

jane rendell

**travelling the distance/encountering the other**

*we are voyagers, discoverers  
of the not-known,*

*the unrecorded;  
we have no map;*

*possibly we will reach haven,  
heaven.*

(h.d. tribute to the angels, trilogy, london: carcanet press ltd., 1997, pp. 58-9).

*the angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelopes or  
container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline,  
changing very decision, thwarting all representation.*

(luce irigaray, an ethics of sexual difference, london: the athlone press, 1993), p.  
15)

the distances we travel are physical and psychic, emotional and mental. the others we encounter on route take the form of a place, object or person. they may be our teachers, critics, students, lovers, children, parents or friends. most often the distant other we encounter in our travels is what we thought to be a familiar part of ourselves.

**the games we never played**

*home is that place which enables and promotes varied  
and everchanging perspectives, a place where one  
discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of  
difference. (bell hooks, yearnings: race, gender, and  
cultural politics, london, turnaround press, 1989, p. 148.)*

*for most of my life, travel has been a certainty rather  
than a question*

*[. . .] travel was unavoidable, indisputable, and always necessary for family, love, and friendship as well as work. (caren kaplan, questions of travel: postmodern discourses of displacement, durham, north carolina, duke university press, 1996, p. 1).*

po box 1606, riqa, dubai, trucional states, arabian gulf.  
po box 387, el fascher, darfur province, western sudan.  
po box 1570, kabul, afghanistan.  
po box 86, mekele, ethiopia  
22 wells close, harpenden, hearts, al5 3lq  
15 mayfield road, girton, cambridge, cb3 oph  
22 collegiate crescent, sheffield.  
15 filey st, sheffield.  
3 st quintins avenue, london, w10.  
12 mogg st, bristol.  
22 barony st. edinburgh.  
18 eyre crescent, edinburgh, eh3.  
60 lillieshall road, london, sw4.  
2a french place, london, e1 3jb  
48 enfield cloisters, fanshaw st, london, n1 6ld

i was born in al mahktoum hosptial, dubai in the 'middle east'. as a girl i lived in sudan, afghanistan and ethiopia. my movements followed the pattern of my dad's work. unlike many parents in similar situations, i was not put into a boarding school at the age of 11, but came back to live in england with my mum and sister. i say, 'came back'. the phrase implies that i was coming back to somewhere i had already been. but i had never lived in england before. it was my parents' country or origin, but not mine. i have never felt at home back (t)here. but then i have never felt at home anywhere.

once the women were back at home. my dad continued to traverse the drier areas of the globe. he is a hydrogeologist. a man who looks for water and brings it to the surface for people to wash and drink. he does this in lands that are not his own, that he was not raised in, that are strange to him. and with people whose languages and customs are not second nature, not kin, but those that he has to learn anew.

it's only recently that i have come to acknowledge the difficult relationship i have with my dad (the coloniser). secretly i have always been rather relieved in confessional conversations around the academic dinner table that my relationship with colonisation is with acts of kindness. my dad was in a position to help, to use his knowledge to provide water and so he did. his knowledge made him powerful, he had skills that allowed him to locate water under a brittle crust. he is a very gentle and unassuming man. he seldom takes the high ground. so why am i uneasy? because, although generated through a sincere motivation – to help – my dad's particular brand of paternalism was also closely related to acts of colonisation.

i remember nights spent capturing insects on cold stone floors. our house was not grand. in western terms, it was a shack, but unlike many other houses we had lived in it had a stone floor, running water and a tin roof that didn't leak. while my parents were out, a tigreanean man stood at our gate. he was our watchman. i was uncomfortable around this tall black man with his hardened feet and long white robe and stick. my younger sister played with him. but i felt distance from him. he never spoke to me. nor i to him.

at that time all westerners had guards positioned at their threshold. was it because a western family had recently been ambushed nearby by eritrean rebels? or was it to suggest that we were important enough to protect? i am still embarrassed of the fact that africans looked after us and our house. 'why?' i ask my parents now. it was the custom they say.

if it is a custom, it's one that shames me. i never played with the watchman. i never travelled that distance. do the games we never played make me a coloniser too?

