Chapter 10

Origination: Journeying In The Footsteps Of Our Ancestors

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Introduction

'Tomorrow we set off for Antwerp to find the Green Cape and set sail for Southern Climes. We have been given many tasks to do on board, as well as a jigsaw puzzle. We are ensuring a taste of home with earl grey tea and marmite.' (Beinart and Beinart, 2009)

In December 2009, my sister and I took a container ship from Antwerp to Cape Town, retracing a journey undergone in the early 1900s by our great-grandparents, who had left behind their homes in Eastern Europe. For us, coming from a partially Jewish ancestry, the context of heritage tourism or roots journeying was a contested territory to set out into. An awareness of the potential dangers of what MacCannell (1973) refers to as 'staged authenticity' and Hewison (1987) refers to as 'bogus history', is only too evident from semi-humorous (and semi-fictional) accounts of similar searches. In *Everything is Illuminated* (Safran Foer, 2002), a young American Jew sets off in search of his ancestors in Eastern Europe only to discover that he is being duped by his tour guides. Books such as *Jewish Ancestors: A Guide to Jewish Genealogy in Lithuania* (Aaron, 1996) and websites like JewishGen (1996) offer plentiful warnings of the difficulty of finding authentic records (an unintentional repeat of the guides aimed at the migrant ancestors, which warned potential emigrants of the less than well-intentioned people they might meet along the way on their travels). Categorizing the Jewish Diaspora heritage tourism market, Collins-Kreiner & Olsen (2004) emphasize the consumption of heritage through an intermediary, and set out categories of heritage-related tourism. However, many of these products promote an orthodoxy and connection to

'homeland' that provides a basis for the construction of a collective identity (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008). If, as Lev Ari & Mittelberg (2008) argue, authenticity is both subjective and dialectically generated *differentially* depending on the background of the tourist, these tours leave a gap in the heritage tourism market for those whose background does not lead them to seek this orthodoxy or sense of connection. This is the space in which our self-organised journey began.

This chapter investigates the transformational effects of undertaking such a journey through a personalized account of a roots journey, making links between heritage tourism, pilgrimage, mobilities and performative art practice. I argue that the liminality of the journey itself provides a space for transformation, in which through performing invented rituals and actions, a personal form of remembrance and witnessing the past takes place (Maddrell and della Dora, 2013; Turner & Turner 1978). This encountering of place through the performance of 'embodied play' (Sheller and Urry, 2004, 4) recognises the overlaps and role changes between pilgrimage, tourism, and other kinds of business (Sheller and Urry, 2004) and of the relationship between 'hosts' and 'guests' as dynamic, fluid and mobile. Heritage tourism literally embodies a range of connections, drawing on our mimetic, cultural or educational heritage as well as our ancestral heritage, and can be viewed as not exclusive but co-existent with other motivations for travel. (McCain & Ray, 2003)

Growing up, I had been aware of our family archive, a collection of photographs, postcards and a kist1 full of salt-spoiled silver and linens. My father had grown up in South Africa and told the story of coming to England by sea, and the archive evidenced a diasporic family, starting out in Lithuania and Russia and making their way to South Africa, Australia and America. Perhaps my own journey started most of all from a sense of absence; of religion, ritual and roots. My fathers parents had died, he no longer practiced and my mother had a Jewish father and English mother, so the only mention of tradition and past came with the Borscht served at dinner, a few Yiddish words, and the long discarded prayer shawls, yarmukkes and silver candlesticks mothed in the kist. At a

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1   A South African name for a storage chest, derived from the Dutch.

transitional point in my own life, it seemed that my ancestors resurfaced and demanded attention. Through discussions with my sister Rebecca we decided to apply for an artists residency in South Africa to research our family's history, and to make the journey by cargo ship. Far from a 'reconstructed narrative' of heritage (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008, 100) we were seeking perhaps more the sacred experience of the pilgrim – where 'journeying is said to bring the possibility of creating social and/or psychological transformation.' (Coleman & Eade, 2004, 2)

Our ancestors emigrated after pogroms in Lithuania made life increasingly difficult, and in doing so they escaped the Holocaust, but I was also aware that their subsequent economic success in South Africa made for a troubled and complex relationship between victim and perpetrator, past and present. This was not a straightforward journey of sentimental admiration for the hard life or amazing escape act my forebears lived through. Rather it was one of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Maddrell, 2009, quoting Pillow, 2003) trying to understand how their mobilities reached forward in time to my generation, what I was willing or wanted to accept of that heritage in my life, what I might need to forgive (and forget), and what their restless ghosts wanted from me.

