierarchy) are associated with lengthy time commitments, and, more importantly to the discussion at hand, with an inherent level of difficulty and hardship. Risse describes how the etymological association between the word travel and the word travail has meant that a measure of travail is often considered to be a defining characteristic of travel, not to mention exploration (Risse, 1998: 43). The rewards

of 'exploration' or 'travel', at least in terms of unique or exclusive experiences accrued, are then measured to a certain degree in relation to the amount of travail that took place. At the bottom of this imaginative scale of hardship, of course, lies tourism through which runs a vein of riskless hedonism associated with the mindless pursuit of pleasure (Dann, 1999). My point is that the interrelated tropes discussed in this subsection – the trope of hardship and the trope of exclusive or unique experience – are associated with a subject position, that of the explorer/traveller, as much as they are disassociated with another subject position, that of the mass tourist. Similarly, and based on the concept that subjectivity is bound up with the experience and perception of places, Mongolia as the physical place in relation to which the travel writers in question are constructing their subject positions becomes represented as a place for exploration and travel as much as a place that is not for tourism and tourists. Thus the image of Mongolia as a frontier for travellers, a place for explorers and travellers, but not for tourists.

#### **Following In the Footsteps of Kindred Spirits: The Trope of Re-creation**

If one agrees with Dann, then being an 'explorer' or 'traveller' not only implies difficulty or hardship and distinction from the crowd, but also "solidarity with an imagined group of kindred spirits" (Dann, 1999: 166). As we saw in Chapter One, the very notions of travel and the traveller are associated with an imperial golden age, they are "bathed in a mellow light of nostalgia", to use Hatcher's formulation (Hatcher, 1999: 132). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that the 'kindred spirits' of contemporary travel writers are often those writers and travellers whose works and travels date back to this aforementioned golden age.

In the body of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia being considered, the works and journeys of earlier European explorers and travellers to Mongolia are constantly being described, quoted, discussed or otherwise evoked for the readership in an almost continuous 'intertextual' engagement. In many cases this occurs within a context that involves the travel writers somehow replicating or recreating an aspect of the travels described by these early European explorers and travellers. Holland and Huggan have suggested that in paying their statutory respects to such individuals, contemporary travel writers are acknowledging that their own travels have come too late and all that remains is to emulate what others have already done before them (Holland and Huggan, 1998: 7). It would seem that this idea is relevant in the context of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, not least due to the presence of the oft-repeated trope of re-creation to which I alluded above. Yet one can go further. By evoking earlier travellers and their works, the travel writers at hand are also making a profound comment on their own subject positions, this time by association rather than negative definition (as was the case in relation to tourists and tourism). In other words, by choosing earlier travellers as their metaphorical travelling companions and weaving their own journeys in with ones that took place during the so-called golden age of travel, the travel writers under consideration are (in part) defining their own subjectivity through the company they have chosen to keep.

Although the term 'intertextuality' has had a complex evolution from Bakhtin to Kristeva and beyond, at its core is the idea that every text has its meaning in relation to other texts – i.e. there is no utterance without relation to other utterances; there is not text without relation to other texts (Todorov, 1984: 60). In the context of travel writing, this statement can be grounded with reference to an essay by Henderson (1991) that discusses

how a given work of travel writing often bears the unmistakable imprint of other travel writing that has influenced or otherwise guided its creation. As I mentioned above, in contemporary travel writing about Mongolia such an 'imprint' is evident, taking shape in the form of an intertextual engagement with a limited set of works composed by European explorers and travellers to Mongolia between the Middle-Ages and the early twentieth century.\* This intertextual engagement, not to mention the trope of re-creation that often accompanies it, is important to consider because it contributes significantly to the textual construction of the subject position that I highlighted under the previous subheading.

In the very first pages of his book, Stewart establishes what is to become an enduring intertextual relationship (if one can call it thus) with Friar William of Rubruck, a French clergyman who wrote a first-hand account of his travels in Mongolia that took place during the year 1253. In addition to being billed as a search for the vestiges of nomadic life in the late twentieth century, Stewart frames his travels to Mongolia as a journey in the footsteps of Friar William:

We tend to think of Friar William now as an explorer, and like the best explorers he had no idea where he was going, how he was going to get there, or what he should do once he arrived. When William left from Istanbul in the spring of 1253, he was setting off, like Jason and Argonauts, into barbarian darkness. His journey took him from Istanbul across southern Russia and what is now Kazakhstan to the distant Mongol capital of Qaraqorum. It was the route I wanted to follow and I saw him, across seven centuries, as a travelling companion (SS 9).