*{hearing of my interest in angels, messengers and figures of transformation, art commissions east sent me through an interesting project-called air rights where an artist, and an architect, robert mull, made planning applications for holes in the roofs for angels to escape through. i used to spend a lot of time as kid upsidedown. i would lie on the sofa flinging my head backwards, looking up*

*at the ceiling wishing it was the floor. it was so clean and white. there was no mess. it was unmarked by the past.}*

### **female academics come with baggage**

*the nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. [. . .] i shall take the nomad as the prototype of the 'woman of ideas': in the history of women's struggle the international dimension is implicit from the start. not only is feminism as such an international movement, like most other major social movements of this century but at the intellectual level also the very conceptual structure of women's studies is the result of intense international networking. (rosi braidotti, nomadic subjects, new york, columbia university press, 1994, p. 22 and p. 254.)*

*admitting that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, examining the process of the same and the other without which nothing lives, undoing the work of death, is first of all wanting two and both, one and the other together; not frozen in sequences of struggle and expulsion or other forms of killing, but made infinitely dynamic by a ceaseless exchanging between one and the other different subject, getting acquainted and beginning only from the living border of the other; a many-sided and inexhaustible course with thousands of meetings and transformations of the same in the other and in the in-between, from which a woman takes her forms. (hélène cixous, the laugh of the medusa, london, harvester, 1981, p. 46.)*

gloria anzaldúa

frances bartkowski

rosi braidotti

judith butler

helen cixous

diane elam

elizabeth grosz

bell hooks

luce irigaray

caren kaplan

julia kristeva

elspeth probyn

janet wolff

moving is not strange to me, both physically and emotionally, i am most comfortable in motion. for me, being in motion itself provides a sense of stability - having left but not-yet- being-there. this has a familiar feel to me. and it seems i am not alone. postmodern feminism is full of stories of travel. women who have moved out of their place. much of their written work speak of their displacement. there is much at stake in constantly moving out of your place. movements vary in their political dimension. not all journeying is to be celebrated.

recent work in feminism, cultural studies and human geography, has increasingly focused on issues of identity, difference and subjectivity. the language of these texts is highly spatialised, with words such as 'mapping', 'locating', 'situating', 'positioning' and 'boundaries' appearing frequently. academics might 'explain' this new emphasis on space as typical of postmodern discourse. (postmodernism in this context refers to a questioning of truth, history and the all-knowing modern subject and instead describes a series of discourses exploring new epistemologies and ontologies.)

these searches for new ways of knowing and being are being framed in spatial terms. for those concerned with issues of identity—race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity—spatial metaphors constitute powerful political devices which can be employed as critical tools for examining the relationship between the construction of identities and the politics of location. in such on-going theoretical disputes as the essentialism/constructionism debate, positionality provides a way of understanding knowledge and essence as contingent and strategic—*where* i am makes a difference to what i can know and who i can be.

the ability and desire to make connections with new things, depends on position. first in one place then in another, i find it is easier to make connections with another when i am out of place. i like to take my baggage across the frontier into a new land - to unpack among strangers. only to find all the things i have brought have lost their intended purposes.

this also describes my experience of collaboration and interdisciplinarity. familiar words but ones which suggest different yet equally complex dynamics about the relationship between two - working between disciplines, working with another.

many female academics i know work between disciplines. they seem to be drawn to the strangeness of new areas of study, to making relationships – connections and distinctions – between things. what travel and interdisciplinary study have in common is their potential for transformation.

to be interdisciplinary you need be between two places. but how exactly is the relationship constituted? is the interdisciplinary operator who straddles two, one who maps the tears and the rifts, the places where things have come apart, and the overlaps and the joins, the places where things come together. or has s/he come from elsewhere, arrived as a stranger in town? the experience of being someone new in town, is a different experience altogether. here one place has been left and a new unknown terrain entered. what do you do? match the new to meet up with the standards of the old, or allow yourself to be changed by your new surroundings?

