

Inez Baranay

THEORY COULDN'T HELP ME

A reply to Susan Ash "Aid Work, Travel and Representation: Inez Baranay's *Rascal Rain* and Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks*" *LiNQ*, Volume 24, No. 2, 1997.

Some of us experience awe and wonder at examples of human brilliance, goodness or beauty, stopping for a moment to marvel at what the world contains. To gaze upon a young person in their divine moment of just-out-of-childhood young adult beauty is one such arresting experience. This moment might occur on the bus from Bondi Beach or a cargo boat from Cairns, and you might think of the young person as a god or goddess. When you recall the journey—it might turn out to be an important journey with reverberating consequences—you might recall this moment, it might seem to resonate with implication and metaphor. If it occurs on a plane from Port Moresby the young person is likely to be a Papua New Guinean.

Perhaps this is "aestheticising" a person (does that mean you're not allowed to think of anyone as beautiful, or only if you don't know, what, their name? phone number? deepest dreams? Or only if they're Papua New Guinean?) I imagine the feeling aroused is rather maternal. But Susan Ash claims (in "Aid Work, Travel and Representation: Inez Baranay's *Rascal Rain* and Alice Walker's *Warrior Masks*") that "here we have the stock aestheticised, eroticised and sexualised body of the native." This is not only to read the opening of my *Rascal Rain: A Year in Papua New Guinea* through a veil of prejudice and projection but to ignore my challenge not to make the obvious, the "stock," response.

Ash's article displays a version of the mentality that says any representation of sex is sexist, any mention of race is racism. Her piece implies that we must only talk of people of other—what? other race, ethnicity, culture, nationality?—in the terms fashion demands, something certain people are comfortable with, apparently something pious or evasive these days. Something that signals the author's distance from the colonising, imperialist and orientalist attitudes of the past or from any remarks that can (by isolation and misrepresentation) be read that way. This is an intellectual version of the mentality that makes a staggeringly popular success out of books like *Mutant Message from Down Under*. (It doesn't have to be true, it has to make us feel good.)

If Ash honestly assumed that I would not be aware that my opening description was wide open to the kind of tut-tut-tut pointing out of the writer's

ignorance that you really mustn't shouldn't aren't allowed to write of a perception that a "native" (Ash's word) is beautiful, she ignored a great deal of what follows. It is perfectly clear, as even her own reading of my book reveals, that I am acquainted with the Theory which informs her article (which opens by the way with a tedious rehearsal of the "there are travellers and there are tourists" trope which surely ceased to mean much at around the time it was first formulated; opens, too, with a barely relevant anecdote of her own travels containing phrases that could easily be isolated and given the treatment she dished out—but let that remain parenthetical). A reader will soon see that I am also aware of the rote responses of those whose triumphs consist in Ash's kind of "gotcha!" Ash's account is typical of the kind of academic writing that takes as its inspiration some thoughtful, original, provocative theoretical writing, but applies it as a mendacious selection of small excerpts, concealing their context and tone.

It seems that the only permissible representation of Other people is none at all, or one couched in terms so carefully correct that a non-academic writer is forbidden the territory.

Ash quotes my passage "theory couldn't help me..." and that is what I'm saying throughout, that all I can do is say this is what happened, this is what I saw, this is what I did. Not to grant the book its givens is poor critical practice. What do they teach in today's literary theory classes?

Implicit in this kind of speciousness is the suggestion that we can not talk of or describe people if offence might be taken. (And not necessarily by the people described but by the professionally offended.) I have both love and contempt for my own culture/s and claim the right to express a similar range of attitudes to any other culture. I claim the right to describe people as I saw them. Ash says I "expose an imperious relation" to the "narrated objects." The descriptions she calls "offensive" apparently are offensive only because they're applied to—what? Black people? People who'd been colonised? It is not true to suggest by this that I do not describe similar white Australians the same way—a point Ash does not consider. Or maybe Ash thinks people from PNG in no way can be similar to us?

Both Alice Walker and I have offered a single person's account, and I imagine Walker was aware, as I was, of the terrain, fraught with a type of academic, armed with Minh-Ha and Cixous, out hunting for the first sign of political transgressions and cultural incorrectness and forbidden language.

Ash says "My position is this: neither Baranay nor Walker can create for themselves pure, exempt positions which evade implication with the West."

This is a position? This is the crux of her argument? It is a pseudo-point. Do I have to say such a creation was never an intention and I don't even think it's anything like a good idea?