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\* Here my application of 'intertextuality' is borrowed from Genette who uses the term as a subcategory of what he calls (somewhat confusingly) transtextuality - "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Allen, 2000: 101). As a subcategory of transtextuality, Genette limits the scope of intertextuality to the "relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts" and as 'the actual presence of one text within another'" (Genette, 1997: 1-2 in Allen, 2000: 101). In Genette's definition, intertextuality is reduced to instances of direct quotation or explicit reference (as opposed to the more complex semiotic process of cultural and textual signification it has been defined as elsewhere by Kristeva, Barthes and others - see Allen, 2000).

Stewart is thus associating his travels with Friar William's, and, by implication, his own travelling identity with that someone he perceives as an "early explorer" of the "best" kind. This becomes clearer if one considers a string of passages in which Stewart witnesses or experiences something that he then compares or informs with reference to Friar William's account of Mongolia. For example, at one point in his narrative, Stewart describes a visit to a Buddhist lamasery: "Above a raised veranda of lacquered pillars the beams were decorated with garish skulls, meant to scare off evil spirits. Inside the tall temple doors adorned with lion-head knockers, the monks were whispering Tibetan sutras into the incense-laden gloom" (SS 200). Stewart then quotes Friar William's description of a lamasery with the intention of highlighting the degree to which his and Friar William's experiences and observations of Mongolian lamaseries coincided: "[The monks whispering sutras] were exactly as Friar William had described them over seven centuries ago. 'All their priests shave their heads completely,' William wrote, 'and dress in saffron colour...on the day when they go into the temple they put down two benches and sit opposite one another in two rows like choirs, holding their books'" (SS 200). If one considers that experience of place to some extent defines subjectivity, and that Friar William's subject position (at least in Stewart's eyes) is that of an explorer, then by drawing comparisons between his own experiences and those of Friar William he is identifying himself as a traveller who is cast from the same mould as the man in whose footsteps he is following.

The joint notions or re-creation and shared experience feature in the book by Severin in much the same way as they do in Stewart's. As I have already mentioned several times, Severin's entire voyage is framed as a search for Mongolia as described in accounts by two medieval European travellers – Friar William of Rubruck and his predecessor Giovanni de

Piano Carpini. As such the idea of recreating or at least revisiting the travels and experiences of earlier travellers is inherent to his book. However, his intertextuality is not restricted to the accounts penned by Friar William and Carpini. Rather, Severin quotes and otherwise refers to accounts written by an entire cast of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European travellers that visited Mongolia.\* In similar fashion to Stewart, Severin evokes these works in such a way as to highlight the similarity between his experiences of Mongolia and those described in the works to which he is referring. On numerous occasions Severin qualifies a description, experience or observation of his own with phrases such as: “[it was] a scene Brother Rubruck would have recognized” (TS 113), “[they were] just as Prjevalski had described” (TS 53), “it was a nightmare of exactly the sort which, even by medieval standards, Rubruck found gross” (TS 165-166), “I was irresistibly reminded of Beatrix Bulstrode’s observation...” (TS 179), “...our situation would have been familiar to Rubruck or Carpini or, indeed Beatrix Bulstrode” (TS 162-163), and so on and so forth. Again, like Stewart, Severin is comparing his experiences with those found in accounts that date back to the golden age of travel, the authors of which he then becomes identified with as a result of shared experiences of Mongolia.

Virtually identical examples of the above can also be drawn from Becker and Middleton, although I believe my point has already been made and does not need to be reinforced with a tediously long list of examples. Suffice it to say that Becker’s and Middleton’s books\* are characterized by similar intertextual engagements that have much

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\* Foremost among which are Beatrix Bulstrode, an Englishwoman who made an impression with her 1921 *A Tour in Mongolia*, and Nicolai Prjevalski, a renowned Russian explorer who travelled in Mongolia in the 1870’s and 1880’s and has been credited with the ‘discovery’ of the Mongolian Wild Horse.

