

[Return to Inscriptions Volume 5](#) | [Return to Inscriptions](#)

Notes on Travel and Theory

James Clifford

Travel: a figure for different modes of dwelling and displacement, for trajectories and identities, for storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world of global contacts. Travel: a range of practices for situating the self in a space or spaces grown too large, a form both of exploration and discipline. Theory: returned to its etymological roots, with a late twentieth-century difference.

The Greek term *theorein* : a practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony. "Theory" is a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance. To theorize, one leaves home. But like any act of travel, theory begins and ends somewhere. In the case of the Greek theorist the beginning and ending were one, the home polis. This is not so simply true of traveling theorists in the late twentieth century.

Paul Fussell's *Abroad* : a reading of British "literary traveling" between the two world wars. Fussell distinguishes three types: explorers, travelers and tourists. Explorers, he writes, like Francis Drake and Edmund Hillary, often end up with knighthoods.

No traveler, and certainly no tourist, is ever knighted for his performances, although the strains he may undergo can be as memorable as the explorer's. [I read the male pronoun in Fussell's account as generally descriptive rather than generic.] All three make journeys, but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveller that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity. The genuine traveler is, or used to be, [Fussell's is a requiem for the good traveler] is in the middle between the two extremes. If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of "knowing where one is" belonging to tourism. (*Abroad* , p. 39)

There's an assumed topography, an already "worlded" world (as Gayatri Spivak might put it) underlying Fussell's vision. The explorer "seeks" the undiscovered; he and the other voyagers "move toward" different experiences, discoveries. However formless or unknown the places an explorer visits (and this is a relative matter: how "unknown" was the summit of Everest for Hillary?, or the moon for Neil Armstrong?), the explorer's point of departure is clear. Home is a stable place to tell one's story, show one's photos, get one's knighthood. In Fussell's topography, home and abroad are still clearly divided, self and other spatially distinct. How *far* this is from the heterocultural situation of Britain today!

The title, *Abroad*, has an old-fashioned ring. Abroad was once simply "out there," over the Channel, a distanced but known set of places. And here Fussell's emphasis on the pleasure of orientation, of knowing where one is while traveling and while experiencing a domesticated *frisson* of adventure, rings true. The Eurocentrism, let alone andro- and Anglocentrism, of Fussell's definitions is all too clear. The genuine, reflective traveler, "mediating" extremes, seeking what "has been discovered by the mind working in history," moves across a landscape where things are in place-home and abroad, us and them-where one can go "out" and "return" with a representable experience or a discovery of interest to a stable community of readers. "The mind working in history?" There is no need to ask whose mind, whose history. . . Fussell is right that these preconditions for the "genuine traveler" are no more.

In the late twentieth century the community, the polis, of the Greek traveller-theorist loses its centrality as a "home" base. It is more and more difficult to ignore what has always to some extent been true-that every center or home is someone else's periphery or diaspora. The most remote "native" lands are tourist attractions. The great cities and suburbs of what used to be called-with a confident sense of spatial integrity-"the West" are occupied by immigrants and *Gastarbeiter* from the Third World and former colonies.

Such a scrambling of locations brings a repositioning of cultural "theory"-a contested term I use to denote simply any developed comparative knowledge about the histories and forms of collective life. This postcolonial confusion (as Daniel Defert has called it) involves a new marking of "the West" as a site of ongoing power and contestation, of centrality *and* dispersal.

Theory, a product long associated with Western discursive spaces-a status that permitted it to speak confidently of "human" history, culture, psyche, etc.-now is marked by specific historical centers and horizons. Since Fanon at least, non-Western theorists have encroached regularly on the territories of Western theory, working oppositionally, with and against (both inside and outside) dominant terms and experiences. Since the sixties and seventies, diverse non-Western and feminist writers have challenged the status of traditional theory, particularly its aspiration to potent overview, its suppression of location and of its genealogical, storytelling functions.

Theory is no longer naturally "at home" in the West--a powerful place of Knowledge, History, or Science, a place to collect, sift, translate, and generalize. Or, more cautiously, this privileged place is now increasingly contested, cut across, by other locations, claims, trajectories of knowledge articulating racial, gender, and cultural differences. But how is theory appropriated and resisted, located and displaced? How do theories travel among the unequal spaces of postcolonial confusion and contestation? What are their predicaments? How does theory travel and how do theorists travel? Complex, unresolved questions.

Conventionally, theory has been associated with big pictures-trans-cultural and trans-historical. Localization undermines a discourse's claim to "theoretical" status. For example, psychoanalysis loses something of its theoretical aura when it is found to be rooted in bourgeois Vienna of the turn of the century and in a certain male subjectivity for which woman is object and enigma. The same is true for Marxism when a critic like Foucault remarks, somewhere in *The Order of Things*, "Marxism swims in the nineteenth century like a fish in water."

