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AID WORK, TRAVEL AND REPRESENTATION: INEZ BARANAY'S *RASCAL RAIN* AND ALICE WALKER'S *WARRIOR MARKS*

Once, on an inter-island flight in Fiji, I was misrecognized as a Peace Corp worker. The flight was over-booked and so I was allocated the co-pilot seat. The pilot, an expatriate Brit who had flown for 20 years in the Pacific region, did not speak to me until just before landing in Suva, when he confessed that he had misjudged me. Clearly I was not a Peace Corp worker, he said, because I didn't smell. However, he couldn't be blamed, could he? for mis-reading my baggy trousers, sandals, and wild unkempt hair. It might have been worse, he suggested, I could have been an anthropologist.

Well, I didn't blame him. In fact I was pleased. I had unseriously considered "joining up," and not *just* because a stint in the Peace Corp would have released me from my American undergraduate student loan obligations.

Having identified me as "fellow world traveller," the pilot assumed we would share the same contempt for misplaced benignity, the outdated notion of '60s peace and love that the Peace Corp signified to him. As "fellow world traveller," the pilot also assumed I would understand that men like him needed, as he put it, "to clear his pipes regularly." For such purposes, he had a regular assignation established with a local, married Indian woman. He offered this information freely, perhaps to console me because he was consequently unavailable that night. He did not realize that I required no such consolation. I did, however, need a lift, and so accepted his offer of a ride into town. We "travellers" must after all seize our opportunities where and when we can.

In this story, I see the collision of three categories or identities which have remained mutually exclusive, and have served some interests by doing so, namely: the tourist, the traveller, and the aid worker. These roles may be constructed through a series of hierarchical oppositions, but I will argue that the three actually share the same ground.

I. "Serious academics have always sought to distance themselves from both tourists and travellers, but in doing so they are often flattering themselves." (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 27)

Before entering this triply shared ground, I'd like to say a bit more about the traveller/tourist opposition. Several commentators have shown that the binary privileging the traveller over the tourist is ideologically motivated and specious. Jonathan Culler, for example, has written of Paul Fussell's "hysterical smugness" in drawing a strict binary of the good traveller and the bad tourist. (Culler, 156) At this point I'd like briefly to sketch how this opposition between traveller and tourist is played out in Western imaginations.

First, consider the notion that identity differentiates the traveller from the tourist. The traveller is the sensitive, self-sufficient individual, motivated by the desire for "the real." He or she willingly risks personal safety for involvement, for adventure. The tourist, by contrast, is identified with the crowd. He or she misrecognizes the spectacle as "authentic." Tourists may seek the *frisson* of the "other," but only if they are guaranteed safety.

Secondly, consider transport. The traveller is self-directed, actively engaged in some kind of bodily experience, walking, biking, hitch-hiking, standing by the road side. The going is hard and slow, but you have time to really "look." A narratable degree of discomfort is essential. In contrast, the tourist's movement is not self-directed, but occurs passively, through mass transport; it is fast, easy and mindless. Where the traveller sees everything "close up" and unframed (or unmitigated), the tourist sees the distant view through the bus window frame.

This is a familiar, isn't it: the traveller who relies on local transport, the back of lorries replete with market produce, live chickens, and local people of all ages who, for some reason, share your humour about this novel rather than normal mode of transportation, and who laugh hysterically *with* you throughout the trip. You stop everywhere. In contrast, the tourist relies on the air-conditioned coach with European engine, (Volvo or Mercedes) plush velour seats, tinted windows, TV, headphones, video games and of course, toilets. (Separate men and women's "restrooms," if it caters to Americans.) They stop for photo opportunities and for souvenirs.

Finally, consider the relation to the visited site and people. Travellers, you understand, do not impact upon visited sites. The traveller leaves behind nothing but footprints and good impressions. Off the beaten track, he or she achieves significant contact with the landscape and with the local people. The traveller deserves the privilege of acceptance as a family member. "True" travellers are adopted by the local people. Invited to share meals with families in villages.

The tourist, however, is a supercilious, blundering agent of change, helping in a direct way to destroy the "foreignness" of a site. On the beaten track, the

tourist can hope for no more than a distant, attenuated experience of the site and its people. Where good travellers take sensitive human portraits with a discrete long lens, tourists push in for snap shots. It is the traveller's belief that local people denigrate only the tourists.