\* No reference is made to Waugh because explicit intertextualism (strictly according to Genette’s definition) is virtually absent in her book. However, this is not to say that the subject position of the narrator/traveller in her

the same role in identity construction and subject formation as in Stewart's and Serverin's books. The broader point here is that intertextualism in the context of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia has contributed to the construction of specific subject positions because of its role in associating the experiences of travellers from the past with those of the present. Moreover, it is very revealing that the travel writers in question never refer to each other or any of the other contemporary travellers whose books about Mongolia I identified in Chapter Two, although it is more than likely that they would have had knowledge of, and access to, each other's books. After all, one could postulate, engaging with fellow travellers would undermine the integrity of the tropes discussed in the previous section – they cannot quote each other because they are writing themselves as unique. Like Rudy the backpacker, other contemporary travel writers do not belong in the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier and are therefore written out of the works under consideration. The inverse is true as well: writing out other travellers perpetuates an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. Finally, I cannot help but remark, how this point also validates the argument that Mongolia has been fossilized, that is the realm for travellers who trace their lineage to the great age of exploration.

### **Shamanism and the Search for Authenticity**

The search for experiences of the 'authentic' (and therefore 'authentic' experiences) is a socio-cultural phenomenon that underlies contemporary leisure travel in the Western world. Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that they are exclusive to the late

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book differs from that in the other books – a point that made abundantly clear in sections 5.2 and 5.4 – just that intertextualism does not seem to be implicated in subject formation in this case.

twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, questions of authenticity vis-à-vis travel and tourism seem to have become a more pressing and obvious concern in recent times (May, 1996: 716). As Wang posits, a widespread concern over authenticity has increased in response to the existential challenges posed by the homogenization, alienation and placelessness that many associate with modern life in the West (see Relph, 1976 for the seminal study of the rise of 'placelessness' in Western culture). Authenticity, in this context, carries a museum-linked definition in as far as the term is being used to describe genuine, real or unique cultural expressions enacted by local people according to custom and tradition (Wang, 2000: 44). As Desforges explains:

'Authentic' places are often associated with 'the primitive, the folk, the peasant, and the working class' whose culture is seen as sticking to its roots and traditions in an unself-conscious way. In particular, authentic places are thought to contain cultural objects and practises that have not been produced for sale, but for other members of the local community. Such places are represented as having a shared culture which is untouched by outside forces. [...] Conversely, 'inauthentic' places are characterized by a sense of self-conscious design for others, for example, making souvenirs for sale to tourists, rather than for the use of the local community. 'Inauthentic' places have been 'spoilt' by their contact with people from 'outside'. [...] The idea that places are either 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' implies that to remain unspoilt a culture must be 'bounded off' from neighbouring influences, particularly globalizing Western cultures. 'Authentic' cultures are those that emerge 'organically' from a place without interference that 'corrupts' their original form (Desforges, 1999: 299).

Thus, authenticity is often measured in terms of physical and imaginative distance from the urban West and the incursions of its tourist industry (May, 1996: 722).

As the preceding excerpt suggests, the experience of authenticity has often been used as a basis upon which 'travellers' seek to distinguish themselves from 'tourists' (their hierarchical inferiors) as the agents of 'genuine' travel. It is important to note that this is not a simple binary classification in which one group (the travellers) experience authenticity and

the other (the tourists) do not. The ideal of authenticity is an important driving force in 'tourism' as much as it is in 'travel'. The difference arises in that tourism is often associated with the commodification of culture and the homogenization and standardization of experience, such that it gives rise to manufactured or 'staged' authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). As Silver points out, tourists are usually fully aware of this fact and are even willing to accept it (to varying degrees and provided it is not glaringly overt) as part and parcel of their chosen form of travel (Silver, 1993). Furthermore, this is not to say that tourists do not lament their inability to achieve authentic experiences associated with nostalgic or romantic visions of 'travel', as evidenced in their search for 'undiscovered' Greece or Spain (May, 1996: 710). Indeed, there appears to be a widespread

[C]oncern with reaching beyond the more usual tourist experience towards some kind of 'real,' usually backstage encounter. As suggested in the literature, such a move is clearly connected to a process of social distinction, being positioned as just one way in which a new class of independent travelers seek to distinguish themselves from others, and to locate their travel experiences within a broader system of cultural capital (May, 1996: 721).

