

**ARTICLE**

# Off the beaten track? Critical approaches to exploration studies

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## Abstract

Since the 1980s, studying histories of exploration has become an increasingly prominent area of scholarship and has attracted critical attention from a range of different academic perspectives. Whether framed as a process of imperial expansion, as a quest for the production of new knowledge, or as a means for certain individuals to establish or advance their reputations, the complex motivations that lay behind European travellers' desire to venture overseas has been examined and critiqued by scholars situated in a number of different disciplines. Growing attention has been paid to those groups or individuals who have historically been written out of traditional, hagiographic exploration accounts, and we have seen the key roles played by women explorers, "indigenous intermediaries," and various others exposed and investigated more thoroughly. The purpose of this paper is to review these diverse scholarly literatures, with a particular focus on those which centre their analysis on the long nineteenth century. In doing so, we demonstrate that the study of exploration is not just of narrow historical interest, but rather offers a means in which to shed new light on many wider social, political, and cultural processes that were taking place during this period.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite the ability to study our world remotely using satellite and aeronautical technologies, narratives of terrestrial travel and exploration continue to excite our geographical imaginations. The recent Weddell Sea Expedition attracted considerable press attention, not primarily for its scientific work examining the glaciological and zoological phenomena in Antarctica, but rather for its (ultimately unsuccessful) search for the wreck of *Endurance*, the ship used by Ernest Shackleton on his Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914–1917 (Huntford, 1996; Sample, 2019). This fascination with exploration was also reflected in a recent quest by the BBC to determine the most prominent figures of the twentieth century. The *Icons* series devoted an entire episode to explorers and again made reference to Shackleton alongside the British traveller in the Middle East Gertrude Bell and the American astronaut Neil Armstrong (BBC, 2019). This obsession has also been criticised, however. Some media commentators suggested that the recent expedition undertaken by “adventure author” Benedict Allen was imbued with neocolonial undertones, which, in turn, led to a firm rebuttal from those seeking to defend Allen's motivations (Fogle, 2017; Weaver, 2017).

Colonial nostalgia may lie behind some of this renewed interest in exploration within popular discourses but, as we explore in this article, critical scholars have also analysed exploration's complex histories in different ways (see for example Driver, 2001; Naylor and Ryan, 2010). As Dane Kennedy argues in *Reinterpreting Exploration* (2014),

*As historians and others work to craft integrated narratives of our intersecting pasts as a human community, it is hardly surprising that they have rediscovered the theme of exploration, since it serves as such a ready avenue of access to so many of the central problems that have arisen from those intersections (Kennedy, 2014, p. 13–14).*

Exploration is, therefore, both a complex phenomenon and a contested term and has hence resulted in the development of number of schools of thought each offering their own forms of analysis. The purpose of this article is to summarise these diverse approaches to critical exploration studies and to explain the similarities and differences between them. In doing so, we highlight the ways in which studying exploration has allowed new light to be shed on broader nineteenth century social and scientific processes—with the explorers' journeys to different landscapes making visible trends that are perhaps harder to detect elsewhere. In highlighting these various contributions to exploration studies, we show that the topic has become an important point of scholarly overlap between geography and several other disciplines. This interdisciplinary focus reflects the heterogeneous nature of exploration—an activity that was enmeshed in questions of science, gender, race, and empire.

Our focus is, however, necessarily partial. A majority of the scholarship reviewed in this article focuses its attention on the exploration practices that occurred from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards and concentrates primarily on explorers from Europe and the United States. Global voyages of discovery are, of course, a far older development, and there are significant literatures that address these earlier periods (see, for instance, Fernández-Armesto, 2006; Fernández-Armesto, 1987; Parry, 1973). While it is certainly true that taking a longer view of expeditionary activity can provide important insights into broader historical developments, it should also be noted that use of the term “explorer” to refer to overseas travellers did not become ubiquitous until the early 1800s (see Craciun, 2011; Robinson, 2014). The change, of course, was not an overnight one, as exemplified by the voyages of Captain Cook in the late eighteenth century provided a model of scientific exploration that was drawn on by later explorers (Mackay, 1985; Richardson, 2005). Although aware of explorations' longer history, we suggest that understanding the close combination of geographical discovery, scientific research, and popular celebrity that fell under the rubric of “exploration” since the nineteenth century is a specific and valuable endeavour—and it is to these developments that we now turn our attention.