What is *Rascal Rain*? I tried to simply tell the story of my year in Papua New Guinea, offering a strenuous attempt to make sense of the experience, while looking at ideas on what is a story, woman, race, culture, postcolonialism, development/aid and so on, and whether so-called women's development in third world countries—these terms I use in implicit multiple inverted commas—obligatory po-mo irony—is feminism or not or should it be or must it not be. I asked whether being a woman was in itself a kind of culture. Up to now I had assumed I could take a relativist position on all things and that travel would only ever support this tendency. It was confronting to find myself become definite on a couple of things I had seen as debatable. One is that when we see cruelty and oppression of women in other countries it is not acceptable to say "oh that's their tradition, their culture, their business" (It's usually male culture, male tradition). An other is a profound sense of how we—late 20th century Australians—are the free-est women who ever lived on this planet; I'm not saying we're in some perfect world but I returned with a new sense of how much we owe to the women before us, who fought for the vote, the right to earn an equal living, to have our rights enshrined in law, how we owe those women who wrote when there was no women's literature industry, and those who used the privilege they had to set off on more-or-less perilous and groundbreaking journeys.

Ash believes we (oh, that "embarrassing unity") "have not yet worked out how we might most productively and least hurtfully talk about these issues." I'd like to say this: the quest for truthfulness and openness and exploration is not served by evading hurtfulness—if a writer set out to evade hurtfulness (to herself or anyone) she would not be able to write. A reader who seeks only the pleasant and comforting is no reader. As for productiveness—the implication that the books in question are not "productive" I will leave alone. Look, there are extremely important things to say about looking at culture and cultures and the historical and social constructs that can shape and distort and restrict our insights and interactions, but the cause of communicating out of a sense of a common humanity and the ability to engage with people from any kind of cultural background are not served—are sabotaged—by the forbidding misrepresentations of Ash and her ilk. (Let alone the cause of finding the pleasures in a text, but that one seems lost.)

The attempt to tell one's truth necessarily means to ignore the academic post-colonial rule book. To scold about the people in Walker's book and my own being subjected to the "Western eye" is ludicrous. What are writers supposed to

do, put out our eyes? To not ever write anything about non-Western people (that's the *reductio ad absurdum*)? Not be who we are? I mean, shame about Flaubert being French.

Oh, and I have never had a "German lover." The person referred to was Dutch. I told the reader that he was Dutch at least a couple of times in the book. Never mind, no-one remembers everything. But to call him "German" means either that Ash filed the information in her category "one of those that are all the same" or else assumed his name could mean nothing else. Hello, who was talking about stereotypes?

And I find it staggering that Ash complains that I "leave out any revealing details of [my] affair ..." Details? What kind of details, exactly, does she want, and what purpose could they ever serve? Who would approve of these details? The person in question is there in the narrative, a companion and comrade and ally, very present (some readers think they know all about us now), often part of the episodes I recount, sharing some stuff and arguing about other stuff, understanding some things and not seeing others, offering points of view often different from my own—but Ash calls for "revealing details." A sex scene perhaps? One of those she says "we have to talk" and he says "can it wait" scenes? And to suggest that I "revealed" things about others that I hid in my own case is beyond ludicrous. As is the suggestion that I should "request permission" [sic] to write "these people" into the narrative. This passage of Ash's basically says I had no right to write an account of my time in Papua New Guinea that includes any description of Papua New Guineans that is not authorised by them! Or that if something should not be true then it should not be written.

You know what, if something is a stereotype that doesn't mean it isn't true. I'm sorry the children I saw were poor (though I never portrayed them as "object"—Ash's word) but to refrain from description that revealed their material lacks (while, by the way, being enthusiastic about much that is exemplary in child-rearing in the PNG Highlands—should I have been scolded for that too?) because—well, Ash's point seems to be that it is so commonly noticed that children in the third world are poor that you should conceal the fact. And hey, most children are beautiful—aren't you allowed to say they are if they're Other? Aren't you allowed to say a driver was drunk if he was black? Aren't you allowed to say things in the third world, too, can be very silly?

How does a single person deal with situations, conflicts, dilemmas and dangers often not fully understood or prepared for, in a culture with values often rather different from those we (we upholders of liberal humanist values) hold dear? I have tried to imagine taking an Ash or an ilking along on the journey I write

of. If by magic everything happened the same way, what would she do? How would she behave, perceive, record, interact? Isn't that the question unstated but present throughout *Rascal Rain*? Isn't that what the reader must ask herself? Is that the true source of Ash's "discomfort and distaste"?