Journeying in search of one's ancestors can be seen as an act of fictionalising both the past and present, of performing a movement through place which seeks to reconnect specific lost memories or events to specific sites. An act of the geographical imagination, of both the grounded reality of present place, and the cerebral fantasy of one's past. In Saunders (2011) study of Victorian and Edwardian autobiography, he discusses the vogue for fake memoirs, which he calls autobiographication. Spry (2001) identifies a form of auto-ethnography as the convergence of the autobiographic impulse and the ethnographic moment and Dorst (1987) as a text that a culture has produced about itself; so it can be both a methodology and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes. That this autobiographic impulse is relational, carried out through a deliberate movement through and connection to a particular place, is evidenced by recent research into contemporary pilgrimages

and roots journeys.

Basu (2009, 2), writing about diasporic migrants returning to Scotland in search of their roots, describes a mutual process of coming-into-being of person and place: 'Through the acts of visiting – of walking, of searching, touching, photographing, sensing – person, place and narrative become fused, co-constitutive of a pervading sense of identity.' Maddrell and della Dora's work on pilgrimage (2013, 1) argues for a 'surface framework' that takes into account the 'value of landscape and aesthetics in the pilgrim's experience, blending pilgrims' embodied travel, ritual, perceptions of the visual, material, affective, and the numinous'. A pilgrimage to ones roots takes on aspects of the sacred, using ritual, and embodied movement through place as ways to experience and imagine connections to the past. The concept of mnemonics, where place acts as a trigger for memory, is built on by Ingold (2007, 16): 'the act of remembering *(was) itself conceived as a performance:* the text is remembered by reading it, the story by telling it, the journey by making it.'

[insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: Journey Images

Source: Katy and Rebecca Beinart 2010.

So we conceived our journey as a performance, taking with us ingredients for our attempts at reconnection and re-enactment. These included an on-going artwork called *Starter Culture;* a bread culture made from grapes from our home, which along with equipment for making bread were carried in a suitcase used by previous generations of our family on the same route between Europe and South Africa (see Figure 1). *Starter Culture* operates as metaphor, as the nature of the culture changes from place to place and is repeatedly renewed with local flour and water; it is also a part of re-invented ritual, referring to a Russian and Eastern European Jewish practice called *Khlebolsolny*, where crossing the threshold to a new home is celebrated with bread and salt, the bread representing

blessing and salt the preservation of the blessing. Our re-enactment of ritual has parallels with those of pilgrims; but also draws on performance art tradition dating from the 1960s/70s. Allen Kaprow (1993) re-enacted everyday actions or 'happenings' as artworks, whilst instructions given to us by friend and family to carry out or repeat during the journey bore similarities to performance art group Fluxus (Friedman, 1998) and pilgrims' prayers. (Coleman and Elsner, 1995)

Departure

'We arrived at the small railway station from where we would embark for Libau. 'Be careful you don't trip over the signal wires' my mother said, as we alighted from Berchik's wagon and crossed to the other side of the railway-line. I stepped over the glistening rails and wires. Hours passed; then with a mighty roar the engine bore down on us. We took our places in the coaches that had come to rest. The first mishap of the journey happened early on: the train window through which I was watching the world unfold itself came crashing down on my fingers. 'The Russian trains are as ramshackle as their empire' an elderly Jew standing next to me said. This empire tumbled into dust a few years later'. (Schrire Robins, 2007; 11)