such activities concerned with the nature of surfaces. we are still new to horizontal knowledges, it is very different from the one we are used to, where the vertical is prioritised. where we plumb the depths to be sure we are not on shifting ground. where we create vertical edifices with footnotes as their foundations.

much of my work involves negotiating a particular kind of relationship between two, theory and practice. strictly speaking these are not disciplines, but rather, ways of operating. there are many ways of negotiating the relationship between two. dialectics. deconstruction. dialogue.

the conceptual space of critical theory both sustains and inspires me. it allows me a place to reflect on the past and to imagine a new future. it requires that i enter a reflective and rigorous engagement with the world directly around me, but it also provides an emancipatory moment, a glimpse of a world beyond. feminist critical theory in particular asks that you imagine the world from a different perspective, the perspective of the as-yet-unrealised female subject, who questions the very notion of all knowing and once and for ever bounded subjectivity.

the relationship critical theory has to practice is not one of exemplification nor of application, but rather of on-going critical transformative dialogue. julia kristeva

has expressed her aim of working in an interdisciplinary way, as one of trying to construct a 'diagonal axis' between disciplines and their associative methodological practices.

if practice is seen as the making of perfect objects. it is also about 'practising' - trying to get it right but often getting it wrong. practice intends to answer a set of aims. critical thinking questions the values of the aims themselves.

thinking is also a practice. it is something we do. we make ideas. unless we understand thinking as a form of practice, and practice as a thoughtful process it is impossible to transform the relationship between the two.

feminism makes it very clear that the relation of theory and practice depends on the particular – on history and geography - there are no universal rules. historically, it is only by acknowledging the work of earlier feminists that we can operate somewhat 'behind'. rather than having to work in reaction to dominant male models - either blending in by copying or by overtly attacking - we can adopt different strategies. we are able to be more listening, more empathetic. it is only in this state of mind that we more able to be ourselves and to open ourselves up to encounters with the other. we travel the distance in order to transform as well as transgress.

*{a recent project for art angel by tim millar took the form of a performance in trinity buoy light house. the artist, dressed as an eighteenth century scientist, performed a number of diy versions of famous scientific principles. for his exit, he asked that the audience each rip out two pages from newton's, laws of gravity, and attach one page to each of his shoulders with masking tape. clad in a pair of paper wings this artist-scientist disappeared up a spiral staircase to the top of the light house. an angel ready to take flight. he was leaving one world to enter another. we, the audience, had an important role in his rituals of preparation. for a brief moment before he took flight, he existed between two worlds.}*

## **caress**

*critical work is made to fare on interstitial ground. . . critical strategies must be developed within a range of diversely occupied territories where the temptation to grant any single territory transcendent status is continually resisted. (trinh t. minh-ha, when*

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london, routledge, 1991, p. 229.)

*the caress is an awakening to intersubjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive or active; it is an awakening of gestures, of perceptions which are at the same time acts, intentions, emotions. this does not mean that they are ambiguous, but rather, that they are attentive to the person who touches and the one who is touched, to the two subjects who touch each other. (luce irigaray, to be two, london, athlone press, 2000, p. 25.)*

8.5.00

new york earth room

7000 oaks

15.5.00

homeopathy

31.5.00

touch

a long coastal walk

between the devil and the deep blue sea

26.6.00

the vertical earth kilometer

26.8.00

exit: come on in

9.11.00

it's quicker by rail

holidays afloat

rounding the cape of good hope

i've recently fallen in love with an artist. before this emotional transformation, in the days and months as we moved towards each other, i wrote about his work, as an independent critic (or so i thought). i was to be the editor of a book about his work. so i wrote a critical account of some of the projects for a publisher. recently

he told me that he never recognised his work in my comments. they were too flattering. but this was not the only reason for the lack of recognition. he also believed that as someone in love with him i was not able to be his critic. 'why?' i asked. he was sceptical about my ability to be objective. but in my opinion the critic can never be objective, there is always something about the self at stake. . .

