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Olu
Oguibe

IN the title of his book, *Imaginary Homelands*, the author Salman Rushdie recalls returning for the first time, after several years of absence, to the city of his birth, Bombay, to which he refers, almost sadly, as 'my lost city.' During his trip Rushdie visits the house where, in 1947, he was born, before his family moved 'across the borders to that unnameable country', and before he was sent away to England never to return.

He does of course return, in a manner of speaking, to a house that he imagined in monochrome, his memory formed largely by an old black and white family photograph upon which he had called time and again in his expatriation and upon which he had come to rely with certainty greater than faith. He returns to the site of his childhood and discovers something he most certainly would have stumbled upon again and again as he prepared himself for his homecoming, and would have repeatedly and off-handedly swept away as we all are wont to, a source of profound trepidation, something greater than loss, namely, the fear of loss. As he weighs the rather strange relationship between him and the city of his birth, excited yet deeply frightened and uncertain, like one about to meet a long-lost love on whom they had walked out, he is drawn to find what memories of him the old love had retained, had allowed to remain, had saved from obliteration. He turns to the telephone book to see if the city still remem-

bered him and his family, and sure enough it did, more out of that indifference which all memorials and monuments possess, than any special concern for one, undistinguished family out of a million, and this in the most appropriate medium of all inert memories; the telephone book. While the returnee cowers in trepidation and writhes in the grips of emotion, the city betrays nothing, gives little, recalls only partially. On the tablet of the city's mind we are only a record, not a recollection.

Our bond with the site of our nativity is a largely one-way affair. It is an ambivalent bond borne out of a one-sided loyalty and a proclivity to possess, a desperate striving to belong, to lay claim to something that lays no claim in return. Severed from the womb and the body that bore us and hauled into the void of life and existence, we crave to attach ourselves to something, a monument, a location, an event; we crave an anchor which we readily find in the contours of the house of our upbringing, in the streets of our childhood, in the city of our birth. But the city has a different desire and a different response, for we need the city more than the city needs us. In his essay Rushdie quotes L.P. Hartley where he writes that the 'past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.' We may in fact paraphrase Hartley and say that the past, including the city of our birth, the geographies that define our beginnings and for which, ever so often, we are called upon to die, is in a significant sense a foreign country where we never belonged. It is a place to which we are tied not by a mutual care or love but by trepidation, by a profound fear on our part of the loss of the familiar. The idea of our city's special love is a fiction of our own

Imaginary Homes *Imaginary Loyalties*

• The Uncertainty of Geographies •



making, a necessary justification for our possessive fixation on it. The conviction that we own the city, that in losing our place to others or to distance we lose that which belongs to us, that to which we have an exclusive right, derives in no small measure from the wish not to compete for the attention of something whose love we crave, but fear, even know, that it does not love us back. It is as much a craving to own as it is an appeal to be owned. And as for city, so for country. In time, this apprehension transforms into a romantic longing in the hold of which we are blinded to the specifics of our relationship. Everything takes on a different hue; the ugly turns unique, the trivial symbolic. We argue the illogical, defend the indefensible, stake out the frontiers and keep out others. We weep at the sound of the anthem and worship the flag. We descend into the habit of kissing the earth. And there is no love more blind than the love of country. We spend our lives in the shadow of the knowledge that the city may not remember us, that upon our departure the city will forget.

Which is why after departure we crave, yet fear, to return. Rushdie returns to his father's former house in Bombay and finds, also, that memory is an untrustworthy friend, especially memory committed to print. Where he had been led to expect monochrome, to wish for and desire monochrome, he is met with the dazzle of colours, and his fear returns to him, coupled now with a confirmation of the loss which he had feared. Where he had expected the straight he is met with undulations, the simple replaced by the multiple, quiet displaced by life, recollections thrown into doubt. Memory had manufactured for him, in the safety of time and distance, a false vision of the familiar with which he must now be met or else is left lonely and betrayed. In the end, excitement is dislodged by bitterness, by a certain hollowness within not unlike the god-hole Rushdie would describe years later in a different context, a touch of disappointment with ourselves but more so with the site of our pilgrimage. It is a strange, mixed feeling when we return to meet an old love. The smile is never truly free, the first handshake never firm, and the hole in the heart that

we bring with us is never completely filled. Often we find there is more than time between us and the one we come to reclaim. Yet, this encounter is the beginning of recovery from our feeling of unbroachable tragedy. Departure, and return, are our best cures for the irresolvable attachment to the geography of our beginnings. By leaving, by venturing beyond the borders of the familiar, we put our fear, and our love, to test. We bring our attachment into crisis.

