I first prepared a version of this article for a conference on utopian communities at the University of Leiden in October 2006, the conference that inspired this volume. I remember as my flight circled the airport preparing to land I caught my first view of Amsterdam’s lacy green coastline, but I remember more clearly the feeling I had when I stepped into Schiphol Airport. It struck me that I had entered a constructed world, a utopia of sorts, a self-contained transportation hub poised at the edge of a continent and large enough to include a two-floor art museum. I immediately boarded a light train that whisked me to the bright, clean, canal-threaded city of Leiden, another world apart. I had flown to Amsterdam from Zagreb, Croatia where I had been living only for a few weeks. Moreover, I had been a resident of Nagoya, Japan only two months before that. I felt in every way a person in transit. My second evening in Leiden I ventured out with a group of conference participants, and I found myself at dusk standing in front of a monument to the Pilgrims who had sailed to America in the seventeenth century. Suddenly I was reminded of home and its many links to the other worlds I had briefly inhabited.

For many today, America still represents the kind of utopian impulse that drew Europeans across a dangerous ocean. Even those who oppose the aggressive actions and powerful commercial culture of the United States often complain of a dream betrayed or an ideal exploited. A new world – as America was described by early modern travellers and writers – offers a real place within which to locate imagined alternatives to an established social structure. As each imagined world becomes increasingly real and increasingly flawed, we may naturally look for other places that will allow us to play out our fantasy societies and our fantasy selves. In the following pages, I read the Japanese texts of Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton in
relation to my own utopian impulses, my unstable identification with America, my struggles to understand transformations of self and community, and my attempt to reconcile the self who feels at odds with community at home and abroad. I deliberately begin this article with the word “I” in order to emphasize the autobiographical questions and multiple sites of identification at the heart of the academic argument.

It is the speculative, future-oriented – or what I consider the utopian – elements of travel writing and the travelling identity that I begin to analyse in the following pages by comparing the construction and deconstruction of female characters in two popular modern English-language narratives: Scottish writer Isabella Bird’s *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880) and Asian American novelist Winnifred Eaton’s *A Japanese Nightingale* (1901). Each of these writers explores the technologies of identity construction through scenes that register recognition of how a woman is seen by those she has come to see and how she is transformed in other people’s eyes. In both Bird’s *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* and Eaton’s *A Japanese Nightingale*, Japan is the discursive setting for self-invention that takes place through a deliberate negotiation of what Stephen Greenblatt calls “wonder”. Each writer preserves an “emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference”.¹ As Greenblatt argues of travel narratives more generally, we often learn more about the author of the account than we do about the culture through which the writer travels. An encounter with another society – in both of these cases the rapidly-modernizing Japanese society – challenges the categories of identity and makes more obvious the extent to which we rely upon socially constructed categories to understand and identify ourselves. Neither Bird nor Eaton ultimately dismantles the ethnic, national, or gender identity of their narrator/protagonist. However, both dwell briefly in moments of ambiguity that suggest alternative identities are possible.

**Utopian authority; or, how a woman sees**

On 10 June 1878, Isabella Bird sat writing at a precariously balanced folding table in a private room at an inn in Kasukabe, Japan, a town

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