The social distinction that results from such 'real', 'backstage encounters' revolves around individuals or groups transcending their default categorization as 'tourists' and becoming 'travellers'. Thus, the search for authenticity is also an exercise in subject formation and identity construction inasmuch as the experience of authenticity defines a particular subject position – that of the real 'traveller'.

In contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, encountering sources of 'authenticity' comes to the fore as a fundamental part of the experience of Mongolia. In Chapter Four I have already suggested that the ethnographic tone evident in the five works could be understood as a nostalgic predisposition for ways of life and cultural expressions

seen as bearing a seal of authenticity as a result of their rootedness in the past. However, rather than injecting the concept of authenticity into the earlier discussion on ethnography (which could well be done), I propose to focus on a different example in order to illustrate how the experience of authenticity contributes to constructing a subject position for the travel writers in question, one that defines them as ‘explorers’ or ‘travelers’ who are both physically and psychologically distinct from the more familiar globetrotter of our day: the ‘tourist’. My example involves discussing descriptions of encounters with Mongolian shamans\* that appear at least once in four out of the five books (Middleton’s being the exception). I will argue that the recounting of these encounters reflects a complex negotiation with the notion of authenticity, which nonetheless eventually culminates in a clear affirmation that the experience was ‘genuine’ and not manufactured or ‘staged’.

To begin with, the travel writers in question reinforce the remoteness of the location where their encounter with the shaman took place, as if to suggest that this factor somehow increased the odds of the encounter proving authentic. Thus, Becker searches for and finds a shaman “in a wild and mountainous region close to the Soviet border”, which even Mongols thought remote (JB 153). Similarly, Severin heads to the Altai Mountains “hoping that in such a remote corner of the country it might be possible that shamanism still continued” (TS 234). Moreover, he is convinced that if a shaman did exist “he or she must surely be the last survivor of what had been an intriguing element of the world of Genghis Khan” (TS 232).

Waugh, too, meets a shaman in the same region as Severin while at a wedding in a valley far from the village where she is living. Finally, Stewart is even more expressive than

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\* A shaman can be loosely defined as a member of certain tribal societies who acts as a medium between the visible world and an invisible spirit world and who practices magic or sorcery for purposes of healing, divination, and control over natural events.

the others in describing the location and setting of his to his encounter with a Mongolian shaman:

The shaman's tent lay in the high Altay on the edge of another world. All morning we rode through narrowing valleys, each higher and bleaker than the one before. Boulders protruded from the grass glazed with lichens the colour of dried blood. We passed a dead yak. Grass grew through the eye sockets and the desiccated hide peeled like parchment from the white bones. At a lonely watershed where the north wind howled down from further heights, we came to a single *ger* standing on the skyline in a stone-coloured light. The name of this place, Ganbold [his guide] said, was Balkhuum. A conclave of ravens circled noisily over the abyss beyond the *ger*. I peered over the edge. Wreathed in cloud the earth fell away into fathomless depths (SS 123).

Just the type of place, one would imagine, where an age-old shaman would live amongst the exotic bric-a-brac of his or her trade.

However, although in each case the setting may be propitious for an encounter with an 'authentic shaman', the fulfilment of this expectation is called into question upon actually meeting the shaman. In the case of Stewart, Becker and Severin, this meeting invariably challenges their imaginative constructions of how a shaman should appear and inevitably leads to a flood of questions and doubts concerning the authenticity of the purported shaman before him. Stewart admits that he had been expecting to meet a "compelling and charismatic character" occupying the raven circled tent atop the cloud wreathed mountain he had just ridden up, but instead finds himself facing a "shambling bashful figure" with "a drained face and limp handshake" (SS 125). Becker appears to have felt faintly ridiculous interviewing a shaman who reminded him distinctly of a "garden gnome" or "forest pygmy" rather than a Mongol (JB 163). Severin, too, is surprised to find that a "normal" looking old-woman "busily getting on with everyday chores" he meets outside a *ger* turns out to be the shaman he has come to see (TS 243). Severin is disarmed by "how thoroughly normal