what is criticism? who is a critic? what is her role? does the distance between the critic and her subject matter make a difference? if the critical viewpoint is meant to be one of 'judgement'. is this judgement subjective or objective? engaged or disengaged? being objective seems to imply that i perceive a distinction between myself and the thing i am critiquing – that i be disengaged. being subjective suggests that i am so engaged in the other that i get lost.

for me, the critic is a travel writer, always going far from home, invited as a guest into someone else's place. to enter another's space necessitates movement out of one's own territory - it involves trust on both parts. to engage with something imagined and made by another is also to journey, from what is already known towards what is as yet unknown. to encounter another requires a willingness to connect, but also to let go, to take risks. some critics travel like tourists, crossing vast territories but remaining unchanged. others, like me, are constantly pulled out of the familiar toward the strange, impelled by a desire for transformation. this is nothing if not subjective – a total emersion in the other – in order to return anew to the self.

but when writing criticism i am not just negotiating my relationship with one other. i am working between two places, a homeplace or theoretical idea that i am already invested in and the project that has recently come into view. as i start to travel the distance between them. i make loops between them. to stitch them together. loosely. but this is a ongoing operation, as i move towards one, glancing back at the other, it has already moved out of view.

for me, critical theory has two main roles – it takes me outside myself in two ways, it gives me a place, an elsewhere, from which to reflect upon myself, and a place from which to imagine new elsewheres. it gives me an outside reference point, perhaps it is footholding in the world, or perhaps a favorite bag i like to

carry. but for whom will i journey? will i travel the distance just because i like to daytrip? or are there particular people and places i want to visit?

*{ in emir kusturica's the underground, a bride glides (as if swimming) the length of a long candlelit table. smiling, she passes just above her wedding guests feasting on either side. she is apart from the company yet acknowledges her connection as the fringes of her dress, heavy brocade and light lace, caress their finger tips. a moment of encounter and of distance. }*

### **telling it as it is**

*perhaps the strange side of my nature can be summed up in a single trait: the need to keep searching, come what may, for new events, and flee inertia and stagnation. (isabelle eberhardt, the passionate nomad: the diary of isabelle eberhardt, boston, beacon press, 1988, p. 36.)*

*they speak like messengers, but gesture seems to be their 'nature'. movement, posture, the coming-and -going between the two. they move - or stir up? - the paralysis or apatheia of the body, or the soul, or the world. they set trances or convulsions to music, or give them harmony. (luce irigaray, an ethics of sexual difference, london: the athlone press, 1993), pp. 17-8)*

traveller

tourist

migrant

exile

refugee

nomad

teacher

critic

researcher

storyteller

my early childhood made me into a traveller. for years i travelled physically all the time. my work simply provided money for a trip. and i never went to the same place twice. recently i've been moving frequently across the planet. but i've not

been travelling in the same way. i go on trips with purposes. i give papers at conferences. i teach. i visit buildings, artworks, friends with new babies. but i don't meander off with no purpose other than to loose myself.

but none-the-less i do loose myself. it's just that my body stays still. through writing, reading, teaching, researching, i loose myself in other people's heads. sitting in one chair with students coming through the door in an endless stream i am endlessly on the move.

we all like to tell stories, but men and women tell them differently. women like to tell stories about people. about people they know. about themselves and their friends. men like to tell stories. they talk about objects. they talk about people as if they were objects. i work the other way, all my objects are people – my telephone is called silver lady, my computer is betty, my filing cabinet, silver baby, and so on. even when alone i am surrounded by many, the objects in my life have a use value. they are my friends.

i used to despise anecdotal teaching, old men taking up valuable time telling boring and irrelevant stories about themselves. how is this any different, i now ask, from the stories women tell?

the stories women tell in the academy are often about travel. they describe where they have come from, where they are going and what it is like along the way. these are not stories about places as objects. these are stories about lives – about encounters with others and about transformations. the old feminist adage, 'the personal is political' remains strong – just now the it seems to favour the form of the travelogue or an autobiographical journey.