Psychoanalytic claims to speak for "the human" across cultures, classes, genders, and sexualities are now very much in question. Yet psychoanalysis is, nonetheless, considerably more than a local act, a male Viennese ethnoscience. It has travelled-with inevitable displacements, revisions, and challenges. For example, in the United States during the 40s and 50s psychoanalysis was appropriated as "ego psychology," itself contested in the name of a different Freud by Marcuse and Brown, theorists who found their mass audiences in the radical sixties. The theory's original route into England, and recent re-arrival by way of Paris, is another story. So is Fanon's use and displacement of its terms. There are places in the world where psychoanalysis may never travel with any degree of comfort.

It would be interesting to explore how "major" theorists, like Freud or Marx, actually travelled in ways that helped establish a "Western" centrality for their theory, and its ability, for a time, to escape location and partiality. We might consider Freud's early travel to Paris, his vacations in Rome, his interest in Shakespeare, all giving a broadly "European" feel to a discourse written in German, in bourgeois Vienna. Moreover, his passionate collecting of antiquities was a kind of travel in time and space to specific origin sites--Egypt, the near East, Greece. All of these displacements within an unmarked "Western" place and history situated his theorizing. They helped construct that "theoretical" place that is noplac and thus

potentially everywhere.

In the case of Marx, we might attend to the theorist's actual travels from the (marginal) Rhineland to the political center of Europe, Paris, and then to the emerging source of industrial-commercial dynamism, Manchester-London. Germany's "backwardness" was, of course a constant theme for the young Marx. By moving to Paris and then to England he modernized, politically and economically. Written from these places, Marxism made its theoretical claim to centrality and thus to a place at the cutting edge of History. Could Marx have produced Marxism in the Rhineland? Or even in Rome? Or in St. Petersburg? It is hard to imagine, and not merely because he needed the British Museum and its blue books. Marxism had to articulate the "center" of the world-the historically and politically progressive source.

Center/periphery--Home/abroad--past/future. . .

At the same time, a doubt about this historical topography exercised the Slavophile intelligentsia in Russia-as in the twentieth century it has troubled a range of "Third World" intellectuals. A profound attraction-repulsion to the West and Europe was felt by a Herzen or a Dostoevski (traveling in and out of the "center"), the feeling that Russia must inevitably take that route while hoping that another path to modernity might yet be possible. One thinks of Vera Zasulich's question to the old Marx (Could Russia produce an indigenous socialism?) and his famous "maybe." Such ambivalences and alternative paths have long been expressed by "marginal" theorists, but only in postcolonial contexts have they begun to seriously disrupt the (chrono)topographies underlying Western theoretical claims to represent "human" diversity and history.

Of the many recent writings that, in preliminary ways, articulate and analyze postcolonial locations and displacements of theory two have been particularly influential in the United States: Adrienne Rich's often-cited "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984) and Edward Said's "Travelling Theory." (1983) The first is collected in *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, the second in *The World, the Text and the Critic*.

Rich's "Notes," along with several other important essays of the early eighties registers the contestation of a political/theoretical category "woman" and of a common female "experience" that had emerged in the seventies as part of a largely white, first-world, middle-class feminism. Rich was among the first to react to a disruption of this too-homogenous category and experience around differences of race, culture and sexuality. Works like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's collection, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Barbara Smith's collection, *Home Girls* (1983), and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) or *Zami* (1982) were complicating, in concrete personal *and* theoretical ways, the intersection of specific and unequal experiences too quickly subsumed under the term "Woman."

The problem was that we did not know whom we meant when we said "we." (Rich: 217)

It was in the writings but also in the actions and speeches and sermons of Black United States citizens that I began to experience the meaning of my whiteness as a point of location for which I needed to take responsibility. It was in reading poems by contemporary Cuban women that I began to experience the meaning of North America as a location which had also shaped my ways of seeing and my ideas of who and what was important, a location for which I was also responsible. (Rich: 219-20)

In light of such decenterings, to "theorize" becomes a newly problematic activity. For it cannot simply dissolve into-or, put more positively, be "grounded in"-the local, "experiential," and circumstantial. To theorize about "women" or "patriarchy" one must stand in some experience of commonality or political alliance, looking beyond the local or experiential to wider, comparative phenomena. Indeed, how can

feminism as a distinct discourse and politics exist without the possibility of broad theorizing? And yet, if "woman," must be allowed to fracture into "women," into different historical experiences of gender, cross-cut by race, culture, class, and nationality, how are the commonalities and differences at stake to be theorized?

