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Othered and Disoriented in No Man's Land

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It is curious but hardly fortuitous that in this apparently post-colonial era, anthropology seems to be abandoning its role as a discourse on distance, on the spatially and, indeed, temporally remote — whose deep-seated premises Professor Fabian has in his writings (eg. 1983, 1991) so brilliantly exposed — in order to become a discourse on proximity, crossed boundaries and borders and the like. Let me venture some scattered, yet situated thoughts that I had while reading a version of his talk a short while ago. First of all, it strikes me that our experiences living in Canada might provide us with a unique standpoint from which to appreciate the ambivalences of this shift. Most of us, after all, live within a few miles of what is touted as “the longest undefended border in the world”, and know only too well just how permeable and elastic such a boundary can be when the side you're on is downstream in the global flow. We have long understood how difficult it is in such circumstances to establish a position from which to speak and act for ourselves, to create let alone preserve a local culture, whether political or artistic, or even to maintain a resource base. Many of us sympathize with, and gain mute satisfaction from, those Mohawks who, trafficking in contraband cigarettes, steadfastly defend their island of identity by ignor-

ing the international border that presumes to divide their land.

At the same time, borders everywhere are being contested from within. We Canadians do our share of border crossing, no passport required. We buy into the American dream with the allegiance of our cash. Some of us take tangible delight in outwitting customs officials with the occasional undeclared toaster or over-allowance bottle of Scotch. Our elders winter in Florida. Our engineers get jobs in U.S. corporations; our actors grace their silver screens. An anthropologist from Mars might observe that border crossing (as both movement and circumvention) is the salient characteristic of the peripatetic Canadian tribe, our distinctive cultural trait.

Yet, if our “significant border” is permeable from either side, the direction of cultural flow across it remains essentially one-way. By extension, in films and TV dramas our cities become theirs, only cleaner, more orderly; our wildernesses become theirs, only wilder, more pristine. Canada is America shortly before “The Fall”, all substantive differences between us being redefined as temporal ones in the process of Disney-fication.¹ Beyond this, in defiance of our government's rhetoric, foot-dragging,

and inequitable weighting of claims, we now have numerous refugees in our midst who, despite the cant of official multiculturalism are on their way to becoming "cultural hybrids" (as the title of one Cultural Anthropology panel puts it, proving that anthropology's taxonomic impulse is yet honoured in the breach). The two forces I've identified, the swift current of the global stream, and the desire to maintain a foothold in it, to have a positive and situated identity, inform our (internal and external) cultural politics at the present time.

So borders are not simply lines on a map, geographical frontiers signaling a shift in the rules of the game, liminal zones in which principles exist to be flaunted. They have practical, dare I say material, consequences. Nor are they necessarily unpatrolled when not physically defended. While I suggest that because of our experiences, Canadian anthropologists may be especially well-placed to analyse them, I also think Professor Fabian is right to caution us that our current fascination with boundaries and borders may conceal old wolves in new sheepskin, and to make us ask ourselves why so much traversing or indeed subverting is, as he says, in the air. The topic is not only CASCA's theme, in different forms it is the issue that was addressed at the AES meetings last year and the Cultural Anthropology meetings a few weeks ago, and will be addressed at the ASA Decennial Conference in Oxford this July. Of course, a case could be made that anthropology is just keeping up with the times, with the reconfiguration of political boundaries and redistribution of people over the earth — that we are merely observing what is happening "out there". But if we consider ourselves simple "observers" of such events, we thereby assume a position of distance from them, and in doing so, insidiously reassert those boundaries once again. Perhaps not the sort of boundary that was, as Professor Fabian notes, earlier seen as an essential property of a functioning social system, but the sort that divides surveillants from surveilled. But how much do such boundaries really differ, at that?

Is it possible that in the face of our subject's imminent demise, we are reinventing ourselves yet again without having learned from our past? Reinventing ourselves no longer as imperialism's silent, often unwitting police, but as globalism's noisy, acquiescent midwives? And is it fortuitous that our exuberant embrace of boundary crossing should come just when many of those whom we had bounded off in the process of empire are, in the wake of

collapsing global certainties and broad dissatisfaction with the legacy of colonialism, defensively bounding themselves?