We travelled by train to Antwerp, via Brussels. I read *Maus* (Speigelman, 1991) on the train and was transported between times, other trains and travels across Europe, people fleeing for their lives or captured and in transit to camps. At the station we were met by a disgruntled taxi driver who proceeded to issue warnings about the crew's desperation for female company, so that our arrival at port was tempered by a certain wariness. We weren't on any lists and we weren't expected. A man casually looked at our passports and waved us on to the Green Cape, which was loading cargo. We had to climb a rickety staircase leaving our luggage on the dock where it was unceremoniously

hoisted up by crane and dumped onto deck. The Steward, Niko, welcomed us with a little too much enthusiasm and showed us our cabin, and we breathed a sigh of relief. It had a lockable door. (Beinart & Beinart, 2009)

We had set off with a pile of books and texts, unsure as to how these would coincide on the journey to unravel our identity myth. Bastea (2004, 12) ventures that 'going back to a place of the past may be the best way we have to take ourselves back in time.' In *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2001), which centres on a search for lost identity, the main character explores narratives of place to re-find lost memories of self:

> And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in
> the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go
> there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side
> of time, so to speak? (Sebald, 2001, 359-60)

Wylie (2007, 175) has written of geographies of Sebald's work as 'more essentially *spectral* in that their concern is with the unsettling of places and selves as a primary and generative process'. We hoped to connect with the spectral geographies of our ancestors and touch moments they had experienced, through re-embodying their journey, but we were aware that this very spectrality could unsettle and regenerate our existing modes of being.

Culture

'Being so religious mad, we lived on black bread dipped in sugar water and dried out, which we had with tea and eggs'. (Schrire Robins, 2007, 25)

Not being so religious mad, we still had our codes of culturally appropriate behaviour tested. Both vegetarian, I wavered, but Rebecca's determination meant many meals consisted of little more than boiled carrot and potato, the Polish cook on board not ready to cater for a vegetarian. We got into a lot of conversations about food and culture, what was important, and what reminded you of home. For a secular family, food was extremely important to us, and perhaps more so given the lack of other ritual in our lives. De Certeau (1998, 86) writes of bread as a 'memorial', a cultural symbol of escape from poverty, and of the hardships of life and work, and our *Starter Culture* contained a remnant of home that became all the more important in the unfamiliar context of the ship.

On Christmas Day, we baked bread on the ship, using our *Starter Culture* from England, and shared it with the sailors, who said it reminded them of the bread they had back at home in Poland. The night before, we had been invited to share and exchange tiny pieces of communion wafer with all the officers and crew. 'The etymology of the word communion is *moi*, and signifies change or exchange. Common, communicate, mutual and renumerate all spring from the same route. Etymologically, a *companion* is a person with whom we share bread.' (Newling, 2001; 119) Sharing the wafers and our bread seemed to represent the mutual exchange and communication on the ship, and the mutation of tradition, place and time. 'We don't want the *Starter Culture* to remain the same, we are interested in how it changes; as we use and adapt traditions and ceremonies from different religions and cultures.' (Beinart & Beinart, 2009)

We re-enacted the *Khlebosolny* ritual at the crossing of the equator. Waking up at dawn in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, we ate the bread and salt and thought about the passage of both place and time. This private gesture or ritual became an important way for us to retain the link to our personal journeying, a performative language that connected past to present (Connerton, 1989, 58) and recognised the internal changes taking place. Hoffman (1998) discusses this relationship between the public and private in the need to fill a lacuna, which often begins as a personal search

but becomes more public. In this sense, *Khlebosolny* is a ritual which can spread, allowing others to take on and adapt the culture to their own ritual, forming a continuum between the private and public, and sacralising the journey.

Performing Identities I: Otherness

'They travelled with crates and packages – bedclothes, odd bits of furniture, tea kettles, baskets of food, samovars, phylacteries and prayer shawls. The Russian officers, leaning against the deck-rails, laughed derisively at the bedraggled mass of humanity'. (Schrire Robins, 2007, 15-16)

For *Family Photograph*, (see Fig. 1) We reconstructed family photographs taken on board ship, and dressed in the original garments belonging to grandparents and great-grandparents. Rose (2010) links the domestic and the global through the family photograph, and our family archive seemed to represent this conflict between home and diaspora, with image after image of family members on board ship, going back generations.

