

You tell me: a topography

Jane Rendell

The essay that follows is a topography which emerges through my engagement with the work of four artists – Jananne Al-Ani, Tracey Moffatt, Adriana Varejao, and Richard Wentworth – exhibited for *(hi)story*, Kunsthalle, Thun (2005). The works invite me in; they draw me close to tell me stories of places. Some I enter through my imagination, others by remembering, traveling back to my childhood in the Middle East. These are journeys to places both external and internal, they take me outside myself and offer me new geographies, new possibilities, but they also return me, altered, to myself, to my own biography, my own interior. This writing is a back and forth movement, a travelogue which takes place across inside and outside, across the sites of engagement between critic and work.

They tell each other stories, back and forth, from behind their hands, the words slip like cherries, full and glossy. They pass them from one to another.

Along the horizon he paces, back and forth, a tiny figure, smoking.

As a child, my movements followed the pattern of my father's work: Dubai, El Fasher, Kabul, Mekele. At the age of 11, I was told I was coming back to England with my mother and sister. 'Coming back', the phrase implied I was returning to a place I had already been. But I had never lived in England before, England might have been my parents' home, but it was not mine.¹

They speak of an absent man.

A tiny figure, smoking, on the dry crust of the earth.

Once the women were back at home, my father continued to traverse the drier areas of the globe. He is a hydro-geologist, a man who looks for water to bring it to the surface. He does this in lands that are not his own, for people whose languages and customs he has to learn anew each time in each place.

Lips part and then come together; words blow in gusts.

¹ The texts in italics have been taken from Jane Rendell, 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other', in David Blamey (ed.) *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, (London, Open Editions, 2002), pp. 43–54 and Jane Rendell, 'To Miss the Desert', in Gavin Wade (ed.) *Nathan Coley: Black Tent*, (Portsmouth, 2003), pp. 34–43. Both these essays were reworked for Jane Rendell, 'An Embellishment: Purdah', in *Spatial Imagination*, (London, The Domo Baal Gallery, 2006) with an associated catalogue essay in Peg Rawes and Jane Rendell (eds) *Spatial Imagination*, (London, The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2005), pp. 34–5. See www.spatialimagination.org.uk.

On the dry crust of the earth, lacerated with cracks, scarred by the sun.

He is a man with property: land and wives. Inside the walls of his house are sunlit orchards full of dark purple fruit; among the trees his wives sit. Dressed in shades of red, some of the women have covered their faces, others have painted their toes nails pink. From a distance, these women watch us arrive, disappearing inside as the foreigners draw closer. The guests are taken upstairs to an empty veranda overlooking the garden. The only furniture here is a carpet laid out in a long line down the middle of the room. Men sit cross-legged in turbans around the edge of the carpet and eat from the dishes laid out in front of them. We are the only women: my mother, my sister and myself.

Hands flicker. The patterns they gesture echo the flutter of speech.

Scarred by the sun, as the day shortens, his shadow grows longer.

After the meal, as we walk through the dark house to leave, I see a pair of eyes watching me from behind a screen. The eyes belong to a girl whose hands glint with silver. This is his youngest wife, once a nomad, who carries her wealth in the jewels on her fingers. Or so you tell me.

[Note to designer. Image 9 to be placed on the opposite page as a full page spread]

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When you look at me, you see only a curtain of black obscuring my face.

She tells me she taught the Sheik's sister's daughter English, and because of this she was allowed to enter the harem. She saw that beneath their abbas, the women wore make-up. When, for her labours, she was offered a gift, she asked for a black abba with a gold trim and a gold leaf burqua, the costume that only the wives of the sheik were permitted to wear.

You watch me drag my brush through the knotted strands again and again.

She was born on the eve of the haj. For her entrance, and her mother's labour, her mother received a second gift. This time, the sheik also sent his apologies. 'Sorry', he said, 'so sorry. For a boy I would have sent a watch, but for the girl – a gold coffee pot on a gold chain.'

You can't see me, but from behind the veil of my hair, I can see you.

As a hajja I will never have to make the journey to Mecca. Or so she tells me.

[Note to designer. Images 10-12 to be on the opposite page with no text, just the five images, each one the same width, placed in vertical column down the centre of the page]

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I can see a man in the distance on the horizon. He approaches me to ask if he might be the odd man out. 'Why', I ask, 'do you think you are the odd man out, is it because you are only one man among so many women?' 'No', he says, 'I think it is because I speak without words: objects have their own stories to tell; once found, they can speak for themselves.'

'You are not the odd man out', I tell him, 'two of these women also tell stories without words, they tell each other stories through places'.