None of these issues is new; they are all part of a problem that has haunted anthropology for the last self-conscious decades: the problem of how to understand and then revise inequitable relationships with Others, how, in this context, to represent difference and conceptualize our own and others' experience. A few years ago it was raised by Marilyn Strathern (1987) in her attempt to reconcile — or at least initiate dialogue between — feminism and anthropology, and her point bears repeating here. For feminists, Strathern said, personal experience is an instrument of knowledge that can be shared only with like persons; it cannot be shared with Others — defined for her purpose as nonfeminist men (1987:288). She wrote: "because the goal is to restore to subjectivity a self dominated by the Other, there can be no shared experience with persons who stand for the Other" (1987:288). She might have been speaking here of any dominated, colonized group.

An anthropological conceptualization of experience is most evident, Strathern suggests, in certain "poststructuralist genres" of ethnographic writing, where the gap between self and Other exists only to be bridged, however incompletely, in the ethnographer's experiences of the alien society: by her living the alien context. Here too, Otherness is deliberately sustained, "but the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other. ... Under attack ... is that part of oneself embodied in the tradition to which one is heir" (1987:289).

Inviting dialogue between these practices is fraught with difficulty. In her encounters with "Others", the anthropologist, representing the dominant, seeks expiation through self-knowledge; the feminist, representing the dominated, seeks restitution through self-valorization. Each speaks to herself, principally about herself. In their solipsism they speak past each other, and an uneasy tension — a no man's land between them — remains.

Now, some of us are both feminists and anthropologists; a growing number of us are both anthropologists and "Others," or all three. Clearly, none of these identities is ontological. If feminism has taught us anything, it is that all identities are contingent, socially and historically constituted. If this lesson is behind our quest to dismantle — or at least to cross — the boundaries of our own making, boundaries

that we and our venerable antecedents earlier endowed with an aura of naturalness and inevitability, then I think there are grounds for hope. Equally so if we have, finally, taken our experiences of being Other and among Others— of being “in the field” — into the heart of the discipline, into theory.

Edward Said, in his much cited article “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors” (1989) captures the political difficulty of this task, in that there is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves (1989:216-17).

The irony is that so long as these relationships exist, our identities seem *as if* ontological — and the boundaries we presently deconstruct, decry, or fetishize, as the case may be, will remain.

I must confess that as the granddaughter of a rum-runner, I have a keen fascination for boundaries and borders, but also a fair wariness of them. As both Mary Douglas and Sudanese *zar* spirits have taught me, crossing boundaries is integral to their maintenance. And as Marilyn Strathern has pointed out, maintaining boundaries may, to our chagrin, be necessary to Others’ liberation, or at least a positive source of their self-worth. Some time ago I wrote about how, as I was about to leave the village in northern Sudan where I had been doing fieldwork, one of the local women was diagnosed as being possessed by a *zar* whose image was a caricature of my own — female, Canadian, incurably nosy (Boddy 1989). Now *zar* spirits (a type of *jinn*) are ethereal alien beings in villagers’ cosmology, and parallel to *non-village* humans in social respects. Surely it is ironic that all my efforts to overcome the distance between myself and villagers had only succeeded in making me well and truly Other.

Yet, since all statements about Others implicate the observer’s experience (Fabian 1982:91), in becoming a spirit I had indeed traversed a boundary. Spirits are personifications of extrinsic historical powers: the power of Islamic saints and colonizing British, of other societies in the counterpart human and spirit worlds. So in “becoming” a spirit I had become part of villagers’ collective past, objectified, available to be represented according to the conven-

tions of *their* anthropological rhetoric. This is not to trivialize the event, merely to expose its reciprocal politics. I was to them, whatever else, an object of knowledge, linked — as all *zar* spirits are linked — to a specific praxis of power, and subject to domestication through a specific counter-praxis on villagers’ part. Neither the boundary between us nor the unequal power positions that it signaled vanished in the wake of the personal relationships we forged; rather, they were made obvious and, in the process, had merely shifted ground. To adopt Kirsten Hastrup’s vocabulary describing stages in the process of being “othered” (1992), my “me” had here become a “not-me”, a local representation, one that enhanced villagers’ own sense of self.

But this situation did not last. When I returned to the village some years later, it turned out that my stint as intimate Other had been short-lived, the characteristics I had hubristically identified as my own having been interpreted as a new manifestation of a well-known Coptic spirit. I was — in more ways than one — dis-oriented by the development. By now I identified with my spirit parallel: she was, in Hastrup’s phrasing, “not-not-me.” The fact that she had failed to become established required that I confront my basic irrelevance to villagers’ lives. Being an insignificant Other has its advantages, however; not least it implies the possibility of creating *human* relationships across the cultural divide.