> 'What was curious was the change in sense of self, as Rebecca felt herself filling out the enormous jacket and shoes of her Granddad Ben, and Katy felt herself taking on the airs and graces of her Great-Grandmother, Edith. The photographs themselves are a deliberately unhistorical reconstruction, a hotchpotch of times and places; the setting is a ship constructed in the 1980s, the clothing dates from the 1930s and 1950s. But perhaps this is a more honest attempt to explain our confused identities than a deliberately accurate reconstruction of the past.' (Beinart and Beinart, 2009)

Taking the photographs, we were not aiming for historical accuracy or 'token-isomorphism' (Macdonald, 1997; Handler & Saxton, 1988) but rather an intentional citation (Butler, 1990) of our

past, learning the postures and performances of our ancestors through re-producing them.

The idea of the diaspora can suggest either a clinging to memories or liberating from the past, either a feeling of homelessness or an unreal sense of rootedness in a fictional homeland. 'Boyarin suggests that nostalgia is a denial of the state of sustained rediasporisation, which is the nature of Jewish history' (Garfield, 2006, 101); so why attempt to reconstruct a past which most Jewish families have for one reason or another been forced to leave behind? Garfield continues: 'diasporic subjectivity offers the contemporary world a way of understanding community without statehood or attachment to territory … the emphasis is not on where you are from, but where you are going' (2006, 103). This makes sense in the context of our journey - we are not seeking a return to the past but rather, like our ancestors, perhaps more a disentanglement from narratives of orthodoxy; acknowledging the complexities of heritage, with Jewishness as part of our identity but not all.

When his father asks him not to tell the story of a significant relationship in his youth, stating 'It has nothing to do with Hitler, or the Holocaust', Speigelman (1991, 12) retorts 'But Pop, it's great material. It makes everything more real – more human.' It is precisely the everyday details and handed down elements of diasporic existence and of migration that constitute the human identities of our family. So for us, it's not the archetypal traditions but rather a family recipe that allow us to reconstruct an identity. And it is the changes in these elements that capture the sense of that diaspora as temporal rather than territorial. There is no better 'place' to realise that than on board ship, a no-country, non-place – a heterotopia where identities can be constructed, without actual adherence to rules or nations. As Foucault (1967) states, metaphorically a ship is the ultimate heterotopia; a space of in-between-ness and otherness that functions in non-hegemonic conditions. It is a liminal space, where the lack of usual boundaries and the seclusion from mainstream society allows for a blurring of identities and positions. The liminal space of the ship reinforced the liminal state of the pilgrimage, where the pilgrims's characteristics become ambiguous, eluding the normal

network of classifications (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978; Maddrell & della Dora, 2013). As the journey continued we began to see our roles switch between travellers re-enacting a personal pilgrimage, and artist-ethnographers, participant observers drawn into a bizarre world.

On the day of crossing the equator, a knock came on the door and the first mate branded us on the forehead with a potato print in red, indicating our status as novices. We were then lead to the deck and 'chained' together with the other new sailors, dunked in a vat of beetroot soup, tied to the bulwark and rubbed with engine oil, mustard and ketchup, 'shaved' with a toilet seat around our necks and finally made to eat bread with jam and mustard and drink coffee with salt. This final activity had to be completed in order to gain the approval of King Neptune and to be new-born as a 'rightful person of the sea' (see Figure 1) (Beinart & Beinart, 2009).

The experience led us to reflect on the strange conflation of life, and art, as the performance we had taken part in was far more outlandish than anything we ourselves could have dreamed up. We began to understand that in this 'non-place' (Auge, 1995), we had to create our own rules of correct behaviour for female passengers on cargo ships. (see Figure 2: The Rules)

[insert Figure 2 – The Rules]

Figure 2: The Rules

Source: Katy and Rebecca Beinart 2010

Performing Identities II: Gender

> 'Logbook, SS Romeo. 1902. The passengers on the cattle-ship The Baltic with its
> antisemitic captain, took up their quarter on the floor of the hard, dung-covered, vast
> and gloomy stable among the hay racks and feeding troughs. Gradually they sorted

themselves out according to their sex and the laws of propriety – the women taking the farthest corner.' (Schrire Robins, 2007; page 16)