Spurious contrasts between traveller and tourist could spin on and on, but that wouldn't be the point. I do wonder, though, how many of us have created for ourselves identities of such self-perceived superiority, travellers rather than tourists? And would we want these identities deconstructed?

Jonathan Culler explains it this way: the *"[f]erocious denigration of tourists is in part an attempt to convince oneself that one is not a tourist."* The historical explanations delineating differences between traveller and tourist are nothing more than excuses for "what travellers always do: feel superior to other travellers." In actuality, this desire to distinguish between the real traveller and the crass tourist is, Culler argues, "a part of tourism—integral to it rather than outside it or beyond it." (156)

More recently, James Buzard notes that the binary between traveller and tourist is continually being re-defined, but each new case retains the spurious privilege of the first term. (Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways to "Culture" 1800–1918.*) We could take as an example the anthropologist, who is perceived as superior in practice and in product to the traveller. The ethnographer as a kind of sojourner, engaging in a spatial practice of co-residence rather than the temporal practice of travel. The ethnographer's observations produce "authentic" knowledge, as distinct from the superficiality of the traveller, whose encounters are comparatively fleeting. These assessments depend upon a notion of duration-in-dwelling and, to quote Bronisław Malinowski, on being regarded as "part and parcel" of local life. (in Clifford, 98) We might also note the hierarchy of consequently produced texts: the scientist's report is superior to the traveller's journal, which is superior to the tourist's postcard.

Much has been said about anthropology, so I'd like to shift the discussion to consider the case of the aid worker, the volunteer abroad, even the World Vision-type adoptive "parent," whom we might think of as an "armchair aid-worker." I want to suggest that the "self-valorising" strategies which privilege the traveller can be invoked to try and create a morally superior space for the aid-worker. And what I will show is the expected: that this exempt space can not be sustained, nor indeed attained.

I have always misunderstood travelling theory, the idea of the critical nomad, to be about critics vacating positions too quickly to be held accountable. I know

this is ungenerous, but I see a parallel here. If one recognizes that the previously respectable "traveller" is implicated in imperialist relationships, one strategy in response might be to adopt a different model through which to produce and understand our experience, as Westerners, moving about the world, a model that achieves the kind of moral patina no longer available to the "traveller" or the "tourist." Such a model might be that of the international aid worker.

One of the cases I'm considering here is Inez Baranay's *Rascal Rain*, which narrates her experience as a volunteer in Papua New Guinea in the early 1990s. In travelling to PNG as a Volunteer Abroad, Baranay might be considered as sojourner in these terms: she does not give up the privilege or security of returning home, but she *does* commit to a co-residency that projects *meaningful duration* rather than insignificant movement. Perhaps more importantly for my argument here, the sojourner model offers grounds for claiming familial bonds, for acceptance as "part and parcel" not just of local life but of the family.

In *Rascal Rain* Baranay draws upon this privileging opposition of dwelling/duration over movement/transience to help retain a sense of legitimacy for both her project and her relations with the people she encounters in Papua New Guinea. However, despite her "good intentions," Baranay cannot secure unmitigated legitimacy for her project. This is not unexpected. Her tropes continually expose an imperious relation to the narrated objects in her text. I suspect that neither the reader nor the author are very comfortable with the narrative produced from this "sojourn."

II. "The intellectuals represent themselves as transparent." (Spivak, 275)

In narrating her experience, Baranay conspicuously demonstrates political and personal awareness. For example, she recognises the travel industry's slogan "Papua New Guinea is for travellers not tourists," as nothing but a "wise-ass distinction," (216) and she consciously claims to resist the role of the anthropologist who always makes local people "conscious" of themselves as "Other." (35) And she accepts responsibility for her own confusion and frustration. She writes:

> I concede—no I insist—that the problem was my own personality, distressed at the absence of clarity, efficiency, courtesy and comfort... (38)

But can she avoid colonizing, exoticizing operations in language? The answer is emphatically no, but what does surprise is the degree and intensity to which she employs "staggeringly" (to use one of her words) offensive images of local people.

