

Holding the Traveler's Gaze Accountable in Shiva Naipaul's *North of South*: An African Journey

Abstract:

Travelogues are partly based on what is witnessed, observed and noted about the places and people visited and what is already known in advance, mainly from an existing archive. The archive, therefore, is an important element in travel writing. However, an author cannot avoid responsibility for what she/he notes/writes/composes about a place and its people. In a sense, a biography of a place may represent a writer's struggles to compromise between the material in the archive – such as existing books on the subject of his/her writing – and what she/he actually observed/observes. The veracity of the writer's narrative/story is dependent on the logic of the evidence that he/she adduces. The weight of the archived narrative, however, can burden the writer in which case he/she would need to limit its influence in order to tell a 'believable' story. Shiva Naipaul's extensive reliance on the existing pre- and colonial-time archive of writing on Africa seriously undermines his representation of life in postcolonial East Africa. The result is a travelogue filled with a great sense of personal disappointment with the political, cultural, economic and social conditions in postcolonial Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia – the countries that he visits. Shiva seems to unwittingly translate this sense of deep disappointment into a 'demonisation' of Eastern Africa. Whilst acknowledging that there is a difference – and an important one – between a text and the world that it seeks to represent, the key proposition in this paper is that Naipaul's biography does not offer any redemptive characterisation of both the African space and the people that he writes about precisely because it summons a biased archive as evidence for its own claims.