On occasions like these I have recognized myself to be under the bell-jar of anthropological scrutiny; but now and again I have also been brought up short by what, to extend Appadurai (1990:4), might be called a “post-nostalgic” turn, where villagers and I, whatever our differences, are acutely *in* each others’ present. As I was about to leave Sudan for the second time, village friends who had recently moved to Khartoum threw me a farewell party. My husband had come to Sudan to meet me, and these friends were anxious to meet him. During the party, which unlike most Sudani celebrations, was not gender-segregated, he was asked to say a few words. I was to translate. But his speech was too formal and elevated for my bucolic Arabic, and try as I might I simply could not cope. My friends, who took great pride in having taught me to speak, were disappointed; I was utterly embarrassed. Our mutual fantasy that I had become “like” them was shattered. Yet by far the worst of it was that they were videotaping my cultural incompetence for endless re-runs and posterity. As a westerner and an anthropologist, I can

say that it is far less comfortable to be objectified by video than objectified by a spirit. The question that lingers is why?

There is a final, more recent incident I'd like to relate; it is also in its own way a matter of sex and videotape, if less, perhaps, of lies. Last year I was asked by northern Sudanese women refugees in Toronto to help them put on a *zar* ceremony in honour of International Women's Day. The ironies of this situation are abundant and I have explored them at length elsewhere (Boddy 1993). But the most salient is that in early March of last year I found myself on a sofa in a Toronto apartment reading aloud from my book on the Sudanese *zar* to thirty Sudanese women, reminding them of the spirits' characteristics and demands. Admittedly, these were women of the country's bourgeoisie for whom the cult is, publicly at least, "superstition". Still, they told me, *zar* is "a part of our culture", and my book verified that fact. They said they wanted to perform a *zar* because *zar* is an expression of women's power, a context in which "men can say nothing", hence suitable for International Women's Day. Moreover, *zar*'s highly theatrical possession rites had recently been outlawed by the fundamentalist regime in Sudan, whose oppression of women and attempts to reshape Sudanese culture along strict Islamic lines these women had fled. Their staging of the *zar* was therefore to be a protest against the state lodged within a protest against masculine privilege.

The evening of March 8th I was there, on stage with the women at the Eritrea Restaurant, dressed in a Sudanese *towb*, announcing the *zar* for non-Sudanese present while two videocameras recorded the event. A year later I ran into a former student of mine, a Ugandan woman pursuing graduate work in another field. She told me that she had recently made several Sudanese friends and one day had asked them to show her "something Sudanese". They played her the video of our International Women's Day *zar*.

Let me end with the following thoughts. The postmodern present— this age of traversing boundaries and borders — is an age of ironies and incommensurable juxtapositions. And irony is often held to be instructive, to provoke critique; for one thing, it forces us to acknowledge ourselves and others as coeval. This may be so. But we would do well to remember — how can we, in the wake of of the ROM's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit, forget? — that irony is language which has an inner meaning for a privileged audience and quite another for those who are addressed or concerned.² Indeed, it takes its meaning from the boundaries — spatial and temporal among them — that it presumes. As such, the current rumble of irony in our discipline may be more than a symptom of boundaries collapsing; it could well be the sound of ourselves hard at work to shore them up.

Notes

1. The relationship between Canada and the U.S. I am presenting here is incomplete, of course, and certainly one-sided. I recognize that in many respects Canadian identity (let alone Canada as a political entity) has historically been forged in opposition to the self-confident, ideologically mandated vision of nation and national destiny prevalent in the U.S., that, in other words, Canadians consider themselves to be "not-Americans" despite similarities between the two societies.
2. Irony is commonly a weapon of the subordinate and disadvantaged; it is, for example, a principal means for disguising potentially subversive political messages in the women's *zar* cult that I studied in rural Sudan. I doubt whether anyone who has spent time in a "Third World" community can fail to have experienced something similar, whether in local humour, drama, or dance. So it is doubly ironic that in this age of "political correctness" in the West, irony has become the mechanism whereby the dominant acknowledge (and expiate) their domination of others, and these "others" now tread the political highground of literalism (i.e. command "the truth"). This reversal, it seems to me, could be profitably analysed. I am grateful to Professor Fabian for raising this point in our discussion following the plenary.

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