at a talk at the ica a few years back, susan rubin sulieman, said something that has remained with me ever since. she described the often painful process of re-reading parts of her older work and the way she would cringe at some of the stories she has told. these were the stories that with hindsight she felt did not resonate, they were not a microcosm of a greater whole, not a detail that referenced a larger pattern, did not illustrate in a concrete fashion a complex theoretical idea, they were just personal outpourings. bell hooks has expressed a similar worry - that we are driven by a need to confess.

but i'm not sure that we tell stories only in order to confess. when i tell stories to my students. i usually do so in order to shift the power dynamic between us, to allow a space to be made where they trust me enough to tell me their difficulties and confusions, so that i have a better idea how to guide them. by telling stories i show empathy. i reveal weaknesses. aspects of myself that disempower me. 'i've been there too'. but to travel this distance i put myself at risk. they encounter me stripped bare.

friends i studied with are often surprised that i teach architecture. they remember me as 'mystic meg and her red baggage'. oscillating somewhere between jung and marx, i never had any answers only questions. what they don't realise is that i teach 'not knowing'. teaching for me provides a place to take a risk, it requires a desire and an ability to encounter the other. to admit not-knowing and to acknowledge a refusal to provide answers. my students love and hate me for it. they want answers and i won't give them. i don't have them to give. i love the questions.

*{in wim wender's wings of desire a tightrope dancer practices for her evening show in a big top dressed in white with tiny feathered wings. invisible to her but visible to us, an unexceptional man, tired, in a drab overcoat watches her. we know this man to be an angel. stories are angelic forms. they are messages. sometimes these messengers are clothed in disguise}*

### **prepositions: transformational messengers**

*far from wanting to possess you in linking myself to you, i preserve a 'to', a safeguard of the in-direction between us – i love to you, and not: i love you. this 'to' safeguards a place of transcendence between us, a place of respect which is both obligated and desired, a place of possible alliance. (luce irigaray, 'the wedding between body and language', to be two, london, athlone press, 2000, p. 19.)*

*préposer: to put someone in a position to carry out a function by giving them the means or the autonomy to do it ... that's prepositions for you. they don't change in themselves, but they change everything around them:*

*words, things and people ... prepositions transform words and syntax, while pré-posés transform men.*  
(michel serres, angels: a modern myth, paris, flammariion, 1995, pp. 139-46.)

to  
at  
from  
in  
between  
with  
among  
for  
on

last week i went with a group of women, all feminists - writers, architects and artists - to hear french psychoanalyst and philosopher, luce irigaray, talk at the architectural association in london. irigaray spoke of her early research into language with 8 year old italian girls and boys. she discovered that when given a preposition to use, girls made sentences that linked them to people, whereas boys made sentences that linked them to objects. so females tend to want to make relationships between people, between subjects, whereas men tend to make relationships with objects.

there were three questions from the floor to irigaray. all from men. all angry. the first asked her why she believed in matriarchy. the second, came from a lacanian, almost in tears, passionately angry at her stupidity. the final man told her that she had a choice, she could either do empirical research into language or she could speculate and philosophise. but she could not do both. not these two things at the same time.

it brought to mind the figure of the angel, described by irigaray as one who moves between, thwarts all representation and challenges existing boundaries.

it's not clear whether irigaray was arguing that gendered identity that precedes language, or whether our use of language makes us sexed subjects, but this was

not the issue here. architecture was the context for this debate. how do men and women live together?

irigaray suggested that women's 'relational' identities provided a good model for living together, for making relationships between two different subjects. she suggested that the architecture of our homes should provide each of the two sexes with separate spaces as well as a place to meet, to invite the other.

i am interested in the kind of architecture which occupies this 'place of respect' between two. described above by french feminist philosopher irigaray, this place of 'to', may be the place between theory and practice, men and women, architect and user.