"Location," here, is not a matter of finding a stable "home" or of discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, "places," or "histories" that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like "Woman," "Patriarchy," or "colonization," categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge. "Location" is thus, concretely, a *series* of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces. Location, for Adrienne Rich, is a dynamic awareness of discrepant attachments—as a woman, a white middle-class writer, a lesbian, a Jew. When, in a much-quoted passage from *Zami*, Audre Lorde writes of inhabiting a "house of difference," she refers to a constrained, empowering locus of historically-produced connections and differences: woman, Afro-American, lesbian, North-American, Caribbean.

Karl Mannheim's free-floating intellectual is no more. With different degrees of comfort and privilege, he or she moves around in complex, constrained travel trajectories. And the same is true of the post-modern primitivist figure of the "nomad," whether the source is Deleuze and Guattari, or Bruce Chatwin's recent *Songlines*. Indeed, far from an experience of escape or flight, actual "nomadism," past or present, is a regulated practice of travel within a known world. (It is interesting to speculate on the current appeal of the nomad metaphor—an image of dwelling-in-travel, of inhabiting, with mastery, a "place" that's too large.)

The word "travel" suggests a more everyday, institutionalized activity, inviting historical specification. Perhaps it is why Edward Said titled his essay "Traveling Theory" rather than "Nomadic Theory", or "Displaced Theory," or "Disseminating Theory." This sense of worldly, "mapped" movement is also why it may be worth holding on to the term "travel", despite its connotations of middle class "literary," or recreational, journeying, spatial practices long associated with male experiences and virtues. "Travel" suggests, at least, profane activity, following public routes and beaten tracks. How do different populations, classes and genders travel? What kinds of knowledges, stories, and theories do they produce? A crucial research agenda opens up.

Said's "Traveling Theory" challenges the propensity of theory to seek a stable place, to float above historical conjunctures. He proposes a series of important questions about the sites of production, reception, transmission and resistance to specific theories. The essay centers on a limited travel story: the transmission and alteration of Lukacsian Marxism from Hungary in the post WW1 period to the Paris of Lucien Goldmann, to the England of Raymond Williams. Said's general perspective is summed up in the following paragraph, following on a contrast between Lukacs the "participant in a struggle" (the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919) and Goldman, "expatriate historian at the Sorbonne."

In measuring Lukacs and Goldmann against each other, then, we are also recognizing the extent to which theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part. Thus what is insurrectionary consciousness in one instance becomes tragic vision in another, for reasons that are elucidated when the situations in Budapest and Paris are seriously compared. I do not wish to suggest that Budapest and Paris determined the kinds of theories produced by Lukacs and Goldmann. I do mean that "Budapest" and "Paris" are irreducibly first conditions, and they provide limits and apply pressures to which each writer, given his own gifts, predilections, and interests, responds. (p. 237)

Said's essay is an indispensable starting place for an analysis of theory in terms of its locations and displacements, its travels. But the essay needs modification when extended to a postcolonial context. The Budapest, Paris, London itinerary is linear, and confined to Europe. Said's delineation of four "stages" of travel—an origin, a distance traversed, a set of conditions for acceptance or rejection, and finally a transformed (incorporated) idea occupying "a new position in a new time and place" (p. 227)—these stages read like an all-too-familiar story of immigration and acculturation. Such a linear path cannot do justice to the feedback loops, the ambivalent appropriations and resistances that characterize the travels of theories, and theorists, between places in the "First" and "Third" worlds. (I'm thinking about the journey of Gramscian Marxism to India through the work of the Subaltern Studies group, and its return as an altered, newly valuable commodity to places like Durham, North Carolina or Santa Cruz, California in the writings of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravorty, etc. When I began these notes Guha was a visiting professor at Santa Cruz.)

Intellectuals such as Gayatri Spivak, Cornel West, Aijaz Ahmad, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chandra Mohanty, Renato Rosaldo, Said himself, the writers in this volume, to name only a few, move theories in and out of discrepant contexts, addressing different audiences, working their different "borderlands." Theirs is not a condition of exile, of critical "distance," but rather a place of *betweenness*, a hybridity composed of distinct, historically-connected postcolonial spaces. Lata Mani's essay in this volume is a case in point. A traveling theorist addressing audiences in both India and the United States, she risks misappropriation at every moment of speaking and writing.