## 2 | A SCIENCE OF EMPIRE

We begin our historiography at the end of the 1980s, a point when scholarly efforts turned towards deconstructing the histories of the European imperial project and understanding its legacies. As poststructural theory permeated the humanities and social sciences, those disciplines holding a historical focus—such as literary studies, cultural studies, and geography—began to investigate precisely how the world had come to be configured in what Edward Said termed the “Orientalist” tradition (Said, 1978; see also Gregory, 1994). As Kennedy explains, Said's writings had a profound influence on how histories of exploration came to be written:

*[Said's] influential work, which helped give rise to postcolonial studies as an academic field, was not concerned with exploration per se. It did, however, draw heavily on European explorers' writings in its examination of Western representations of the Orient, and Said used the term 'imaginative geography' to connote the culturally constructed nature of those representations. Above all, he made the case that the knowledge the West claimed to have acquired about the Orient by means of exploration and other inquiries served – and still serves – its imperial ambitions (Kennedy, 2014, p. 7).*

Said sparked a flourish of critical engagement with nineteenth-century exploration, and overseas travel was reconceptualised in terms of its inextricable relationship to European imperial expansion. Many researchers began to interrogate the vast array of cultural texts that had been produced during this period in order to understand the development of what Mary Louise Pratt (1992, p. 5) termed the “eurocentered form of planetary consciousness.” In doing so, scholars examined how understandings of the world had come to be dominated by a particularly western-centric perspective and argued that practices of exploration had played a crucial part in this development. Furthermore, Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987) argued that hagiographic histories had, in fact, acted to replicate and compound imperialistic worldviews:

*This kind of history, which reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone, might be called imperial history. [...] The primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate. [...] The fact is that, as an account of foundation and settlement, not to mention the related processes of discovery and exploration, empirical history, with its emphasis on the factual and static, is wholly inadequate (Carter, 1987, p. xvi).*

These theorists showed how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century exploration was both supportive of and supported by wider processes of colonial expansion. They demonstrated that explorers rendered the landscapes through which they travelled in ways that made foreign lands appear destined for imperial ownership. As Simon Naylor and James Ryan have summarised,

*Exploration could be regarded less as some impartial means of 'discovering' the 'unknown' than part of a powerful and enduring projection of Western imperial interests onto other parts of the world (Naylor and Ryan, 2010, p. 1).*

Exploration scholars were now tasked with identifying the colonial and imperialistic motivations of explorers and hence sought to interpret the expansionist ambitions of the respective nation states or organisations that they represented.

These colonial-centred literatures have, however, been criticised, and some scholars have questioned the usefulness of such approaches for understanding such complex histories (see Thomas, 2003). As Robert Young (1995, pp. 164–165) noted, the strong focus on textuality and representation, sometimes at the expense of “historical and geographical particularities” meant that many who followed this line of inquiry “reached something of an impasse.”

That is to say, (post)colonial conceptualisations have been just one set of theorisations used to investigate the histories of exploration activity. Researchers from other schools of thought have questioned whether viewing exploration only in relation to empire has resulted in other more nuanced motivations being overshadowed. As Max Jones cautioned,

*The history of [expeditionary] science and the history of empire were intimately connected through the nineteenth century, their relationship mediated through institutions like the [Royal Geographical Society]. But the two histories were not identical (Jones, 2003, p. 48).*

Nicholas Thomas (2003) argues that studying exploration purely in terms of its connections to colonialism has resulted in a somewhat limited scope for enquiry and has also resulted in too narrow a range of sources being used, thus risking a degree of anti-historicism. As we examine below, rather than focus attention *exclusively* on the imperial context that framed exploration, many scholars have instead concentrated their enquiries on the sociocultural milieu in which nineteenth-century explorers operated, examining the complex (and often conflicting) motivations behind exploration.