Here are a few examples. Page one begins:

The small plane took off from Port Moresby... I sat beside the most beautiful boy. He was going to college... Forcing this information from him enabled me to gaze at his fine-boned black-skinned just-out-of-childhood beauty, and the shy, averted look in his eyes. (1) She calls him a "young god." (1) In other words, here we have the stock aestheticised, eroticised and sexualised body of the native. The passage reminded me of the turn-of-the-century colonial postcards of pubescent "native" girls from various faraway places, in particular, New Zealand and Algeria. Why, I wondered, on first reading, open the text in this fashion? I read on...

The bus driver who meets Baranay's flight that first day is "a wildlooking *character,* with matted hair, bare feet, a gap-toothed grin and the heavy odor of alcohol." (My emphasis 5) He drinks more than his fair share of 48 cans of beer and then negotiates the difficult mountain roads. In true "traveller" style, Baranay claims, "I figured my number wasn't up yet and I wouldn't worry about it." (6) Instead, she settles into the back of the lorry where, she claims, "we all shrieked with mirth." (6) Indeed, these rides she claims, would "arouse longing in all those [back home in Australia] who plan to transcend tourism." (47)

In fact, she subjects everybody she meets to this penetrating inspection by the Western eye, selecting and filtering the visible for signs which, when translated into narrative, will enter a web of signification already familiar to the Western reader. Levitica, the local woman who is responsible for the Volunteer arrangements and who Baranay positions as a sort of nemesis, appears in equally stereotypical terms: she is "the largest woman I ever saw in PNG, ... standing like a monument, smoking a cigarette at the front of a colourful throng." (4-5) Baranay addresses her directly:

> "You were lordly and dismissive if I spoke to you. You were the slave master and I was the slave... You were massive and majestic and you had me baffled. I could do nothing but take it... You were in charge and made sure everyone knew it." (40)

Here Baranay ironically reverses the colonial master/slave opposition, fully empowering Levitica over herself. She proclaims, "I had to admire you, but not for long." (40) Eventually another volunteer explains that Levitica distrusts Baranay because she is a writer; Levitica, as it turns out, quite rightly fears how she will be written about. To this Baranay responds:

"If Levitica minded—something I hadn't seen any indication of—there was nothing I could do about it. Writers steal, but they must write." (211)

Baranay wilfully licenses and exercises her writer's prerogative to textualize and objectify. This privilege is essentialised and supposed to transcend the rights of others. At no point does she request permission to write these people into her narrative, but she does scrupulously leave out any revealing details of her affair with another European volunteer. *Her* personal life, her romance, it seems, is off limits to the reader.

Surveys of Western representation of the "third world" would not be complete without the *de rigueur* portrait of children abject in poverty. Not unexpectedly Baranay figures the children as her "giggling" "little gang":

> ... kids, smeared with mud and snot, terribly cute with their gorgeous brown eyes and brilliant smiles, surrounded me, clattering and laughing and grabbing at my hands, my skirt. This was probably a nice culture to be a little kid in, but we couldn't discuss it. (24)

Trinh Minh-Ha has argued that rehashing stereotypes to criticise stereotyping can "constitute a powerful practice: a knowing kind of recycling," she says, "looks at itself exerting power," and inflates stereotypes only to better deflate them. (190) Well I don't believe we can make this case for *Rascal Rain*. What kind of currency the West makes out of such images of "indigent" children is something I will say more about in a moment, but what interests me now is the way Baranay first engages in her project on the basis of familial bonds, in this case the sisterhood of feminism and yet the resulting narrative invokes base, derogatory stereotypes.

III. "We hardly know how to give." (Trinh T Minh-ha, 23)

To condemn *Rascal Rain* outright is to assume some superior ground, and to defend it at all implicates the defender in ways I wish to avoid. So I don't propose to do either. I want to consider what forces are at work to produce this kind of text: that is, one which constantly avows and disavows its own authority and complicity, in a sort of wild careening between gestures of love and contempt both for the writer and for the people in Papua New Guinea. Near the end Baranay writes that *her "sense of failure and self-loathing is immense."* (217) I know there are psychoanalytic explanations for her feeling this way, but I want to consider the possibility of western people actively engaging in emancipatory enterprises that are not merely self-satisfying gestures of benevolence. What constitutes legitimate moral involvement? Legitimate political action?