for years, an open feminist in architecture schools, i refused to make any comment on the differences between female and male students and the ways in which they designed, even to myself. but i realise I have been taking it all in, storing it up. there is a difference and it is as obvious as eric stoller's research showed back in the 1970's, women are more interested creating indefinable interior spaces, whereas men like to make externally located objects they can look at and define. women often tend to shy away from drawing the outside of the building, they don't imagine space as an object viewed in its entirety from the outside, but rather they locate themselves within space and sometimes refuse to locate the edges. one student cried when i forced her to make a model with limit lines.

design education encourages us to be specific and definitive. to behave as if architecture is an object separate from us. rather than a person we can have a relationship with.

i are interested in the kind of architecture explores the spatial nature of relationships between people, allows us to consider the ways in which people think and make, occupy and imagine space. place is central to our experience of relating to one another.

in earlier work, irigaray's contributions to discussions about space and place have concerned the 'cultural shape' of the female body – the close but not closed

metaphor of two lips suggested new ways of living together. here language structure appears to provide the same utopian impulse. prepositions in particular, possess a strong suggestive role. they are capable of changing everything around them and provide a means of making connections between two, between people and places. some prepositions emphasise position, the relation of an object or a subject to place, such as on, in, between, through. others focus on relationships between subjects and objects, for example, among and with, and the directional nature of these connections, like, beyond, for or to. yet others contain elements of time, as in beyond.

for irigaray the potential of the 'to' in 'i love to you' suggests a new social order of relations between two different sexes. this might involve a new order to the relationships made between architect and user, where interaction and collaboration play important roles and where the qualities of particular end-products are only as important as the processes of making them.

considered as prepositions, things have an important role to play in making relationships between people. in processes of making and using, things occupy a place between people. animate objects tell stories, bridge the private worlds of separate individuals, mediate between real and imaginary and suggest new forms of action. things suggest a number of different narratives about their histories and their potential future uses. considered as props they play an important role as mediators. as toys they encourage play and speculation, as gifts they challenge capitalist notions of profit and ownership.

the ways in which relationships between makers and users are constructed can constitute a major part of the conceptualisation and realisation of a project, effecting aesthetic and formal decisions. this may tend towards the choreographic, where the work manifests less as an object and more as an event, a series of exchanges people make with one another. such working methods necessitate engaged and committed contact with others, they present opportunities for questioning one's own ways of thinking and making. in this space of critical dialogue we have no choice but to travel the distance to encounter the other

*{in the kabakov's palace of the projects, the hundreds of embryonic projects housed in a plywood copy of the tatlin tower are either impossibilities or so simply executed that they seem rather naïve and not very worldly in their intentions. my favourite is a pair of angel wings ready to strap on with instructions for use.}*

### **spinning: a space between**

irigaray notes that when her mother goes away, the little girl does not do the same things as the little boy. she does not play with a string and a reel that symbolise her mother. because she and her mother are of the same sex, her mother cannot have the object status of a reel. instead the little girl is distressed. she plays with dolls - a different kind of object from the reel. she dances, 'this dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to her mother'.<sup>1</sup> in her dance she spins around de-stabilising existing connections between herself and her place, making new ones between herself and her (m)other. she creates 'a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other'.

irigaray's notion of the daughter spinning to make room between her and her mother, resonates strongly for me. i imagine being five again spinning round and around in the middle of a room. only stopping when the furniture, walls and floor begin to revolve around me, when everything around me slips out of place. for me, this is the place of prepositions: a space inhabited by angels. to travel the distance, to think between, i need to be spun 'out of place'.

but i also need to be engaged in my encounters with others. working practices which necessitate committed contact present opportunities for questioning my own ways of thinking and making. this creates a real space for critical and transformative dialogue where i discover parts of myself in my encounter with the other.

for me writing provides this place:

writing is working: being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same and of other without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another. (h. cixous, 'the newly born woman', in s. sellers (ed.) *the hélène cixous reader*, london, routledge, 1994, p. 43.)