### 3 | INDIVIDUALS, NETWORKS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Authors drawing from theoretical debates in both histories of science and science and technology studies have considered whether alternative ways of thinking about exploratory practices might be possible. Much of this work has built on the work of the French sociologist Bruno Latour, who introduced the term “centre of calculation” into analyses of exploration (Latour, 1987). In Latour’s view, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century exploration ought to be understood as a process of knowledge accumulation, whereby travellers ventured overseas to collect new information before returning to the metropolitan centres of Europe. Upon the explorers’ return, this new knowledge would then be considered in relation to the existing information already available (Latour, 1987; see also Cox, 2016). Botanical samples, zoological specimens, and archaeological curiosities were just some of the materials that were collected during these expeditions before being brought back to the European metropolises in order to be compared to the vast collections that had accumulated within these centres of calculation (Dristas, 2005; Wintle, 2013). Although it is clear that explorers continued to serve colonial interests, they were now understood, not necessarily as colonisers themselves, but rather as scientists or natural philosophers seeking to further human understanding.

This approach also meant that explorers were no longer seen as lone agents venturing into the unknown, but rather as actors embedded firmly within wider international and institutional networks of knowledge production and circulation (Finnegan & Wright, 2015). In doing so, scholars have shed light on the role of learned societies such as the Royal Society, the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Anthropological Institute, and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in facilitating, legitimising, and perhaps most importantly promoting these global exploratory networks in order to increase their collections of both materials and knowledge (Cornish & Driver, 2019; D.N. Livingstone, 2003; Driver, 2001; Martin, 2018; Miller, 1996). Biographies of individual explorers have hence been recentred so as to focus on the broader cultural and institutional forces, which influenced their subject’s lives (Baigent, 2010). Such an approach can be seen in Kennedy’s (2005) biography of the British explorer and diplomat Richard Francis Burton. His biography highlights the institutions that shaped Burton’s worldview in order to understand and analyse the intellectual milieu in which he lived. A similar approach, combining biography with a discussion of broader trends in geography and empire, can also be found in Riffenburgh’s (2004) work on Ernest Shackleton as well as in Robert Stafford’s (1989) study of geologist Roderick Murchison.

## 4 | ON THE STAGE AND ON THE PAGE

The role of the publishing industry has been another method through which scholars have begun to investigate the role of institutions in practices of exploration (Riffenburgh, 1994). As the hunger for new knowledge about the world grew, the narratives published by explorers began to circulate widely and became immensely popular across late nineteenth-century society (Withers & Keighren, 2011; MacLaren, 2011). Furthermore, newspapers, magazines and other printed media were also filled with stories about the latest feats of exploration allowing a diverse array of new information to spread across all levels of European society (Fyfe & Lightman, 2007; Lightman, 2007; Newman, 2019; Sebe, 2014). Explorers also undertook lengthy lecture tours to share their experiences with audiences and, in the process, shaped ideas about the regions where they had travelled (Finnegan, 2011; Finnegan, 2017; Keighren, 2008). As Innes Keighren, Charles Withers, and Bill Bell have noted,

*Exploration usually also had a lasting public 'afterlife' as the results were debated in scientific institutions as well as in the periodical and newspaper press (Keighren, Withers, & Bell, 2015, p. 7).*

Scholars have therefore shown that while exploration involved the accumulation of information, it also involved the circulation of this new knowledge.