She tells me her story.

How she served you on her knees; buffed the wooden banister, brushed the stone steps, polished the tiled floor at the bottom of the staircase, until her hands bled.

How you took her brown cheeks between your white hands and ripped at the flesh. In your too-tight crinoline, you held her down, beat her crumpled. You hacked her hair off. Clumps of black silk, slits on the white tiles.

She streamed out, escaped to far away, to the palace of her imaginings. The lilac winds of the laudanum desert blew her upwards. She hovered over ceramic-scapes, plates whose edges just touched, and tiles of blue, white and primrose.

Soon this was all there was to see, endless surfaces smooth and empty: saunas, hospitals, prisons, and mortuaries – inside was outside.

[Note to designer. Image 13 to be placed on the opposite page as one single image with no text]

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You tell me of a room awash with blood; tiles meet, red seeps; vividness floats, water dilutes.

I tell you of a hot tent, sweating, with sultry breath and a swollen tongue I gush headlong into red. Round and round, down and down, I am pulled into a world beneath the sand. And towards me, staggering out of the redness comes a soldier.

You tell me of a room pristine square, threatened with ragged tears. The walls run thick with flesh, squeezing through incisions sliced into the tile-work. The slits are dark, alive to touch and fit to burst, lined with grease, from torn limbs laced with fat.

I tell you of a floor of polished marble, black, interwoven with white veins, of how I anxiously trace the tiny cracks around the edge for intruders who might, at any moment, slither through.

You tell me of a ruin where the walls have been turned inside out. Their patterned interiors laid bare to the wind, their edges torn open to expose raw inners

You tell me.

In *On Histories and Stories*, writer A. S. Byatt examines her fascination with 'topological fictions', fictions where the term topological means 'both mathematical game-playing, and narratives constructed with spatial rather

with temporal images'.² She names certain works by Primo Levi, Italo Calvino and George Perec as the most interesting examples of this kind of writing. For me, these authors have different ways of making topological fictions; while Calvino often uses combination and permutation as strategies for constructing the shape of stories, Levi draws on existing empirical structures, such as the elements, to determine the narrative, and Perec's detailed descriptions of actual places are organised to produce fictional spaces.³ In discussing his own interest in 'topological fictions', Calvino refers to a review by Hans Magnus Enzensberger of labyrinthine narratives in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Robbe Grillet, where Enzensberger describes how, by placing narratives inside one another; these authors make places where it is easy to get lost.⁴

The theme of topological fictions is apparent in the works of Al-Ani, Moffat, Varejao and Wentworth but in different ways. Wentworth's interest, made evident in *Making Do & Getting By* and *Occasional Geometries* (1975–2005), is in seeking out and paying attention to those animate objects that already articulate but which have somehow been ignored. In works such as *List (15 months)* (1994) and *Spread* (1997) he positions combinations of things – buckets, plates, spades – in ways that allow them to communicate with one another and 'speak' directly to the viewer.

Varejao also lets matter speak for itself, but in her work, stories are told through spaces not objects. In earlier works such as *Azulajaria Verde em*

² A S Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 139–141.

³ See for example, Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1998) and Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, (London: Collins Harvell, 1992).

⁴ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Topological Structures in Modern Literature', *Sur*, (May–June 1966) referred to by Calvino in Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 25.

Carne Viva (2000) and *Parede con Incisao a la Fontana 3* (2002), seemingly endless tiled interiors tell, with their scars and flesh wounds, of repulsion and excess. In later pieces, the disturbances, like the spreading stain of *The Guest* (2004), are subtler, and in works like *O Obsceno* (2004) or *O Obsessivo* (2004) the titles suggest an interest in the recurring relationship between spatial configurations and specific psychic states, particularly those associated with perversion and claustrophobia.

In Moffat's work there is also an engagement in the emotional qualities of certain types of space, not the internal typologies that intrigue Varejao, but in juxtapositions of inside and outside, explored in *Up in the Sky* (1997) through the dialogue between a remote shack and the desert wilderness. There is also a central spatial motif in *Laudanum* (1998), in this case, a staircase, a metaphor of transition, whose circular form suggests a dynamic tension, allowing connections to be made between upper and lower levels, but also between physical qualities of materials and the altered mental space of drug induced hallucinations, as well as the charged erotic site of the sado-masochistic relationship between the two female characters in the scene caught somewhere between violent physical conflict and an opiated dream.

