

## **somewhere else she is told**

*For the rest of her life, Isabelle would remain severely dependent on narcotics and on alcohol; in North Africa, she would function for days without sustenance, as long as she had enough kif and arak to stun herself with. Every last borrowed franc was spent on these habits, for she had the makings of a hardened addict – the loss of all will power, of all sense of reality and self-respect.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1989, on the way from Austin, Texas to Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, I met a Chicano artist, who gave me a book, *The Passionate Nomad*. The book was the diary of Isabelle Eberhardt, a young woman from an affluent French family who spent the later part of her short life disguised as an Arab man wandering the deserts of northern Africa. She died aged 28, on 21 October 1904, in a flash flood at Ain-Sefra. Her diary is one of my favourite books. I too have had addictive relationships with travel.

In 2001 I attended, 'Transcultural Architecture in Latin America', a conference held at the Institute of Romance Studies, University of London, organised by Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden. While I was listening to the papers, some stories came back to me, concerning encounters that took place while I was travelling in Guatemala in 1989.

We all like to tell stories. Many of our stories are about journeys - travelogues and autobiographies. They describe where we have come from, where we are going and what it is like along the way. Personal stories can be a microcosm of a greater whole, a detail of a larger pattern. Telling a story is one way of trying to communicate across difference. At one point in her book *Mappings*, Susan Stanford Friedman summarises the modes in which post-colonial theory discusses cross-cultural encounter. She outlines a number of tendencies: the use of stories of intercultural contact that focus on movement; the syncretist blending and clashing of difference; mimetic forms of cultural borrowing, assimilation, appropriation and parody; bonds of connection and disconnection as well as reciprocal agencies in subject/subject encounters.<sup>2</sup>

The stories I am now going to tell do not illustrate a previously held theoretical position. (Somehow I wish this were the case, for this kind of research would hold a more certain academic status). It is rather the reverse. Having sketched out each event or story as I remember them, I have then discovered the kinds of resonances that occur with the narratives of cross-cultural encounter that Friedman describes:

*These patterns of interaction, I would further suggest, arise out of a dialectical or dialogic oscillation between sameness and difference in the ethnographic encounter. Travel - a form of movement through space - brings about an engagement with the other or others in a liminal space materially, psychologically or culturally in between.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rana Kabbani, *The Passionate Nomad: The Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987, p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 143.

## **encounter 2: the mimetic faculty**

*Tired of the tourist trail, I hide on board a tiny ferry crossing Lake Panajachel. I find a place to stay: a small garden with a shed housing a platform to sleep on. In the garden there are a stone basin and a stand-pipe. There is little to do in Santiago Atitlan except sit in the garden and write. Sometimes I go to the market and buy tortilla – two instead of twenty. I get giggled at. I have sent most of my clothes back home by sea and prefer to wear a piece of Guatemalan fabric, wrapped around me like a skirt, in the way my Spanish language teacher, Rosa, has shown me. I develop the idea that I am partly indigenous. But with my western t-shirt and trainers I am more boy than girl. All the indigenous women here wear traditional costume. The weave of the fabric, the colours, and, in particular, the specific motifs in the embroidered patterns, indicate the village the women come from. But the boys are more hybrid, they wear pepsi cola t-shirts and nike trainers with skirts woven out of traditional fabric.*

*I meet a man from California who has settled here, having married a woman from Santiago Atitlan. I learn that this place is not as sleepy as it appears. Santiago Atitlan has seen a lot of trouble, past and present. There have been a number of disappearances and executions. Father Stanley Rother, a Catholic priest who served in the parish from 1968 to 1981, sympathised with the Indians and made his views against the redistribution of land well-known. Rother was assassinated by a parliamentary death squad. His heart was removed and buried in the church. No-one wants to talk about it. Santiago Atitlan is also unique in being the first village in the country to expel the armed forces. Extensive guerrilla activity to the north of the village gave the government a reason to establish a military base and raise accusations concerning the villagers' allegiances with the rebels. Throughout the 1980's almost 300 villagers were killed over 11 years. No-one wants to talk about this either. Instead the American guy wants to sell me his wife's clothes. He can make a lot of money that way. And I'll look more like a woman.*

