the WRITER

From pioneering female reporters and Black novelists to immigrant authors who struggled to adjust to
AATISH TASEER celebrates the outsiders who have seen and documented the globe with

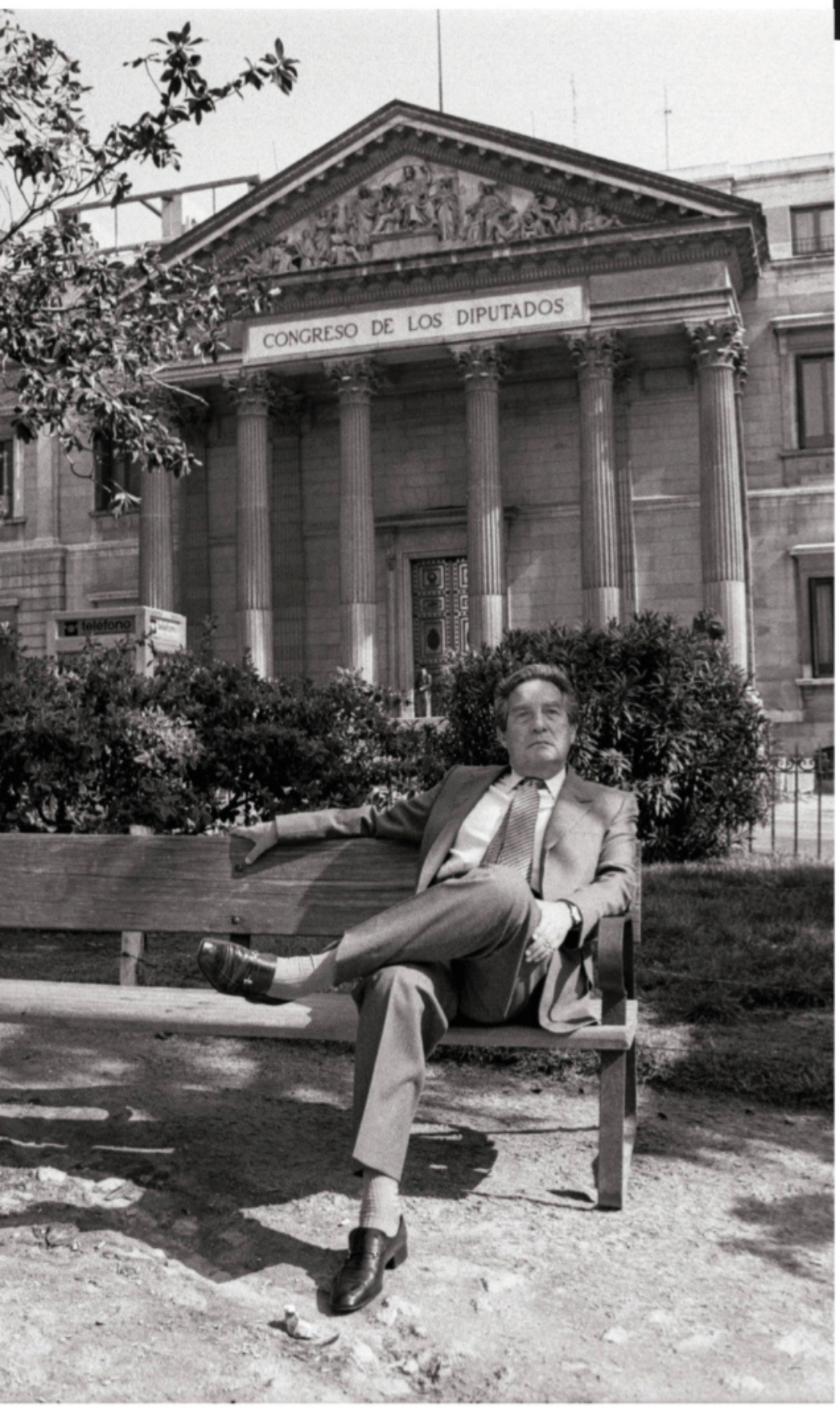
and the WORLD

From far left: The American author James Baldwin touches down at JFK on his return from Paris in 1965; English novelist and reporter Rebecca West on the streets of London in 1960; the Trinidad-born writer V. S. Naipaul in Paris in 1992.

their new homes, the best voices in travel writing have always had one thing in common. clear eyes—and whose perspectives are more relevant than ever.