In *Rascal Rain* Baranay, as the remembering subject, seems to sabotage the political legitimacy of her own work. Why? I think it is because of her

perception of two counts of disillusionment and betrayal: one from Western aid organizations generally, and the other specifically from the Papua New Guinean women.

First consider the aid organization. Baranay writes of the meaninglessness of her work; she can neither measure, organize, nor map the terrain of her project. No one in Australia (or PNG) will explain what her brief as volunteer with women in PNG *is*. Bewildered, she sees only the VSA's waste, ineptness, and political apathy. Speaking of another volunteer she writes:

> Julian had declared "fun" as his principal motive, to great approval. Everyone was encouraged to include fun in their agenda. The ideology of fun was part of volunteer culture: fun as a goal proved you weren't (merely) missionary or mercenary in you motives. (8)

She comes to believe that her failure to settle into this culture of "fun" is the cause of the VSA's dissatisfaction with her work and character. In other words, she feels unfairly denigrated for having a political consciousness, in particular a *feminist* political consciousness. She cites an article by a volunteer in Thailand who criticises Women's Development projects as "impos[ing] values" in ways that a "humanist" approach avoided, and claims Western women volunteers impose a "gender theology." He writes, "If a Thai farmer beats his wife it's not a volunteer's business." (177) Baranay believes that the Australian volunteer organization condones this position, which she cannot rationalize with her role as a feminist. She cannot "not see" the violence against women in Papua New Guinea. She cannot "unknow" that in the province she was assigned *"the most common cause of death for women is being beaten by their husbands."* (217)

At the same time, Baranay idealistically assumes that she will be readily accepted by the PNG women on Western feminist grounds. She is careful to differentiate her motives from interventionist ones. After all, she responded to an appeal by the Papua New Guinea women themselves, who had requested a volunteer. As she says, she isn't into *"imposing."* She appeals to a notion of solidarity among women. She expects a sororial exchange of views, unguardedly with other women. But the women refuse to reveal themselves.

And so Baranay positions herself between structures she can neither understand nor work within: the international aid organization and the PNG Women's Council. She seems to want her personal failure to be understood ironically as the responsibility of neo-colonial structures over which she has no control. And she describes her state of mind near the end:

> Remnants of postfeminist postcolonial postmodern ideas rattled in my head but no theory on earth could help me figure. I had woken up in Wabag posttheoretical. Not a post to lean on. (207)

The epilogue finds Baranay, holed up with her German lover in a eco-cabin in an eco-resort in the Daintree, nursing her ideological wounds. Thus, the former traveller exchanges her position as failed aid-worker for the comparatively understandable, somewhat-elevated moral position of eco-tourist.

I confess, here, that despite my discomfort with and my distaste for Baranay's bitter narrative, I felt a sense of recognition when, in the final pages, she passionately relates her confusion about *how* appropriately to participate, particularly in postcolonial feminist work.

IV. "Right from the moment they venture to speak, what [women] have to say will of necessity bring about a shift in metalanguage." (Cixous, 353)

For purposes of comparison, I will conclude by briefly considering another narrative which describes an emancipatory enterprise. That is Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and Sexual Blinding of Women,* an account of how Walker came to produce a documentary about circumcision in Africa. In a letter predating the film she writes that her film will "serve the world" (9) by linking "genital mutilation to other psychic and physical maimings that women endure. It is also a way to make these mutilations visible in a different way, instead of only the pitying/horrified ones." (12)

As assessment of whether or not she succeeds is outside the scope of this paper. But I would like to consider how she represents the African people she encounters. She invokes a psychic identification with African people on the basis of race and a shared history of oppression. The frontispiece combines a photo of a small African girl with Walker's disclosure that "It was exactly as if I were looking in a mirror but seeing my three-year-old self." These familial grounds entitled her to claim the sororial bonds that are desired by, but withheld from, Baranay. And Walker acknowledges that her project is in part legitimated because *The Color Purple* preceded her in Africa, where it received a "large enthusiastic reception." (41) Nevertheless, I would pose the same question for this text as for *Rascal Rain,* "Does Walker avoid *Western* colonizing exoticising operations in language?" You judge.