An Igbo aphorism has it that the travelled youth is endowed with greater wisdom than even his gray-haired countryman father. In Jonathan Swift's 1726 classic, *Gulliver's Travels*, the protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, after a shipwreck on the high seas finds himself in an epic and enriching adventure of eight years that takes him to four kingdoms and to peoples and cultures of statures and virtues never before known to his English sensibilities. Yet it is his return to London at the end of this journey, upon which he is forcibly consigned to an asylum and made to prove his sanity and wholesomeness under the rigours of the rule of reason, that proves the most revealing and rewarding lesson of all his adventures. Upon return Gulliver discovers the opposite of something which hitherto he was wont to take for granted, namely the right to country. Feted by the benevolent giants of Brobdingnag and tested by the philosopher horses of Houyhnhmland, Lemuel Gulliver returns to his country to find he is the stranger in a savage nation where reason is placed at the service of brutal power. He survives the dangers of a distant world and returns with the certainty to find love and unconditional acceptance in his own country. But the city of his birth is a lesson in the profound uncertainty of all claims to geography.

Far more than endow us with wisdom, therefore, departure, and return, reveal to us also, the folly of unquestioning love of home and country, and the possessive bigotry that is bred from it. While our lives in expatriation may yet be ruled by the craving to return and reclaim, return confronts us with the loss we feared, and places us on the path to recovery, for in revealing the imaginary nature, and ultimate futility of our claims, we are made to

question the foundations of our love and loyalty, and of our tenacious defence of territory. Distance and its negation become the cycle we must follow in order to discover an original truth, one which, though it leaves us with the sadness of unrequited love, ultimately sets us free. Rushdie refers to Bombay as 'my lost city' and in this recognizes that the Bombay of his loss is a city of the imagination, an indefinable construct unto which his desires and projections are latched, he recognizes also, that bonds that are manufactured in the confines of the imagination must equally find their unravelling in the seamlessness of the imagination, outside the pressures of rhetoric and passion

Swift's moral tale, too, is an investigation into the geographies of the imaginary where, outside the reign of reason and convention, our true migratory nature finds sanctuary. There are we able not only to play out the distortionary configurations of our fictions of peculiarity but also to supersede them. Lemuel Gulliver's fantastic journey emerges from the imagination yet stimulates the disentangling powers of real distance and removal. In the landscapes of the imaginary where our fictions of ownership are formed, there, too, are we allowed to question the certainty of our affiliations to mine under the foundations of our convictions, and to expose ourselves if only for an intermission, to the possibility of a fundamental infidelity in the bond between us and the physical geographies that we claim for ourselves. There the monochrome of memory invites us not to latch unto and battle for the supposed truth which it decidedly betrays, but to construct a new reality, to build a new world on the uncertainties of the imagined, to realise how city and country and place are all of our own making and therefore loose without permanent anchor.

In the temporal ambience of its appearance, Swift's interrogation of the certainties of geography was, perhaps, ahead of its time, located at the exact media between Copernicus's challenge to the dogma of our planet's peculiarity which, a century later, would bring Galileo before the Inquisition, and Rushdie's return to the lost city of his birth.

In all three instances, however, what is shared is the ability of the transcendent spirit to reveal the fictiveness of our claims over territory. Copernicus made the leap beyond the ideological restraints of a domineering faith and the physical constraints of rudimentary science, and in his monument of removal from the immediate perimeters of his location confirmed our inconsequence in the vast patterns to the universe. Through Lemuel Gulliver, Swift transported rationalist England beyond the strictures of its bondage to myopic logic to discover not only the existence of territories outside the cartographic confines of a North Sea Isle, but the presence in those territories, also, of knowledge and cultures to challenge its claims to a superior disposition.

In both cases, the reaction of those not enamoured of the revelatory benefits of translocation is to submit to the fear that the anchors of their faith and loyalties are about to unhinge, that ideas and delineations which they had hitherto taken for certain are under threat of exposure. The consequence of this fear is a blind resistance, and a battle to restore the fictions of certainty. Under the guise of loyalty to city and nation, this struggle to hold unto territory and geography calls upon the instruments of power and human regulation in order to expunge the body of threat and shut the window on the world. Today we find this in the fierce individual and legislative struggles against digital subversion of territorial cartographs and borders and affirmation of interzonality through the thoroughfares of the information super highway. We find it in the increasing appearance, even along those thoroughfares, of struggles of regulation that negate the very idea of interzonality and instead reaffirm territorial claims.

In the end our greatest hope lies, it seems, in the individual will to depart, to allow ourselves beyond the border, like Rushdie, and Gulliver before him, and upon return to discover, and acknowledge, the fictionality of assumed geographies and imagined affinities, this way opening ourselves, the doors of our consciousness, to the bountiful revelations of a seamless world. **GR**