There is an exploration of the spatial qualities of emotional tension too in Al-Ani's work. *The Visit* (2004), relates *Muse* where an isolated male figure inhabits a flat desert plane to *Echo*, a fragmented conversation between female figures, a place where he is referred to, yet absent from. In several other pieces, Al-Ani focuses on spaces that bind and separate individuals, in *Untitled* (2002), a veil of hair brushed by the subject of the image articulates a visual boundary between the viewer and the brushing subject and in *Portraits* (1999) the women who cover their mouths with their hands sever communication between viewing and viewed subjects.

In this increasingly globalised world, the stories many artists and writers have been telling recently concern travel: they tell us where they have

come from, where they are going and what it is like along they way. These are stories about lives, yet despite the often powerful autobiographical elements, told as journeys, the narratives take spatial forms: actively referencing special places, generating situated dynamics through various voices, such as I, you and s/he, and inviting the reader or viewer to take up particular yet often ambiguous and changing positions.

My own fascination with topological fictions has focused on what I call 'site-writings'.⁵ My interest is in writing spaces rather than writing *about* spaces. In art criticism this approach demands that the critic investigates the position s/he occupies in relation to works, the locations those works refer to and the spatial issues they raise, not only conceptually and ideologically, but also materially and emotionally, in order to produce texts that locate the spatial themes of the art works in written form.

I suggest that the critic always takes up a position, and that this needs to be made explicit through the process of writing criticism. Along with Hal Foster who has examined critical distance in terms of identification,⁶ and

⁵ For an account of the conceptual framework that underpins my practice of 'site-writing' and relates it to the work of other theorists and critics see Jane Rendell, 'Architecture-Writing', in Jane Rendell (ed.) 'Critical Architecture', special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, v. 10. n. 3, June 2005, pp. 255–64. For a discussion of two pieces of 'site-writing', which transformed over several sites, see Jane Rendell, 'Site-Writing', in Sharon Kivland, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Emma Cocker (eds) *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, v. 4, (Sheffield Hallam University and Site Gallery, 2005), pp. 169–176 and Jane Rendell, 'Site-Writing: Enigma and Embellishment', in Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (eds) *Critical Architecture*, (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2007). See also 'Site-Writing: she is walking about in a town which she does not know', Lesley Mcfadden and Matthew Barrac (eds) *Connected Spaces*, special issue of *Home Cultures* (forthcoming 2007) and 'Curating, Editing, Writing: Critical Spatial Practice', Judith Rugg (ed) *Issues in Curating, Contemporary Art and Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Press, forthcoming 2007).

⁶ See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001) pp. 223–6.

Isobel Armstrong who has explored the differences between close and distant reading distinguishing between what she calls a criticism of affect and one of analysis,⁷ I would argue that such a project involves rethinking some of the key terms of criticism, specifically judgment, discrimination, and distance. By repositioning the work as a site, 'site-writing' investigates the site of the critic's engagement with a work, adopting and adapting both Howard Caygill's notion of immanent critique where the criteria for making judgments are discovered or invented through the course of criticism,⁸ and strategic critique where the critic may make a discriminate judgment at a moment of externality where the work 'exceeds itself' and 'abuts on experience',⁹ as well as Mieke Bal's exploration of 'art-writing'.¹⁰ Rather than write *about* the work, I am interested in how the critic constructs his or her writing in relation *to* and in dialogue *with* the work. The focus on the preposition here allows a direct connection to be made between the positional *and* the relational.¹¹

⁷ See Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2000) p. 87.

⁸ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* London: Routledge, 1998, p. 34 and p. 79.

⁹ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin* p. 64.

¹⁰ See Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) p. xi. See also Norman Bryson, 'Introduction: Art and Intersubjectivity', Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G+B International, 2001) pp. 1–39, p. 12.

¹¹ The significance Trinh T. Minh-ha assigns to the shift from speaking 'about' to speaking 'to' has been stressed by Irit Rogoff who underscores how, instead of taking power relationships to produce spatial locations, it is possible for a change in position to advance a change in relation. See Irit Rogoff's discussion of Trinh T. Minh-ha's assertion in Irit Rogoff, 'Studying Visual Culture', Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader* (London, Routledge, 1998) pp. 14–26, p. 18.

Theoretical explorations in literary criticism of the different subject positions authors can occupy in relation to the text, multiple 'I's',¹² for example, as well as 'you' and 's/he',¹³ are relevant here, as are the writings of post-colonial critics who have woven the autobiographical into the critical in their texts, combining poetic practice with theoretical analysis to articulate hybrid voices.¹⁴ Critical 'voices' can be objective *and* subjective, distant *and* intimate. From the close-up to the glance, from the caress to the accidental brush, criticism can draw on spaces as they are remembered, dreamed and imagined, as well as observed, in order to take into account the critic's position in relation to a work and challenge criticism as a form of knowledge with a singular and static point of view located in the here and now.