Adriana Craciun (2016; 2014) has argued that the ways in which a traveller represented their expedition in print were central to both the authenticity of their findings and their status as an explorer (see also Withers, 1999; Withers, 2004; MacLaren, 1994; MacLaren, 2011; Jones, 2005; Shapin, 1994). As Kennedy (2013, p. 2) explains, an explorer's search for new information was often "made problematic by the conditions of its production." The practices undertaken during an expedition—travelling in small parties, the use of disguise, reliance on local guides, translators and intermediaries, and close (sometimes sexual) relationships with local people—could all raise doubts amongst metropolitan commentators as to the trustworthiness of an explorer. This meant that the presentation of their expedition to domestic audiences through books and other publications proved crucial in establishing their credibility (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014; Driver, 2001). Furthermore, scientific findings produced via expeditionary activity were often hard (or even impossible) to verify or reproduce, meaning that establishing credibility through authorship was again central in establishing their veracity. Innes Keighren et al. (2015) have highlighted the role of the John Murray publishing house in shaping and curating accounts of travel in order to enhance both their credibility and their popular appeal. Finkelstein (2002, 2003), meanwhile, has explored how another publisher, William Blackwood, played a significant role in editing John Hanning Speke's account of his Nile expedition, removing and downplaying some of his most dubious actions. A similar approach has also been employed to examine the *Missionary Travels* (1857)—the work of the African explorer David Livingstone—and how this book was edited and revised for publication (J.D. Livingstone & Wisnicki, 2019; Henderson, 2012; Henderson, 2015). These insights often compliment earlier works examining how explorers used literary and rhetorical devices in order to enhance the veracity of their travel narratives (Pratt, 1992; Regard, 2009). Focusing on explorers' roles as authors and situating them within their contemporary circulatory communities has thus shown that explorers were often influential communicators as much as they were travellers.

## 5 | HEROISM AND HEROINES

A degree of showmanship was required to communicate this new knowledge effectively, and many explorers came to be considered as popular heroes. A number of scholars have therefore devoted attention to understanding the emergence of the "explorer-hero" as a cultural figure. Related to the work on publishing above,

Beau Riffenburgh (1994) argues that many practices of exploration were shaped to a large extent by the emergence of a sensationalist press over the course of the nineteenth century, which both sponsored and reported on these expeditions. By the early twentieth century, press reports detailing tales of hardship, suffering, and death played a central role in explorer's public reputations—often more so than either their geographical or scientific discoveries. Similarly, Clair Pettitt (2014) has highlighted how the growth of print culture changed the way domestic audiences were able to encounter and experience narratives of travel, and as Sebe (2014) shows, these “legends of exploration” played an important role in shaping public understandings about geography, science, and empire. It has also been demonstrated that appeals to the public via the increasingly influential print media were often a necessary means by which to generate funds for a forthcoming expedition (Riffenburgh, 1994; Robinson, 2006).

In these prominent public roles, then, explorers both reflected and shaped ideas about society. Several authors have hence examined the connection between changing approaches to heroism and adventure and ideas about gender and race (Robinson, 2016; Robinson, 2015; Robinson, 2006; Larson, 2011; Maddrell, 2009; Jones, 2005; Jones, 2003; Dick, 2004; Driver, 2001). These trends were often driven by the fear that technological advancements, sedentary lifestyles, and urbanisation were “degenerating” men's bodies, rendering them soft, weak, and feminised (Robinson, 2015; Morin, 2011; Forth, 2008). Exploration therefore became a way to test and demonstrate the capacities of the European male body, and scholars have examined how a growing focus on white masculinity in exploration cultures caused tensions with the increasingly rigorous scientific work that explorers were expected to carry out (Armston-Sheret, 2019a; Robinson 2015; Larsen 2011; Dick, 2013; Dick, 2004; Jones, 2003). Narratives of “suffering science” were used to recast fieldwork in extreme environments in terms similar to the heroic expeditionary adventures that had gone before (Larson, 2011, p. 173, see also Heggie, 2019; Outram, 1999; Hevly, 1996; Herzig, 2005).