Today, there certainly seems to be a fascination with critical debate around modes of movement, from flânerie to nomadology. From the spy to the skateboarder, we seem increasingly obsessed by figures which move through space. A central motif in recent debates concerning urban experience is the literary flâneur. This city stroller who appears in Charles Baudelaire's poems of 1850's Paris, has featured most famously, at least in academic circles, in work of cultural critic Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, writing in the 1920's and 1930's, as well as surrealists like André Breton and Louis Aragon, and now for writers such as Iain Sinclair and Patrick Wright and filmmakers like Patrick Keiller, urban roaming defines a particular approach to creative practice.<sup>4</sup>

There is a kind of thinking that corresponds to moving; one that follows a general thematic, keeps up a certain pace, but is in constant motion. From one thing to another, engaging only in passing, the external world operates as a series of prompts for more philosophical musings. These journeys - actual and imagined - are story-telling in motion. In some cases, the work takes the form of a narrative unfolding through space,

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Charles Baudelaire, *The Parisian Prowler*, (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997); Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1997); Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, (Boston: Exact Change, 1994); André Breton, *Mad Love*, (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). Patrick Keiller's films *London*, (1995) and *Robinson in Space*, (1997) are good examples of contemporary flânerie.

in others the events discovered on the way are enough to create the story. The spatial element of story telling is stressed in French sociologist, Michel de Certeau's notion of 'spatial stories'. Stories take place, asserts de Certeau. The 'spatial story' is a device that allows connections to be made between people and places. Through the journey, these connections are continually made and re-made, physically and conceptually over time and through space. Public concerns and private fantasies, past events and future imaginings are brought into the here and now, into a relationship that is both sequential and simultaneous.

Between departure and arrival, we are in motion. The journey is as important as the destination, or the sites stopped at on route. The fleetingness of travel, of being 'no where' for some time, has been celebrated theoretically, in allowing us to occupy a limbo position. Philosopher Rosi Braidotti's interest in nomadism, does not so much describe the nomadic subject, the person who moves from place to place; rather she is inspired by nomadism as a way of knowing that refuses to be pinned down by existing conditions. For those concerned with issues of identity and the oppression of minorities, the kind of thinking engendered through walking is important for emancipatory politics since it provides a way of imagining a beyond, an 'as if'.

A corresponding interest in transformation through travel is also apparent in more theoretical discussions about the traveller and the tourist. Kaja Silverman has talked about two modes of identification: 'heteropathic' identification where the subject aims to go outside the self, to identify with something, someone, somewhere different, and 'cannibalistic' identification where the subject brings something other into the self to make it the same. These two modes of identification operate often through 'styles' or 'rhetorics' of consumption – through what we say, wear, eat; through where we've been and where we're going. This two way street – with its parallel movements towards difference and sameness – is interesting to consider in relation to food and travel. I tend to see the traveller in the 'heteropathic' mode, desiring of difference, and the tourist in the 'cannibalistic' mode, desiring of the same.<sup>5</sup>

The metaphor of the cannibal is also used in relation to the Brazilian Movement founded by Oswaldo de Andrade called 'Antropofagia'.<sup>6</sup> Here though the cannibal is the colonised subject, the one who is able to appropriate and transform the coloniser by eating part of him/her. In this context cannibalism is an act to be celebrated, eating like a cannibal is an act of positive transformation rather than an act of assimilation. So the potential of the metaphor of the cannibal alters depending on the specifics of the eating encounter, 'eating to make the same' can be a way of refusing the kind of difference which has the potential to destroy, but then again, 'eating to make the same' can also be a way of assimilating difference by equating it with the self. It is not that then that particular acts hold within them the seeds of oppression or the promise of liberation, that for example, writing is more transformative than speaking, and so on, than but rather that the potential of any act is characterised by the distribution of power that occurs at that specific moment of encounter.