In her travels Walker is enchanted with the children who, "Within minutes ... put on a show for us. Completely unself-consciously. Spontaneous music made with tin cans and sticks... The crew was enchanted and started to film." (40) In the Gambia she writes her joy into her journal:

> To be in Africa. To realize Africans are doing OK, basically, if they'd just stop hurting themselves. And that I love both Africa and Africans. That Africans have "time" and "space." Westerners no longer have that. Africans really should be able to be wise, not just clever and smart. (50)

A few days later in Senegal she writes, "What has happened to these people that they seem so joyless and oppressed? Is it Islam, as some suggest...?" All around her are:

> women with downcast eyes and stiff back and necks (they are of course beaten by fathers and brothers and husbands). And men look at a woman's body as if it were a meal. (69)

I acknowledge that I've selected these excerpts to reveal a perspective, to support my argument. But I suggest that Walker also subjects third world people to the *Western* eye, and filters the visible for signs which enter a familiar web of signification for the Western reader: poor but spontaneous children, the wise native, and in the Orientalist vein, evil Islam. I'm very aware that making this claim is fraught with problems. My own motives may be misunderstood; or worse, understood and rejected.

My position is this: neither Baranay nor Walker can create for themselves pure, exempt positions which evade implication with the West. Walker is surprised when African people make requests for money. *"We are black women,"* she says, *"and our resources are not the same as those of the American television network which is upper-class white and male."* She doesn't acknowledge the implications when, in the next sentence, she mentions that it is *English* television financing half of her project. And as I have indicated, her narrative does not manage to avoid idealizing, objectifying tropes.

What I want to emphasize is this: I don't think we have yet worked out how we might most productively and least hurtfully talk about these issues. Alice Walker accounts for the problem this way:

> The fear of being labelled...racists has made many women reluctant to say or do anything about female genital mutilation. Except for the writings and voices of a handful of white feminists over the last decade or so, there has been a deafening silence, a refusal to engage whether critically or actively with this taboo area of feminist concern. (94)

She doesn't say this to laud the work of white feminism. On the contrary, she says that:

> If one hundred million white women and children were being mutilated as a matter of course in the name of tradition, the earth would be now shaking with the tremors caused by voices of protest and righteous anger. (95)

Nevertheless she declares that "As a woman, I am concerned about eradicating the pervasive violence that all women experience across all cultures, all races, and all societies." And she concludes, "Torture is not culture." (95)

This is the point where my literary theory class recently came apart. "Torture is not culture." One female student absolutely refused to concede Alice Walker the grounds to make this declaration. Her argument was similar to the male volunteer's in Baranay's narrative: *any* Western action regarding another's cultural practices was interventionist, not emancipatory. She was passionate. Other students made a few comments about the racist implications of a white woman in Perth denying a black woman her claim for African identification. Tied in ideological and positional knots, the room was soon silent.

And that is my point. I don't think we have yet worked out how we might most productively and least hurtfully talk about these issues. How we may participate in postcolonial work in ways that don't risk either sidelining women's issues or silencing women altogether.

Clearly, it is possible—even easy—to critique the ways women from many subject positions participate in and speak about feminist work in postcolonial contexts. Both Baranay and Walker employ "othering" tropes in their representations and reveal a Western ideology that takes for granted that the "gift" of aid will be gratefully received. But I find also in these texts evidence of two poles of an opposition that needs critique. At one end is the kind of convenient sloppy relativism which dismisses any involvement as "imposing values," and at the other end, a kind of self-authorized universalism which assumes the right to speak for all women. We have to find some other space: neither absolute relativism nor false universalism. But I do not think this means that we must reject out of hand the notion of communities of women committed to shared emancipatory values that resist totalizing feminisms yet work actively to contest subjugation.

I recognize that the pronoun "we" itself invokes an embarrassing unity. I know that as critics, we each inhabit the subject position of feminist activist differently and invoke different grounds for speaking. But my utopic hope is that critique will continue to blossom. If there are no exempt spaces, perhaps there are only exemptions. For women must speak, despite the imperfect way we do our work. Cixous has written that "the moment women open their mouths—women more often than men—they are immediately asked in whose

name [are] they speaking." In short, women in academia are kept busy showing their "identity papers." (353)

More and more I see around me disheartened women disengaging from postcolonial work. In different ways, these two texts remind us to capitulate neither to bitter cynicism nor to silence. To do so would be no service to women at all.

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