Others, meanwhile, have considered gender and exploration in different ways and have highlighted the historically important roles that women have played in expeditionary history (Blunt, 1994; Rose, 1993; Rose, 1995; Monk, 2003; Monk, 2004; Mills, 1991; Johnson, 2015; Johnson, 2017). Feminist and gender studies scholars have shown that the contributions made by women to exploratory activity have been regularly overlooked or simply ignored within many histories. Sarah Evans's work (2016) shows that despite the considerable distances travelled by women such as Isabella Bird and Gertrude Caton-Thompson, expeditions undertaken by female explorers have received considerably less attention from historians (see also Maddrell, 2009; Evans, 2015). Likewise, Nuala Johnson (2015) notes how women engaged in informal (and often overlooked) practices of exploration and scientific research. Indeed, as noted by Evans, Keighren, and Maddrell (2013), women were not able to join the Royal Geographical Society on equal terms and in significant numbers until 1913, even though women travellers had played an important role in the production of geographical knowledge well before this date. Similarly, Elizabeth Baigent (2010) demonstrates that the heroism of women, foreigners, and “natives” regularly went unrecognised, with the (male) naval officer emerging as the exemplary British hero in the early twentieth century. While travel and exploration could provide opportunities for women to behave in ways that would be impossible at home, dominant visions of expeditionary heroism meant that scientific exploration continued to appear an exclusively male pursuit (Blunt, 1994; Foster & Mills, 2002; Mills, 1991).

The relationship between gender, heroism, and exploration therefore highlights the degree to which the production of geographical knowledge was to a large extent shaped by the identity of the traveller themselves and also how they represented their journeys to European and North American audiences. Indeed, as Maddrell (2009) demonstrates, examining the role of gender within expeditionary history can also offer important insights on the inclusion or exclusion of certain perspectives within modern-day scholarship and knowledge production. Moreover, studying changing attitudes towards expeditionary heroism can also offer insights into other sociocultural developments taking place today (J.D. Livingstone, 2014; Jones, 2007; Jones, 2014).

## 6 | BODIES AND INSTRUMENTS

While exploration has been studied from postcolonial, institutional, or gendered approaches, other scholars have considered the topic in more material terms. The corporal makeup of the explorer has come under critical scrutiny from those keen to understand exploration from a more embodied perspective. As noted above, an explorer's personal attributes often played a central role in debates about his or her credibility and it has been shown that white, upper-class European men were regularly privileged above other people (Stern, 2014, p. 65). Indeed, an explorer's body, behaviours, and conduct in the field acted to establish the credibility of their findings and were therefore loaded with broader cultural meanings (Armston-Sheret, 2019a; Driver, 1996; Driver, 2001; Outram, 1999). But explorers' bodies were not simply passive objects that could be controlled and disciplined. As Johannes Fabian (2000) shows, explorers regularly lost control of their minds and bodies (see also Fleetwood, 2018). These approaches demonstrate that nineteenth-century European practices of knowledge production were not the rational or disembodied processes they are often presented as. On the other hand, explorers could turn their own bodies into the objects of study. Vanessa Heggie (2019, 2014) has highlighted the ways in which explorers studied their bodies in the field as a way of developing scientific understandings of human physiology and argues that

*Exploration and its related concept of heroism exist alongside the very real physical exploration of a very high, very hot, very cold, and very dangerous material world by men – and, extraordinarily rarely, women. (Heggie, 2014, p. 332)*

Studying explorers' bodies can, therefore, shed new light on a variety of processes that occur both in the field and also at home (see also Armston-Sheret, 2019b).