Lukacs, Goldman and Williams had pretty clear notions of who would read them—a relatively stable audience. This is not true in a complexly literate, politicized, global system of cultural flows (the world of "public culture" currently being investigated by Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, among others). Theorists such as Mani—indeed, with varying degrees of risk, all of us—are exposed to discrepant audiences in very different "locations." Historical or cultural theory written today must expect to be appropriated by readings, local experiences and political agendas from several "third world" and "minority" as well as feminist locations.

If Said were expanding on "Traveling Theory" today he would no doubt grapple with such non-linear complexities. (Lukacsian Marxism in his essay seems to travel by immigrant boat; theory nowadays takes the plane, sometimes with round-trip tickets.) Said's work in the eighties, along with that of many postcolonial intellectuals moves between several locations, between first and third world, "central" and "marginal," places. Such traveling theorists see their productions as inescapably political, written against and for, in concrete situations of indentification, opposition, alliance. The "experiences" described and explained by theory are nonsynchronous, exclusive of one another in hierarchical ways. Theory is always written from some "where", and that "where" is less a place than itineraries: different, concrete histories of dwelling, immigration, exile, migration. These include the migration of third world intellectuals into the metropolitan universities, to pass through or to remain, changed by their travel but marked by places of origin, by peculiar allegiances and alienations.

Location Exercise

A place on the map is also a place in history. (A. Rich)

I've always felt slightly disoriented in Santa Cruz. Even after ten years. The sunsets are particularly disturbing. Here I am on The West Coast, yet the sun sinks into the ocean, off to my right, behind the land. That mountain in the view is not an offshore island but Monterey peninsula. We are looking south, across the arc of a wide bay. Ten miles up the coast, beyond the Northern lip of Monterey Bay, the shoreline turns from East-West to its proper coastal alignment. The setting sun behaves itself. I can stand on the clifftop or beach and look westward to the east, to China and Japan. The look is familiar. It poses

no immediate perceptual problems. I know where I am, as Charles Olson said: "where we run out of continent."

In Santa Cruz I can never quite reconcile this "cartographic" location, on The West Coast, with the evidence of my senses registering more land "out there," and the sun going down to my right, behind the hill. There's a permanent discrepancy between the realities of map and experience, with the first always (never quite) overriding the second. Were I one of those people who situate themselves concretely, by means of the four directions. . . But I'm not. The map--the great abstract coast, the hemisphere--is more real to me than the local curve of shore. I'm "looking west to the east," despite my senses.

This is where I am on the world I learned to represent to myself long ago puzzling over maps where California, Oregon, and Mexico occupied the margin, the last "continent" before a scattering of tiny islands and the map's left edge, an edge where mysteriously west stopped and started up again as east on the right hand side. I always wondered about the Aleutian Islands, connecting somehow the two edges, directions, of the world.

This orientation, perhaps particularly North American, looking west to the east, came to seem natural to me. Even its founding paradoxes--an east both "behind" and "ahead," past and future, near (at the Bosphorous) and far (across the Pacific), expelled and desired--made sense to me, as a Westerner. In Santa Cruz, looking west but seeing only south, I resent the everyday dis... occidentation.

South: the other half of Santa Cruz county: Watsonville, Castroville, lettuce fields, Latino migrants, ... and drifting in, the new, nomadic, computer plants.

I, my parents, my grandparents, did not come to this remote coast from China, Japan, the Philippines, Mexico, Guatemala, Samoa, Cambodia, Vietnam...

Before moving to Santa Cruz I lived in the center of the world. The center was the North Atlantic Ocean--for the capitalist West what the Mediterranean had been for Europe, from Rome to the Renaissance--a body of water to gather around, a known space to travel over. My first homes were in New York City and Vermont (migratory map for a modernist intellectual). I studied and lived for a time in London, Philadelphia, Boston, Paris. My parents, born in Indiana, were Anglophiles. We travelled to and fro across the North Atlantic, by boat, book, memory, genealogy. White Anglo Saxon Protestants.

To know who you are means knowing where you are. Your world has a center you carry with you. For the Oglala Sioux Black Elk, the Black Hills of North Dakota and especially Harney Peak formed the center of the world. Black Elk traveled to Chicago, New York, Paris and London. He also said that wherever you are can be the center of the world. Centers and borders, homes and other places, are already mapped for us. We grow, live across and through them. Locations, itineraries: helping us know our place, our futures, while always having to ask. . . "Where will WE run out of continent?"

Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not quality of goods and utility that matter, but movement: not where you are or what you have, but where you come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there.
-C.L.R. James, 1901-1989

[Overview](#) - [Programs](#) - [Sites of Interest](#) - [Events](#) - [CS Archives](#) - [Home](#)

Last modified: Dec 7, 1998 by Megan O'Patry.
Please send your comments to the Center for Cultural Studies, cult@hum.ucsc.edu.