We became very aware of our gender on board ship. From before we arrived we were repeatedly warned of the Polish seamen. We were told again and again how unusual it was for two young women to travel in this way. Our performance *Victorian Lady* explored a fictitious idea of a genteel past of sea travel, where lady travellers in full dress would paint careful watercolours, perhaps a more accepted version of what a woman artist should be. (Beinart & Beinart, 2009) In contrast, for another performance, *Dangerous Cargo,* we printed our bodies with the words Dangerous Cargo and posed on the bridge; this played on the fact that we had been told that passengers were the most dangerous cargo on board ship, as they could move. The sub-text to this was the danger we presented as women, a danger of temptation and distraction. From the beginning of the voyage, the sailors told us that it was bad luck to have women on board ship. Butler's (1990) discourse on performativity questions enacted gender roles, and by deliberately performing a variety of expected roles we tested our identities and behaviours as passengers.

While waiting to depart in Antwerp, we happened upon an exhibition which included artist Helio Oiticia's *Parangoles* (made-on-the-body-cape), and it seemed a strange coincidence that the name of our ship was Green Cape. During the journey we designed a *Green Cape* and then made a short film of Rebecca wearing the cape and dancing to unheard music on the fore of the ship. This work took on Oiticica's (1972) philosophy of non-theatre, non-ritual, non-myth; process not display; not-nostalgic but rather concrete action. The identity became not about the photograph or document, not about the past or our history, but about our being on the journey, on the ship at that very moment; it felt liberating. We were aware of our freedom as young women doing what we had chosen to do, a freedom others in previous generations would be unlikely to enjoy. It became more and more apparent that however much we wanted this journey to be about reconnecting with our roots, it was

just as much about negotiating our identities in the here and now. (Beinart & Beinart, 2009) The

liminality of the ship provided us with artistic freedom, where we could test ideas, roles and

transformational acts. On reflection, this was akin to a sacred space, one where we could devote

ourselves to our artistic practice, commit to ourselves as artists. This journey was a crucial turning

point in both of our practices as we exchanged methods of working, began a collaboration that is

still going, and released ourselves from our existing patterns of work and life. In this sense the

journey perhaps connects as much to the life-changing narratives of 'Frontier Tourists' described by

Noy (2004) and Laing and Crouch (2011).

Translation and Miscommunication

> 'In the mornings the waiter would ask me if I had finished. I thought 'finish' meant fish
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> so I would sit and wait for the fish. When we got to Madeira, I was given grapes and
>
> bananas. I ate the grapes, but I threw the bananas overboard. They tasted awful. I did
>
> not know you had to peel them first.' (Schrire Robins, 2007, 26)

Migrants, like tourists, often suffer from the mistranslation of the familiar, so it becomes unfamiliar

and strange. Translation, which derives from the Latin '*Transferre*', meaning 'to bring across', can

be seen as a metaphor for migration. (Basu & Coleman, 2008) An object transferred takes on a new

set of significances – or may be evoked using new objects which 'stand for' the original. Similarly,

in the carrying over of language, words take on new significances. Translation can also be seen as a

bringing across between generations. In the same way that the translated object may become less

intelligible after multiple translations, we can question how intelligible, or authentic, our

experiences of ancestral seeking may be.

The written language of the ship is in a multitude of words: German/Polish/Italian/English. A

palimpsest of makers/users/voyagers. Original signage has aged and one language has gradually replaced another, hastily typed and pasted over. The crew speak Polish, and we write out a series of questions for them, and ask the Captain to translate for us. Somehow the question 'can you give us a family recipe?' gets confused into the Polish 'what do your family think of your job?', a question that has a very different, emotive meaning. We provoke angry, difficult, upset responses, without meaning to. By the time we work out that the word 'recipe' has been confused with the word 'receive' we have already had some difficult but interesting conversations about the hardships of their lives, one perhaps we would have avoided with a question about the culture of food. (Beinart & Beinart, 2009) The mistranslation brought to the fore the present emotional geographies we were experiencing (Bondi, L., Davidson, J., and Smith, M., 2007) which contrasted with the spectral geographies we were seeking out. In seeking the 'inter-personal authenticity' of our family ties (Wang, 1999, 364) we stumbled into the 'Inter-Personal Authenticity' of Communitas (Wang, 1999; Turner & Turner,1978), where the relationship between and roles of 'hosts' and 'guests' (Sheller & Urry, 2004) on board the ship became fluid, structures broke down, and our exchanges became more honest and direct.

