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The Foreigner Question – An Epilogue

In 1996, the philosopher Jacques Derrida took part in a series of seminars in Paris that culminated in the book *Of hospitality*,¹ presented as a dialogue with the psychoanalyst and philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle. The conversational form of the seminars/essays is important. It makes present the dialogic terms of hospitality – which presupposes a host and a guest – and where hospitality harbours more menacing conditions, such as having your generosity abused – and of deconstruction where meaning hinges upon exclusions and opposites.

In the opening essay ‘Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/from the Foreigner’ (*Question d'étranger: venue de l'étranger*), Derrida, our teacher, hooks us in – as all good teachers do – with a puzzle. ‘Isn’t the question of the foreigner [*l'étranger*] a foreigner’s question?’ he asks ‘Coming from the foreigner, from abroad [*l'étranger*]?’² And then the questions keep coming, through circularities and small changes in emphasis and angle that disclose and release other meanings.

The question of the foreigner is a question of the foreigner, addressed to the foreigner. As though the foreigner were first of all the one who puts the first question or the one to whom you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question.³

This type of writing can make you feel giddy. There are bouts of confusion and enlightenment. This is another point expressed in form of the deconstructionist effort to think differently by making language and meaning insecure and difficult. I have learned to stick with these texts, moving with the play of meanings as they coalesce and disperse, just letting the writing fizz and wash over me at times.

So with Derrida, the foreigner is a figure who questions our own existence and belonging. I go back over the text, back over the text. *I didn't get that – what did he just say?* Anne Dufourmantelle who sits to the left of me in the split text format of this seminar/writing is some comfort. She is both a helpful guide (don't worry he's obsessed) and a pedagogue, authoritative and erudite. The obsessing Dufourmantelle tells us is Derrida being Derrida 'drawing the contours of an impossible, illicit geography of proximity'⁴ where what is foreign is right here. In other words, otherness or alterity is not so much a spatial problem, a problem of the cultural and experiential distance between me and you. It is a problem of time. A problem of genealogy, inheritance, anticipation and of not ever knowing what the future holds. This is also the other-within, the alterity within each of us that I wrote of in the Introduction.

So this is the foreigner – a 'being-in-question' – as an unknowable, ultimately uncategorizable Other that disturbs our being at home with ourselves and in the world. 'To the pacified reason of Kant' Dufourmantelle explains 'Derrida opposes the primary haunting of a subject prevented by alterity from closing itself off in its peacefulness'.⁵

Derrida's tracing of the figure of the foreigner is formidable, moving through readings of Kant, Plato, Sophocles, Levinas, Joyce and Kafka, histories of colonization and decolonization such as French colonial rule in Algeria, and anthropological texts. It is significant that the seminars open with Derrida's citing of a Tupinamba weeping ceremony of welcoming and hospitality performed by women and taken from Jean de Léry's *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*. As Julia Emberley⁶ has pointed out, Derrida's use of the Tupinamba ceremony for the purpose of radicalizing and advancing a European cosmopolitan hospitality is problematic when the effects of colonization on indigenous peoples in North and South America have been disavowed, especially for women.

Emberley is interested in excavating 'an indigenous ethics of hospitality, homelessness, and homecoming'⁷ that builds upon Derrida's opening up of hospitality to aboriginality, territorial dispossession and sexual difference. Emberley takes up Derrida's invitation to consider the domestic playing out of hospitality and the question of the unwanted violating guest through a discussion of Doris Pilkington's novel *Rabbit Proof Fence*.⁸

Rabbit Proof Fence is the story of the forcible taking away of 'half-caste' children from their aboriginal mothers to British colonial boarding schools in 1930s Australia. Emberley's is a multi-sited telling, showing how 'The history of the movement of bodies is not a simple one, it is complicated and troubled by

histories of violence, uprootings, various kinds of fascisms and racisms.⁹ Crucial to this recognizing of the historical inflections of transnational hospitality are shifting notions of territory as ground, soil and earth for figures as diverse as the aborigine, the nomad and the violating European refugee turned settler.