everything was” around him and finds himself having “misgivings” about the authenticity of it all, even asking himself rhetorically if he was being naïve to expect to find a “real shamaness in modern Mongolia”, as if the two were mutually incompatible (TS 240). Despite claiming to have become less sceptical as he realized that conditions were hardly propitious for “chicanery”, Severin nonetheless remained doubtful. He therefore proceeded to ask the shaman, Samga, a series of questions, the responses to which he compares with ethnographic theory in an effort to determine the plausibility of her status as an authentic shaman. Stewart also suspects he is being deceived and describes in a bemused tone how a price was negotiated between himself (the “client”) and the Shaman’s wife (the “manager”) for the privilege of viewing a séance, which went ahead on the wife’s insistence despite the shaman’s protestations that the spirits could not be summoned on that particular day and time. Clearly unimpressed, Stewart then recounts the séance during which, he claims, the shaman “sounded uncannily like Marlon Brando” (SS 127).

Thus, these travel writers are not only demonstrating their deep concern for authenticity, but also that they are weary of inauthenticity. They are, in effect, acknowledging the potential for staged or manufactured authenticity while at the same time reassuring the reader that they are capable of discerning between what is ‘genuine’ and what is ‘fake’. Having established this (and one will note that Waugh skips this ‘step’), attentions are turned to convincing the reader that there is an authentic core to these encounters despite the earlier indications to the contrary. For example, during the apparently staged séance that Stewart witness the shaman told him to “beware of the horse with the man’s name”, a heeding to which the author pays little attention. Yet, much later in the book as Stewart journey is coming to a close, he acquires a mount whom he names “Fred”, realizing too late

that this was the horse the shaman had warned him of months before. It is on “Fred” that Stewart rides to the most unwelcome and disconsoling destination of his travels – journey’s end (SS 259). Severin claims a similar experience. While he is talking to Samga, the shaman, she interrupts a childhood story she is relaying and casually tells the author that there is a pair of spectacles in his home and that he doesn’t know who owns them. Severin is startled by this piece of information and goes on to describe how he had come across a mysterious pair of spectacles while packing his expedition kitbags in Ulan Bator several days previously and that none of his travelling companions had recognized them as their own. Furthermore, upon returning to Europe, Severin noticed that the video he had made of the séance Samga performed for him had a peculiar electrical interference, a curious item given that, as he points out, the shaman had told him that electricity interfered with her shamanistic powers.

Waugh and Becker also suggest that there was a core of authenticity in their respective encounters with Mongolian shamans. Waugh envelops the shaman she meets at a traditional wedding in an aura of mysticism: the woman is young “though her age was somehow indefinable” and “[s]he had the gait of someone much older and more weary than her apparent years” (LW 133). Waugh senses that her weariness came from deep inside, that “[she] was a woman who seemed to carry a burden from within, the weight of other people’s grief, anxiety, sadness and yearning” (LW 137). Similarly, the shaman Becker meets (gnome-like appearance notwithstanding) emanates a “special force”, a “strange presence” (JB 165). “The hypnotic drumming and the singing” of the séance witnessed by Becker “came like a primeval lament wrenched with great pain from inside him [the

shaman]" (JB 178). Becker finds it "disturbing", "frightening" even, to such a degree that his hands became clammy and the camera he held slipped from his grasp (JB 178).

Thus, in each case, the travel writers have written their experience with Mongolian shamans as 'authentic'. The scepticism with which three of the travel writers faced the experience only solidifies this claim because it posits them in the eyes of the reader as discerning individuals who are not content with the tourist approach of suspending disbelief when faced with a cultural expression that is staged. As both Wang and May have suggested, travelling off the beaten track in search of spaces that are conceptualized as bastions of authenticity in an increasingly artificial world has an implicit dimension of self-making (May, 1996: 721; Wang, 1999: 363). That the shamans were 'genuine' (or at least made out to be in the text), therefore, bears witness to the ability of these travel writers when it comes to seeking out sources of the authentic. It is precisely this ability that helps define their subjectivity in as far as it enables particular experiences and acts as a differentiating characteristic between these 'travellers' and their antithesis, the 'tourist'.