Mexican diplomat and writer Octavio Paz in front of the Spanish parliament in Madrid in 1982.

Aldous Huxley, right, and a friend on the terrace of Café de Flore, in Paris, in the 1940s.



IN 1925, Aldous Huxley set off on a journey around the world to collect material for his travelogue *Jesting Pilate*. Huxley, though only 31 and not yet the author of *Brave New World,* was already a literary star in London and was feted on his arrival in India. In the city then known as Bombay, he was invited to a tea party by Sarojini Naidu, an eminent politician. A young Muslim man rose and recited some verses by the Urdu-language poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. The subject of the poem was Sicily. It was "a Mohammedan's indignant lament," Huxley wrote, "that the island which had once belonged to the Musulmans should now be in the hands of the infidels."

Hearing the words in translation, Huxley felt some indignation of his own. "For us good Europeans," he wrote, "Sicily is Greek, is Latin, is Christian. The Arab occupation is an interlude, an irrelevance." It was unreasonable, Huxley felt, to represent a place he considered to be "classical ground" as "a piece of unredeemed Araby."

But then, mid-indignation, Huxley stopped himself. His tone changed from strident to reflective. It seems to have dawned on him that this business of seeing and being seen, of contesting narratives describing the same place, like a Venn diagram at war with itself, is not extraneous to the idea of travel, but in fact strikes at its very essence. "In the traveler's life," Huxley wrote, "these little lessons in the theory of relativity are daily events."

The sense of affront Huxley felt that day in Mumbai, as travel forced another idea of history upon him, is particularly relevant to the moment of reckoning we find ourselves in today. From Seattle to Brussels, from Cape Town to Bristol, England, statues are being torn down and major institutions renamed, some representing racists and slavers (King Leopold II, Woodrow Wilson,

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: QUIM LLENAS/COVER/GETTY IMAGES; ROBERT DOISNEAU/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES; ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY IMAGES. PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; EDDIE WORTH/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK; A. ABBAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

The Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, aboard a zeppelin bound for the North Pole, in 1931.

Edward Colston), others depicting figures more typically thought of as heroes (Gandhi, Winston Churchill, George Washington). History, with a capital *H,* is alive as never before.

Across the world, our settled narratives of how we view the past are being disrupted, leading us to question everything, from which writers we choose to read to what our newsrooms should look like. Which voices have we privileged, and which have we ignored? Do the people we venerate look like us? Do they speak for us? Have certain races, genders, or backgrounds been disproportionately represented, and have others been edged out? Huxley in his day had to travel to India to understand the discomfort of having his deepest values questioned. Today, as history is being reexamined in the West, that discomfort has come home to us.

While this sensation is new to many in the U.S., it is very familiar to a group of travel writers I have always found particularly compelling—a group I like to categorize as "outsiders." By this I mean authors who, because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or class, cannot travel as if the world was theirs and, as a result, tend to see with clearer eyes, without foisting their worldview onto the people they encounter.

Perhaps my favorite of these writers was the late V. S. Naipaul, who was also a mentor of sorts to me. Naipaul was descended from Indians who had been sent to the Caribbean as indentured laborers by the British after the abolition of slavery. While Huxley belonged to what he described as "that impecunious but dignified section of the upper middle class which is in the habit of putting on dress-clothes to eat," and went abroad as the emissary of an empire that controlled one-fifth of the planet, Naipaul was by contrast the quintessential outsider. In his 1990 book, *India: A Million Mutinies Now,* Naipaul describes a process of awakening that could easily sum up the moment we are going through now. "To awaken to history," he wrote, "was to cease to live instinctively. It was to begin to see oneself and one's group the way the outside world saw one; and it was to know a kind of rage."

I have always been keenly aware of the role of the outsider in travel writing. I grew up gay, of mixed parentage (half Indian, half Pakistani), in New Delhi. I lived and worked in the United Kingdom, and later made the United States my home. I am married to someone from Tennessee, of an evangelical Christian background. For someone like me, assuming a single perspective was never an option.

Starting out as a writer, I found that the body of travel literature that was available to me was invariably written by Europeans. This meant that the people to whom I was connected by race, religion, culture, and language did not speak; or they spoke in ways that did not tell the whole story. For example, my grandfather, a poet from Lahore, was a student of Muhammad Iqbal, the poet Huxley encountered in Mumbai. (Iqbal in fact officiated my grandfather's marriage, to a woman from East London.) My grandfather could very easily have been the "young Mohammedan" in Huxley's story. But I have to imagine that man into existence, because, in the Huxley essay, he is a voiceless caricature.