Arrival

> 'We were more than pleased when our wandering had come to an end. The ship now
> lay peacefully in the harbour and our wonder grew as we looked at Table Mountain
> with its tremendous tablecloth of cloud. It was one of the most magnificent sights I had
> seen in my life…as wonderful was the sight of houses on the slopes of the mountain as
> if they had been built into its haunches. And even more wonderful when night fell and
> the illumined dwellings ringed the slopes higher and higher, curving this way, then
> that. It was truly a city of magic.' (Schrire Robins, 2007; page 28)

On Saturday 9th January 2010, Table Mountain appeared, distant and hazy on the horizon. We watched all day as it grew larger and more solid, the city eventually becoming visible at the base of the mountain. We dropped anchor in Table Bay and spent twenty hours waiting for a space in the harbour. On Sunday 10th January 2010, twenty-five days after leaving Antwerp, the *Green Cape* docked in Cape Town, and we lined up our bags, ready to disembark. As soon as the Captain allowed, we triumphantly left the ship, skipping down the rickety steps to stand on South African soil. We carried out our *Khlebolsolny* ritual on the dockside, marking our arrival. Several hours later, we were still sitting on the harbour-side, waiting for a mythical taxi that was supposed to take us to immigration. (Beinart & Beinart, 2009)

Our sense of anticlimax on arrival perhaps reflects that the search for our ancestors is ultimately unresolvable; it is the journey that is important, not unlike the pilgrim for whom the journey is the durational and transformational element of pilgrimage, and the arrival signifies the end of that journey. Our waiting at the dockside also forces us to realise that a large element of mobilities is in fact stillness, or stuckness. (Cresswell, 2012)

Conclusion

The act of journeying in the footsteps of our ancestors was less a re-enactment of their exact actions, and more an embodiment of the emotions and sensations we imagine they may have felt and experienced. Though we didn't set out on a religious pilgrimage, elements of the experience were personally transformational, and had parallels with sacred journeys, similar to those identified by Basu (2009), describing homecoming journeys that become profound emotional journeys of personal self-discovery, and Maddrell (2009), researching the emotional geographies of pilgrims and those making journeys of remembrance.

We can understand the heritage pilgrim as a 'restless seeker for identity' (Bauman, 1996 in Coleman and Eade, 2004, 5) searching for an understanding of self, on a transformative journey that takes place on both a private and public level. Forty (1999, 2) puts forward Connertons (1989) argument that 'material objects have less significance in perpetuating memory than *embodied acts, rituals and normative social behaviour*'. The rituals we brought on the journey, and the performative actions we carried out, are now written into our own lives as memorials to past generations, these memories filtered through our cultural, environmental and educational heritages, which have formed us as much as our genetic inheritance.

Making this trip, forming a link between our own artistic practice and the past, is perhaps a more authentic means of reconnection than the 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973) of trying to directly perpetuate lost cultural or religious practices. If narratives are internalised by recreating journeys, making origin myths out of origins, we recognise the multiple points of departure and arrival – a complex of journeying – of our family. This destabilises the idea of singular roots, suggesting rather the rhizomatic, tangled roots of belonging, and the differential, personal nature of authenticity in roots journeying (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008, Wang, 1999). These do not adhere to notions of collective identity or links to a particular 'homeland' (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008) but rather remain diasporic, non-hegemonic, bridging past and present.

As migrant, diasporic families, so much of our culture comes from the act of journeying, the act of adapting oneself to changing environments, negotiating language, gender roles, and cultural practices. We came to understand that whether or not they sought it out, our ancestors were leaving behind certainty, clear religious and cultural identity, for the unorthodox, the unfamiliar, the liminal place of being-in-transit. And that by putting ourselves in liminal space, we shifted our emotional geographies and artistic practices, marking a crossing point or threshold in our own lives.

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