## **Conclusion**

The subject positions I have discussed throughout this chapter produce and reproduce imaginative geographies of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier. After all, the travel writers in question have cultivated their subject positions in relation to Mongolia, which means that they have conceptualized the country as a place that will support their romantic fantasies of travel and exploration. To be the 'traveller' or 'explorer' they needed a place where it was possible – and indeed plausible – for them to allege unique and unprecedented feats, to recreate (as closely as possible) the experiences of earlier travellers, and claim to

have encountered unaffected sources of the authentic. My argument is that the subject positions actively created or cultivated in relation to Mongolia also contribute to defining an image of Mongolia itself, much in the same way as the active engagement with place is widely regarded as generative in terms of subject formation. Thus, Mongolia becomes associated with the characteristics that shape a particular travelling identity – that of the ‘intrepid traveller’, just like the Dominican Republic, for instance, has become associated with the attributes that engender another (opposing) travelling identity – that of the ‘package tourist’.

# Conclusion

Over the course of the previous chapters I hope to have illustrated how collective, coherent representations of Mongolia in the five works under consideration constitute discursive formations that reflect and reproduce an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a travellers' frontier. As I have maintained from the outset, I believe the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing must be read in light of the 'sense of nostalgia' that permeates current discourse in the sphere of Western travel. Indeed, there seems to be a prevalent sense of longing for a time when travel took place in the context of unknown frontiers, which played an important social role in Western society as proving grounds for men in search of fame, fortune and adventure, and for women who wished to transgress the strict gender norms at play in old Europe (Mills, 1991; Phillips, 1996; Clark, 1999; Harper, 2001). Although in reality such frontier spaces have ceased to exist as a result of processes that can be grouped together under the banner term 'globalization', their imaginative potency remains active in the realm of Western travel, which is characterized by "a studied reluctance to see the world as having irrevocably changed" (Holland and Huggan, 1998: 15). It is this nostalgic socio-cultural desire for remote, mysterious and exotic frontiers in which to travel that, I argue, underpins the representation of Mongolia in contemporary travel writing.

I also stress from the outset that the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier is governed by a structured and remarkably cohesive discourse. It is a discourse constituted and reconstituted by sets of representations that are common to all the

five works under analysis. I argue that each of these sets of representations constitutes a discursive formation that reflects a conceptualization of Mongolia as a frontier space for travellers. However, these discursive formations not only reflect an imaginative geography of Mongolia, they also perpetuate and reproduce the same imaginative geography through the process of writing. Thus, contemporary travel writing is a site where imaginative geographies of Mongolia are both imported and created 'in-house' through the generative capacity of textual articulation.

Perhaps a brief recapitulation of the central points of my analysis will help provide a unified picture of my argument. In Chapter Three I discuss how Mongolia as a travel destination was introduced to readerships. I argue that the presence of particular representations served to 'frame' the country in light of characteristics associated with classic travellers' frontiers. More specifically, I show how in each of the works Mongolia was depicted as a remote and mysterious land that naturally engenders adventurous travel. I also identify a recurring trope in which the travel writers posit themselves as arriving in Mongolia at a propitious time, ready to rediscover Mongolia after almost a century of communist isolation. Implicit in this trope is the suggestion that the travel writers in question at once rediscovered Mongolia and were the last to see it unaffected by the globalizing influences that are sure to follow in their wake. Therefore, even before the act of travel has been narrated or described, Mongolia is contextualized as a frontier travel destination. I argue that this contextualization is as much the result of a pre-existing imaginative geography of Mongolia as it is a narrative plot that seeks to create expectations for the readership by constructing a compelling image of Mongolia. In either case a unified

set of representations structure a discursive formation that both reflects and produces an imaginative geography of Mongolia as a frontier travel destination.

In Chapter Four I explore how the discourse in question legitimizes and regulates representations of Mongolia as an ancient, primeval land, mired in its own history and unchanged by the passage of time. My discussion on the normative geographies of Mongolia illustrates how the discourse that underlies the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a travellers' frontier has its own 'regime of truth' that legislates inclusions and exclusions and establishes criteria for what is acceptable and what is not (Gregory, 2000c: 180). I show how urban Mongolia and anything modern or progressive is either excluded outright from, or depicted as 'out of place' in, the Mongolian landscape. Conversely, references to the past permeate the texts under consideration and traditional lifestyles, religious beliefs, practices and artefacts are all very much considered 'in place' vis-à-vis the Mongolian landscape. Thus, Mongolia becomes a cultivated anachronism, a destination that offers the possibility of 'time travel' back to a golden age before globalization changed the character of Western travel forever. This idea is further reinforced through the presence of a comparable ethnographic discourse that also constitutes its object of representation allochronistically.