It is that need to restore a voice to people silenced by history that has given rise to a new kind of literature. In 2013, Kamel Daoud, a journalist from Algeria, wrote a novel, *The Meursault Investigation,* in which he retold Albert Camus' *The Stranger* from the perspective of the Algerian whose brother is killed by Meursault, the hero of Camus' masterpiece. Daoud's novel filled a void left by history. It was a response to the enforced silence of the past, an effort to tell the other side of the story, as it were.

When you don't have a single culture, or a single body of literature, to fall back on, it becomes necessary to (Continued on page 102)

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find people who answer your need for representation. In my own life, I have sought out voices like that of Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian Jew who, in the first half of the 20th century, was forced out of multiple countries in Europe before he settled in England. Or Octavio Paz, a Mexican Nobel Prize–winning poet and diplomat who was posted in Paris, Tokyo, and New Delhi, the last of which he wrote about in his book, *In Light of India*.

Paz and Koestler had nothing in common, except that both men were in their own ways quintessential outsiders. They could not assume the mantle of speaking from the center of power and cultural dominance. It is the oblique angle from which they approach their material that makes them kindred spirits.

When I first moved to the United States, I felt a certain impatience with history here—with the notion that this country was almost exempt from the demands of the past. It was Paz, writing from half a world away, who spoke to my apprehension. In places like India, Paz wrote, "the future to be realized, implies a critique of the past." The U.S. was different, Paz felt. "The past of each of its ethnic groups is a private matter; the country itself has no past. It was born with modernity; it is modernity."

The United States certainly seems to have a past now, a past that refuses to go quiet. We are being forced to ask ourselves whether the American wish to be free of history arose out of the desire to be rid of stories that are painful or difficult. Here again, it is an outsider, this time an Englishwoman, writing at a time when the literary world was largely dominated by men, who provides a clue. In the late 1940s, Rebecca West—the author of one of my favorite works of travel writing, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,* an inquiry into the persistence of history in the Balkans—was in Nuremberg, reporting on the Nazi trials.

There, she wrote of an earlier incident in the U.S., between an American newspaper owner with "vast industrial interests" who was showing a group of European guests around his building, and a Black elevator man "who proved to be from the South, and illiterate." Noticing the tension between the two, one of the Europeans remarked, "'Ah, yes, you Americans have your problems like the rest of us.'" Which is to say: you, too, are subject to the laws of history. "The newspaper owner looked brutal in his contempt," West wrote, "as he said, 'No, we have not. You have all the problems there over in Europe. But here in America we have nothing to do but just go ahead and get rich. We shall be a country with no history.'"

All writers are, of course, a product of their time, and no individual is immune from prejudice. But these prejudices are rendered almost inconsequential when compared with the prejudice reinforced by the might of an empire or a powerful country. It is these that the "outsider" disrupts, and why his or her role is so valuable. The received wisdom of a society, any society, is never benign. The loudest assertions we make often come at the expense of people who cannot join us in our vehemence, usually because their experience is so unlike ours. The figure of the outsider matters precisely because he or she upsets our notions of who we believe we are. The appearance of such a figure is by design a provocation.

I can think of no better example than "Stranger in the Village," the last of the essays in James Baldwin's marvelous collection *Notes of a Native Son,* which was published in 1955. In the essay Baldwin recounted his arrival in "a tiny Swiss village," where by all accounts the local population had never set eyes on a Black man before. What followed is possibly the greatest testament to the power of the gaze of the outsider in travel literature. Baldwin used the isolation of the village as a theater in which to reenact the meeting of the Black and white races on the North American continent, with all the wonder, fear, and trauma that entails.

Unlike the newspaperman in West's story, Baldwin was under no illusion about what history has wrought in America: "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." This is not the history of history books; this is raw, not-yet-dealt-with history that roils away under the surface of a society. At the heart of it is pain, confrontation, and the profound discomfort of seeing oneself through other eyes.

"You never had to look at me," Baldwin once wrote, addressing his white compatriots. "I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me."

It is to learn what the outsider knows about us, how we appear to those unlike ourselves, that we turn to the best moments in travel writing. We do that because—and these words of Baldwin's have never been more important than they are now—"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." ✦

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