Another material approach to exploration has seen scholars focus their attention on scientific instruments and their use in the scientific fieldwork undertaken by explorers (Noëlle, Licoppe, & Sibum, 2002; Bourget, Licoppe, & Sibum, 2002; Macdonald & Withers, 2015; Withers, 2019). The nineteenth century saw significant changes in the expectations that were placed upon explorers and resulted in the increased provision of scientific equipment to explorers in the field. However, the contingent and uneven nature of these efforts has also been noted (Fleetwood, 2018; Wess & Withers, 2018). As Withers, Rae, and Souch (2015) explain, instruments in the field were far from passive objects and often had a "liveliness" of their own. Moreover, the extreme environments in which these instruments were used could cause the instruments to produce errors or indeed break down entirely. In a similar way, photography—which appeared to solve many of the problems of unreliable testimony—also proved problematic. Not only was early photographic equipment cumbersome and difficult to use in the field, but photos were edited frequently, and some explorers lied about where photographs had been taken (Ryan, 1997; Ryan, 2013). The interrelationship between scientific instruments and the bodies that used them thus remains of central concern to historians of exploration and by considering the degree to which they could either reinforce or preclude an explorer's credibility reveals the messy, material practices out of which scientific knowledge is produced.

## 7 | "HIDDEN HISTORIES" AND INDIGENOUS INTERMEDIARIES

The final branch of exploration studies to be considered here seeks to move beyond the figure of the Western explorer entirely. Instead, these studies have sought to analyse the involvement of what have been termed "indigenous intermediaries" within expeditionary narratives (Konishi, Nugent, & Shellam, 2015; see also Schaffer, Roberts, Raj, & Delbourgo, 2009). Such work has taken the postcolonial approaches discussed above a stage further by re-examining and re-evaluating western travel and exploration with the purpose of identifying the complex array of actors who were involved in these processes (see Pandey, 1995). In their book *Brokers and Boundaries* (2016) Tiffany Shellam, Maria Nugent, Shino Konishi, and Allison Cadzow define such actors as

*The guides, translators, hosts, labourers and myriad other 'locals' who became involved in expeditions and assisted and facilitated European explorers who ventured out into the world from the eighteenth through to the twentieth centuries (Shellam et al., 2016, p. 1).*

Contributors to these literatures argue that indigenous intermediaries played a vital role in exploratory activity in all corners of the earth yet were rarely acknowledged in the accounts written by explorers upon their return. The consequence of this omission has been that these people and their contributions have regularly been obscured within the Western historical record and hence have been overlooked by historians and historical geographers.

Acknowledgement of these "absences" or "silences" has led to calls being made for researchers to study accounts and narratives of exploration more closely in order to draw attention to the complex social dynamics that existed between Western travellers and their non-Western companions in the field. Using an example of Arctic exploration, James Ryan argues:

*The presence of non-European people dwelling within supposedly desolate environments such as the Arctic, for example, complicated the myth of enterprising imperial men 'discovering' and conquering the unknown. Despite the predominant imagery of the Arctic as desolate and uninhabited, Arctic exploration was often full of encounters between Europeans and Eskimo and Inuit people (Ryan, 2013, p. 113).*

It has been shown, however, that Western explorers rarely acknowledged the contributions that such actors made to their expeditions. Rarer still did they acknowledge fully their (often substantial) dependence on non-European people, many of whom were travellers in their own right and not at all "local" (Driver, 2017; Jones, 2010). Stephen Rockel (2014), for instance, highlights how the European exploration of East Africa was only possible due to the prior existence of extensive trading caravans. Such dependence on local knowledge, transport, and labour was by no means unusual yet was downplayed consistently in the Western travellers' expeditionary accounts. Furthermore, in those rare instances where the assistance received from such intermediaries *did* feature in these accounts, their contributions would in most cases be reduced to mere physical labour or logistical practicalities:

*Even when the presence of others was admitted, [indigenous] contributions to the exploration enterprise and its outcomes would invariably be obscured by their being reduced to 'mere servants' or 'unnamed assistants.' (Konishi et al., 2015, p. 5)*

The result of such acts of silencing is that historians hoping to identify and understand indigenous or non-European involvement of any sort must work "against the grain" of the archival record and deploy alternative and/or creative methods to recover their obscured and concealed presence (Lambert, 2013; Lambert & Lester, 2006; Jones, 2010; Stoler, 2009).