In Chapter Five I investigate what could be called the 'performative' side of the discourse that produces and reproduces the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a travellers' frontier (Foucault, 1972; Gregory, 2000d: 180). More specifically, I consider how this imaginative geography influences the experience of Mongolia (and its textual rendering) and is implicated in subject formation and identity construction on the part of the travel writers in question. My core argument is that the travel writers constitute their

subjectivity in relation to a conceptualization of Mongolia as a frontier space. They write themselves as explorers and intrepid travellers who have had unique, unprecedented and authentic experiences in Mongolia comparable only to those of famous nineteenth century European travellers. Travelling in Mongolia allows them to construct a space of exclusivity and distinguish themselves from the social milieu associated with contemporary Western leisure travel. Thus, once again the discursive formations structured by coherent representations that cross-cut the works under analysis not only reflect the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller's frontier, but also help to recreate it through textual constructions of the 'self'.

In the process of constructing arguments in support of my thesis statement, I hope to have shown how my interpretive and theoretical frameworks were appropriate to the research at hand. Although in some instances I might have been able to support my thesis with recourse to standard content analysis methodology, by and large this analytical technique would not have allowed me to explore the role of tropes, language, imagery, plot, description, and so forth in the creation of discursive formations to the extent required by my thesis objectives. This study required the flexibility of a hermeneutical framework that is sensitive to the ways in which texts of creative non-fiction construct representations and transmit meaning on a variety of levels. Furthermore, my approach to analyzing contemporary travel writing about Mongolia is congruent with the disciplinary practices of the 'new cultural geography', the sub-field of cultural geography from which this study emanates and to which it seeks to contribute. Like other proponents of the 'new cultural geography', my analytical approach draws on literary and cultural studies (rather than on the more rigid social science methodologies) to study a *problematique* that focuses on the way

meaning is actively constructed and negotiated (and often contested) in socio-cultural discourses (Cosgrove, 2000: 136).

From the outset, I made it clear that the contributions of this study to the discipline of cultural geography are effectively twofold. Firstly, I sought to illustrate how an object of study – contemporary travel writing – that has been largely overlooked by geographers is of considerable relevance to many themes and theoretical considerations of current importance to the discipline. Secondly, I have tried to move away from a Post-Colonial ‘reading’ of travel writing that focuses almost exclusively on the power relationships revealed by representations and inter-cultural exchanges described in accounts by European travellers. It is not that I disagree with scholars who have argued that travel writing has traditionally been implicated in the perpetuation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes towards ‘other’ peoples and places that often justify practices of control, exploitation and subjugation (Holland and Huggan: 1998). On the contrary, I acknowledge that behind travel writing’s “apparent innocuousness and its charmingly anecdotal observations lie...powerfully distorting myths about other cultures” (Holland and Huggan: 1998: 8). However, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, the case for this seems to have been made and although it is a line of inquiry that is far from exhausted, I feel that there are others that merit attention as well. It was with this in mind that I explored the imaginative geographies of Mongolia with an emphasis on the context of globalization, contemporary travel and tourism debates, and the constitution of individual subjectivity and group identities. I did of course discuss the influence of colonial discourse on the imaginative geography of Mongolia as a traveller’s frontier and highlight certain instances in which grids of power and privilege came to the fore, although, this was not the guiding theme of my study.

The fundamental idea I have tried to transmit is that the travel writing under consideration is characterized by a discourse that naturalizes a very particular conceptualization of Mongolia. It effectively equates Mongolia with the notion of a traveller's frontier, in the process defining a role for Mongolia in the Western psyche and prescribing the way it is negotiated (cognitively, physically, artistically, politically, etc.) as a geographical entity. The unfortunate part is that this 'frontier identity' seems to have been imposed on Mongolia, which has been denied genuine interlocution given its consignment to a static, unchanging past (Said, 1978). Yet this should not come as a surprise, since rare is the instance in which a culture constitutes another based primarily on sustained dialogue and self-reflexive assessment. Rather, as a traveller's frontier, Mongolia is an imaginative construction that embodies a particular set of Western fears, desires, ambitions, and social needs. Mongolia is a Utopia that makes a map of the world worth looking at to plan a journey of escape beyond the limits of the present world.

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