

Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other

[These short excerpts are taken from Jane Rendell, 'Travelling the distance/Encountering the Other', David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There, Elsewhere*, (London: Open Editions, 2002).]

*[. . .] we are voyagers, discoverers
Of the not-known,*

*The unrecorded;
We have no map;*

*Possibly we will reach haven,
Heaven.¹*

The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing very decision, thwarting all repetition.²

The distances we travel are physical and psychic, emotional and mental. The others we meet on route take the form of a place, objects or people. They may be our teachers, critics, students, lovers, children, parents or friends. Most often the distant other we encounter in our travels is what we thought to be a familiar part of ourselves.

the games we never played

*Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives,
a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.³*

¹H.D. *Tribute to the Angels, Trilogy*, (London: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1997), p. 59.

²Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 15.

³bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (London: Turnaround Press, 1989), p. 148.

For most of my life, travel has been a certainty rather than a question [. . .] Travel was unavoidable, indisputable, and always necessary for family, love, and friendship as well as work.⁴

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I was born in Al Mahktoum hospital, Dubai in the 'middle east'. As a girl i lived in Sudan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. My movements followed the pattern of my dad's work. Unlike many children in similar situations, i was not put into a boarding school at the age of 11, but came back to live in England with my mum and sister. I say, 'came back'. The phrase implies that i was coming back to somewhere i had already been. But i had never lived in England before. It was my parents' country or origin, but not mine. I have never felt at home back (t)here. But then i have never felt at home anywhere.

Once the women were back at home. My dad continued to traverse the drier areas of the globe. He is a hydrogeologist. A man who looks for water and brings it to the surface for people to wash and drink. He does this in lands that are not his own, that he was not raised in, that are strange to him. And with people whose languages and customs are not second nature, not kin, but those that he has to learn anew.

It's only recently that I have come to acknowledge the difficult relationship I have with my dad (the coloniser). Secretly I have always been rather relieved in confessional conversations

⁴Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), p. ix.

around the academic dinner table that my relationship with colonisation is with acts of kindness. My dad was in a position to help, to use his knowledge to provide water and so he did. His knowledge made him powerful, he had skills that allowed him to locate water under a brittle crust. He is a very gentle and unassuming man. He seldom takes the high ground. So why am I uneasy? Because, although generated through a sincere motivation – to help – my dad's particular brand of paternalism was also closely related to acts of colonisation.

I remember nights spent capturing insects on cold stone floors. Our house was not grand. In western terms, it was a shack, but unlike many other houses we had lived in it had a stone floor, running water and a tin roof that didn't leak. While my parents were out, a tigreanean man stood at our gate. He was our watchman. I was uncomfortable around this tall black man with his hardened feet and long white robe and stick. My younger sister played with him. But I felt distance from him. He never spoke to me. Nor I to him.

At that time all westerners had guards positioned at their threshold. Was it because a western family had recently been ambushed nearby by tigreanean rebels? Or was it to suggest that we were important enough to protect? I am still embarrassed of the fact that africans looked after us and our house. 'Why?' I ask my parents now. It was the custom they say.

If it is a custom, it's one that shames me. I never played with the watchman. I never travelled that distance. Do the games we never played make me a coloniser too?

{Hearing of my interest in angels, messengers and figures of transformation, commissions east sent me through an interesting project—quadratura – a collaboration between an artist Edward Allington and architects Beavor Mull. Participants were invited to become 'angels' and planning applications were made for access into various spaces through the ceiling. I used to spend a lot of time as kid upsidedown. I would lie on the sofa flinging my head backwards, looking up at the ceiling wishing it was the floor. It was so clean and white. There was no mess. It was unmarked by the past.}

[...]

Spinning: a space between

Irigaray notes that when her mother goes away, the little girl does not do the same things as the little boy. She does not play with a string and a reel that symbolise her mother. Because she and her mother are of the same sex, her mother cannot have the object status of a reel. Instead the little girl is distressed. She plays with dolls - a different kind of object from the reel. She dances, 'this dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to her mother'. In her dance she spins around de-stabilising existing connections

between herself and her place, making new ones between herself and her (m)other. She creates 'a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other'.⁵

Irigaray's notion of the daughter spinning to make room between her and her mother, resonates strongly for me. I imagine being five again spinning round and around in the middle of a room. Only stopping when the furniture, walls and floor begin to revolve around me, when everything around me slips out of place. For me, this is the place of prepositions: a space inhabited by angels. To travel the distance, to think between, I need to be spun 'out of place'.

But I also need to be engaged in my encounters with others. Working practices that necessitate both freedom and committed contact present opportunities for questioning my own ways of thinking and making. This creates a real space for critical and transformative dialogue where I discover parts of myself in my encounters with others.

Writing provides me this place.

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⁵Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: towards a culture of difference*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.59.