The task of recovering non-European involvement in expeditionary processes is now commonplace in exploration studies. However, the recovery of these non-European actors raises many deeper epistemological questions. That is to say, much work remains to be done in order to understand fully the extent to which these same actors were involved in practices of *knowledge production* during these expeditions. More recent work has therefore examined the diverse array of people who were involved in knowledge production activities "on the ground" (Driver, 2018; see also see Mueggler, 2011). Historian of science Kapil Raj's work has been highly influential here. In his book, *Relocating Modern Science*, Raj makes explicit his attempts to

*Contest the all-too-commonly accepted assumption that the history of science or, more modestly, the history of modern surveying and mapping, can be told as an autarkic West European story with no mention of concomitant developments in other parts of the globe and their influence on the course of the shaping of this history. This assumption is based largely on conceit, for a number of studies ... have documented the*



*crucial contributions of autochthonous peoples to European terrestrial surveying and map-making since the beginning of European expansion (Raj, 2007, p. 11).*

Scholars such as Raj seek to demonstrate that a range of complex knowledge-making practices unfolded as explorers negotiated their physical and theoretical pathways through the field and argue that non-European people were integral to these activities. Furthering the work of Mary Louise Pratt outlined above and using her concept of the contact zone, Raj continues

*By studying the construction of scientific knowledge in the contact zone itself, I hope not only to enlarge the scope of social studies of knowledge by bringing contact zones, along with novel historical source material, into their ambit as legitimate sites of scientific knowledge production, but also to show that important parts of what has been passed off as European, or Western, science were actually made elsewhere (Raj, 2007, p.11).*

This work has begun to reveal a more nuanced picture of how knowledge about the world has been constructed historically by a diverse range of different people (see Radcliffe, 2017). Adrian Wisnicki (2019) has developed these approaches further, looking not just at those directly involved in the expedition but also examining the contribution of on non-Western cultural, political, and material forces to the development of African explorers' travels and narratives. This approach is innovative in that it not only decentres the explorer but also moves attention away from metropolitan institutions and practices—requiring a more localised and specific understanding of African histories. Such approaches have also been combined with digitisation projects, the most notable of which is *Livingstone Online*, a project that has involved the digitisation and transcription of a huge variety of documents on the Victorian explorer of Africa, David Livingstone. The project has therefore combined these insights with new digital research methods to expose how many of his journal entries, in fact, contain multiple non-Western authors (Wisnicki, 2019).

## 8 | CONCLUSION

It is clear, then, that the study of exploration is a diverse, contested, and yet important area of scholarship. As we have shown, over the past 30 years, academics have interrogated the cultures and practices of exploration from a variety of perspectives, and this article has outlined some of these key themes and debates. While some studies of exploration seek to decentre the explorer, others focus explicitly on their personal attributes and characteristics. However, what unites each of these approaches is an attempt to use exploration as a means to interrogate broader historical processes, including race, class, gender, practices of knowledge production and circulation, as well as empire and colonialism more broadly. In examining the various ways in which scholars have approached these histories, we have shown that the study of exploration involves much more than simplistic retellings of past travel narratives. Instead, we are able to gain insights into the shifting boundaries of what counts as credible knowledge, consider who is able to produce such knowledge, and understand the ends which this new information ultimately serves.

However, in spite of the salient critiques that have been offered by the authors presented in this article, it is undoubtedly the case that many historical accounts of exploration have not taken these insights to heart. As just one example, the public acclaim given to authors such as Tim Jeal (2011, 2007) shows that uncritical exploration narratives continue to remain of considerable appeal to popular audiences. While Jeal's books have attracted firm criticism (see Mutua, 2009), they nonetheless demonstrate that there is still much more work to be done by critical exploration scholars in displacing fully the nostalgic, hagiographic, and hence problematic accounts of exploration that continue to appear regularly on the shelves of bookshops and libraries.

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