Rabbit Proof Fence stories the dramatic escape of three Nyungar children – Molly, Daisy and Gracie – from their colonial boarding school. Using the rabbit proof fence as their guide, the girls walk 1,200 miles from the Moore River Native Settlement to their mother's camp. Their homecoming is commemorated with a weeping welcoming/mourning ceremony where tears, blood and soil merge. 'The wailing began softly at first then grew louder as more people joined the group.'¹⁰ The ceremony is performed at the meeting point of material, affective and symbolic borders. For Emberley, the ceremony makes audible and feelable an emergent ethics of hospitality and story telling, where homelessness and the desire for a homecoming flow into each other. She writes,

This narrative of flight, I want to suggest, is also a story of homecoming, returning to their mother's camp, and to their mothers. Thus, the motivation to flee was not only due to the oppressive conditions of the Moore River Native Settlement but also to their desire to return to their mother's camp. Strangely enough, the way back is guided by a barbed-wire fence, which on the one hand is the rabbit-proof fence, a boundary created for colonial containment, and ironically, as Pilkington writes 'a symbol of love, home and security' (109). It was their umbilical connection to their home, their kin, and their land.¹¹

Such moments of hospitality as a homecoming on ambivalent ground resonate with the dispossession from the warmth and aqueous security of the womb for Emberley. In watering the soil, the weeping/mourning ceremonies 'reproduce the original fluidity of home and dispossession'.¹²

I would like to contribute another final story to this palimpsest of hospitalities. It is a story in which birth and death are intimates and where homecoming is dispersed across debilitated paternity, migration trajectories and life itself.

Sweet chariot

I interviewed Ibrahim, a refugee from Ghana, in his hospice bed ten days before he died. When I think of Ibrahim he comes to me as breath.

When we met, Ibrahim's pain was not under control. The audio record of our interview and the written transcript is indented by pauses, hesitations

and laboured breathing. The breathing came both from Ibrahim and from the mechanical sighs of the syringe driver that was pumping liquid opioids into his blood stream. Scattered throughout the interview are ellipses, the transcription denotation for pauses. I have yet to find a code that comes close to symbolizing the tempo and varying presence of breath.

In our interview Ibrahim talked of his fears for his partner and 16-month-old baby in London and for his two older children in Ghana. How would they survive financially without him? He worried aloud about the cultural identity of his baby son, a concern that echoes with what the United Nations has called the ‘intangible cultural heritage’ of language, oral history, rituals and craft skills.¹³

At the time, hospice doctors were overhauling Ibrahim’s drugs to better control his pain and symptoms. Hospice social workers had secured a small grant to ease the family’s financial burdens. Ibrahim had come up with his own solution to the problem he saw facing his baby. He wanted to be buried in Ghana.

I want my son to [. . .] one day not just melt away into this society, but think of a place where he comes from and one day, or once in a while go back there, and when he goes there and then there’s this grave stone standing there and say ‘Oh that’s your Dad lying down there’ just gives him some kind of attachment to a place which I will cherish [. . .] yeah. But if he stays here, just melts away into society and that’s the end [. . .].

The repatriation of the dead is a practice that follows in the footsteps of Ghanaian diasporic rituals. It is not so unusual. Yet, the problem of how to ensure that a baby known in the present connects in the future with a place he has no experience of – and where his father was himself endangered and excluded in the past – is a novel predicament, full of uncertainty, paradoxes and strange temporalities. It is one where Ibrahim’s desire to cultivate a sense of a transnational belonging for his son is made by casting an experimental lifeline fabricated from the only materials that he has left: his imagination and his body.

And because this reiteration of a Ghanaian diasporic death ritual comes from a dying refugee it complicates, if not subverts, the sentimentalizing of the nation as a vital territory and ground of belonging. ‘Ghana is a difficult country and in this situation if you send me back you are going to make some people’s lives worse for them . . . If you have to die, just die here [. . .] I don’t want to compound anybody’s misery.’ Ibrahim’s imagined post-mortem future hosting of his son in Ghana is not that of the paternal despot in Derrida’s writing, who lays down the

laws of hospitality.¹⁴ This is a father without a home, and on temporal ground that is fast moving out from under him.