So when we travel are we aiming for difference, to transform ourselves by becoming other, or for more of the same, to remain intact by incorporating external things and places? Or is it that we seek to blend in by

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<sup>5</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 22-7.

<sup>6</sup> Else Vieira, 'Liberating Calibans: Readings of Antropofagia and Haroldo de Campos Poetics of Transcreation', in Susan Basnett and Harish Trivedi, (eds.), *Postcolonial translation: Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

adopting aspects of the other we encounter? For Michael Taussig, the mimetic faculty is based on imitative play or the representational performance of the other.<sup>7</sup> In wearing a piece of fabric like a Guatemalan skirt, am I trying to become Guatemalan or aiming to show I understand what it means to be a Guatemalan? I don't fold my cloth in exactly the right way, but that's because I haven't perfected the art of wrapping yet, and my cloth is a bit too thick. I choose to wear my skirt with a t-shirt and trainers. Is this mimicry then rather than mimesis, a copy that knows itself to be a copy rather than an original?

But do we not need to be more precise about the relationship between the traveller and those who the traveller travels to? Postcolonial writer and critic Gayatri Spivak, casts the emphasis not on the traveller, the 'me' in my story, but on those that I travel to. Spivak has argued that the 'subaltern cannot speak', that there can be no representation of subaltern consciousness, that the act of representation always accompanied by an appropriation, and that alienation is the price of every representation.<sup>8</sup> As Papastergiadis points out, Spivak advises against the possibly benign identification with the subaltern, the well-meaning gesture of solidarity. For her, subalternity is not a condition to be desired. Spivak 'warns against the presumption that subaltern experiences are texts that are available for translation' and instead focuses attention on what the work 'cannot say'. This insight takes us back to Benjamin, and to his observation that no translation offers an exact correspondence between different languages.

For Bhabha, in the moment of encounter, elements transform each other. Hybridity works two ways. There is the mimicry of the colonised and the mimicry of the coloniser. How do they intersect? What is the difference between a girl from England, and a boy from Guatemalan wearing a Guatemalan skirt with a t-shirt and trainers? Note that my t-shirt and trainers are anonymous and his are Pepsi Cola and Nike. He shows he knows about brands, I show I know about indigenous culture. Bhabha suggests that 'Interdisciplinarity is the acknowledgement of the emergent sign of cultural difference produced in the ambivalent movement between pedagogical and performative address'.<sup>9</sup> He and I show how 'terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively.' He and I perform each other, but for each of us this means something very different. In this story, as in many others, a certain equation is made between travel and colonisation, here the traveller has a close relationship with the coloniser is and the person who is travelled to is one of a group who have been colonised. How would things be if he travelled to me? As Bhabha points out, the question of hybridity is both routine and transgressive, but it depends on place and history.<sup>10</sup> We would both be understood differently if I was him and he were me, or indeed if we were in London, or New York, or La Paz.

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### **Los Encuentros**

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Tracing Hybridity in Theory', Pnina Webster and Tariq Modood, *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, (Postcolonial Encounters Series), (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 255-7.

<sup>9</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 86.

The suggestion that the listener will tell again, somewhere else, interests me, for it shifts the focus from one point of telling, even if a contingent one, to multiple tellings. These tellings can be defined spatially, but such a mapping is not certain, rather it can only be defined through undecideability, through difference and deferral. Multiple tellings in many places at once emphasise difference through simultaneity; re-tellings over time highlight slippage through deferral.

*When did you tell and where did you tell it? What did you tell about me?*

*Los Encuentros and Los Quatro Caminos and were my favourite points along the Carretera InterAmericana,, the main highway that runs through Guatemala from Mexico to Honduras. These names marked the places where I got off one bus and decided which one to flag down next.*

*Los Quatro Caminos. North, south, east, west. From Austin, Texas to Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala and back again.*

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