In visual and spatial culture, feminists have drawn extensively on psychoanalytic theory to think through relationships between the spatial politics of internal psychical figures and external cultural geographies.¹⁵

¹² Italo Calvino, for example, has explicitly explored the relationship the writer has to his/her writing in terms of position – where a writer stands – inside and/or outside a text. See Italo Calvino, 'Literature as Projection of Desire', *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 58. In another essay, Calvino discusses the places writers occupy in relation to their writing in terms of their different identities as subjects or 'I's. See Italo Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 15.

¹³ Roland Barthes has described his choice of authorial voice in terms of four regimes: including an 'I', the pronoun of the self, a 'he', the pronoun of distance and a 'you', a pronoun which can be used in a self-accusatory fashion or to separate the position of the writer from the subject. See Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-80*, translated by Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) pp. 215–6

¹⁴ See Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Lute Books, 1999) and Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', translated by Betsy Wing from Susan Sellers (ed.) *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵ See for example, Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies Of Encounter* (Princeton, Princeton University Press,

The field of psychoanalysis explores these various thresholds and boundaries between private and public, inner and outer, subject and object, personal and social in terms of a complex understanding of the relationship between 'internal' and 'external' space. Cultural geographer Steve Pile has described it like this:

While inner life is distinct, there is continuous exchange between the internal and external, but this 'dialectic' is itself interacting with the transactions between 'introjection' and 'projection'.¹⁶

The psychic processes of introjection and projection, as well as identification, provide a rich source of conceptual tools for exploring the complex relationships made between subjects and others, and between people, objects and spaces. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has suggested that once we start to think in terms of relationships between subjects, or subjectivity, we have no choice but to consider these intrapsychic mechanisms of relation, most importantly identifications: 'Once subjectivity is embraced', she says, 'we have entered into a realm of knowledge based on identifications, hence knowing that is intrapsychically filtered.'¹⁷

If criticism can be defined by the purpose of providing a commentary on a cultural work – art, literature, film and architecture – then criticism always has an 'other' in mind. The central task of criticism might then be considered as: how does one make a relationship with an 'other'? It is this

1998); Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers* (London, Routledge, 1995); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁶ Steve Pile, *The Body and The City* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 91. See also Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 27-61.

¹⁷ Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1998) p. 25.

question that is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice. As Benjamin writes:

An intersubjective theory of the self is one that poses the question of how and whether the self can actually achieve a relationship to an outside other without, through identification, assimilating or being assimilated by it.¹⁸

This question – of how is it possible to achieve a relationship with an other – has also been taken up as a pressing enquiry in feminist philosophy. Judith Butler, through discussions of both G. W. F. Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic and Emmanuel Levinas' exploration of the face of the other, has drawn attention to the ethical aspects of relationships with the other.¹⁹

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that we which we have yet to know.²⁰

Butler points to the work of Italian feminist philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, who argues that we are exposed to the other from the start, and it is this exposure, which is the condition for political and social life. Cavarero states:

¹⁸ Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics* (Winter 2001), v. 31, n. 4, pp. 22–40.

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004) p. 49.

Autobiography does not properly respond to the question 'who am I?' Rather, it is the biographical tale of my story, told by another, which responds to this question.²¹

Cavarero proposes that our desire to have our life story narrated by another, demonstrates the role of a pre-existing other as foundational to the formation of the subject. Butler suggests that Cavarero turns around the usual progression from the early dyad to social relations, and instead 'ground[s] the social in the dyadic encounter'.²²

Literary critic Mary Jacobus has described 'the scene of reading' in terms of a relation, perhaps a correspondence, which exists between the inner world of the reader and the world contained in the book.²³ Taking up this insightful observation, I suggest that criticism involves such a double movement back and forth between inside and outside. The critic is expected to remain 'objective' or exterior to the work and at the same time he or she is invited inside – to enter the world of the work; the work is physically positioned outside the critic, yet at the same time it may occupy the site of the critic's psychic life igniting interior emotions and memories. This pair of two-way movements between critic and work suspends what we might call judgment or discrimination in criticism, and instead, through what I call the practice of 'site-writing', traces and constructs a series of interlocking sites that relate and locate, that position the 'dyadic encounter' between critic and work.

²¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, [1997] translated by Paul A Kottman, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 45.

²² Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', p. 24.

²³ Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 18.

[see image 14]

This red book has been read in parts, read then left, left then read. Objects slipped in between the pages mark the pauses. How long will it be, I ask, before you open a page and tell me another story?

You tell me.