In his essay on 'Sly Civility' Homi Bhabha notes the unsettled root of the word territory '... "territory" derives from both *terra* (earth) and *terrere* (to frighten), whence territorium, "a place from which people are frightened off"'.¹⁵ That Ibrahim could imagine a return to Ghana only in death, and then through a risky investment in a cultural trust fund, moves between subservience to and flouting of the *terrere* of the nation-state and its borders.

Refugee flesh, Ghanaian soil, patrilineality and an ambivalent territorial identification all circulate in Ibrahim's imagined return to Ghana under the cover of death's darkness. It is a fantasy shorn of the immediate constraints of economic resources and uneven claims to citizenship. It is a burial plan and a site of future welcoming and hospitality that is fleshy, earthy and imaginative. Speech acts are always uncertain. They can do things – like name ships or turn a relationship into a marriage – but only if the conditions are right to help them get 'uptake'. Ibrahim's morbid umbilicus of a speech act extending between father and son is the wispy breathless desire of a marginal citizen. It is especially tenuous. It can only be hoped for, and dreamed of, rather than assumed or relied upon.

From graves to monuments, archives, rituals, stories and dreams the dead live on – continuing to commune with the living, sometimes nurturing them and the natality of an unknown future.¹⁶ 'Like human dwelling, the afterlife needs places to take place in' Robert Pogue Harrison concludes. 'If humans dwell, the dead, as it were indwell – and very often in the same space.'¹⁷ Ibrahim's place of hospitality and a homecoming to come, for a child that has yet to feel the soil of this home between his toes, is one which rests upon and exceeds Ghanaian territory and tradition. It is a place in the sense of Plato's chora. A realm of future encountering, a web of coordinates and organic metaphors. 'Not at all a determined place, which would be a topos' Peter Van Wyck reminds us of chorographic place-making 'but a manner of *spacing* in which things may come to take place'.¹⁸

Ibrahim could not be buried in Ghana because his partner did not have the money for the repatriation of his body and the burial costs. But I do not know how the story of this fragile, spirited hospitality will end. I imagine that Ibrahim's son has some inkling. I hope so.

Love insists upon making a . . . leap over death . . . because the beloved constitutes the most particular and differentiated image of which the human imagination is capable. Every hair of your head.¹⁹

Geese²⁰

It happens every time.
We wonder about the geese
on our drive to work –
 passing the ferry
or slowing amongst the fields
of water and reeds –
and they come
 out of nowhere
resuming the game they will make
of distance.

It's reassuring then
 to think
that anything could be
so punctual and loud
their voices splashing in the sky
above us
 and the bodies surging on
towards the light.

In school
 we were taught to admire
the homing instinct
 animate and sharp
 behind the eyes
ignoring this vast delight
 this useless motion.

I'd think of them gorged on savannah
 or native corn
an African heat laid down
 in the well-oiled feathers
or mingling with salt and berries
 in the blood.

I'd think of tundra
 birchwoods under snow
hectares of lake and ozone
 and the odd
glimmer of random light
amongst the trees

but I couldn't imagine the maps
by which they travelled:
 miles of surface
etched into the brain's
 wet geometry.

I couldn't imagine
 the pull and sway of home
unless it was play they intended:
 that no good reason
of purposed joy.

Round here
 they mostly arrive
in sixes and sevens
dropping to rest for a time
 at the edge of the firth
then moving on

 but once
in the first grey of morning
 travelling north
I saw them in their hundreds:
 one broad
wave of black and white
 the motion
verging on standstill.

I parked the car
 and stepped out
to the rush of it:

a rhythm I had waited years
to feel in the meat of my spine
 and the bones of my face

and a long time after they passed
I could feel it still:
not what my teachers had seen
 that mechanical
flicker of instinct
nothing magnetic
 no skill
and no sense of direction

but homing
 in the purer urgency
of elsewhere
 which is nothing like the mind's
intended space
 but how the flesh belongs.

John Burnside