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Of Identities and Nationalism seen from near and far: Narelle Jubelin and the Politics of Space

Shelley Hornstein

Canadians wax nationalistic very often these days. Well perhaps they do, and then perhaps they don't. After all, here in Quebec, where the ASA conference this year was held, nationalistic can mean different things to different people. My sense is that at least for artists and researchers on art and culture, specifically, flag-raising national fervour comes in the form of a hesitant commitment: the garden may flourish on Canadian soil, but the perennials are not always indigenous. In other words, art production might very well be local but for many, an operative international art agenda is ever-present.

In an increasingly diverse world where different people may share physical soil but cultural differences, assisted in large measure by technological connections, continually encourage the negation or mutations of physical place, one indivisible nation seems increasingly difficult to accept as sustainable for all. Difficult, that is, for those who want nationalism to be squarely determined in the name of cultural homogeneity and the neutralizing of race and gender. On the other hand, for those who are keen to dissolve traditional, nationalistic boundaries and address the notion of racial or female identity while navigating cross-culturally (transnationally, one would have said recently) or shifting boundaries (of nations, canons, and so on), might seem much simpler and offers the possibility to radically alter fixed discourses of national identity and its attendant ideology of genius-making and preservation.

It is a complicated process to be an artist, to write, critique, or teach about art production, or be any sort of cultural player in Canada these days - whether inside or outside its geographical boundaries. This country has always been subject to issues of unity.¹ There seems to be a hint of required allegiance to the nation and its

historical legacy yet no less than a working knowledge of international art as well as theory. It is an unreasonable but nevertheless real pressure that is a function of our temporal and spatial place: we live in a society where collectively some seem to be at once torn and fused by identity politics. Canada cannot possibly be in the process, as some would have it, of becoming unglued, since it has never been glued: rather it is a nation taped and stitched. Riveted by political, economic and cultural differences, nationalism, with its natural and unnatural divisions, necessarily includes culture-makers of every sort, many of whom now aim to challenge the notion of cultural congruity across the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, or class. There is a new-found ability to exercise control over naming our own narratives such as, who am I in this world? Or, what does it mean to be a Canadian and does it matter? What is, and is there, local production and what is, and is there, global production? And when exhibitions by international artists take place in Canada, for example, there is a mixed reaction to the value of hosting such a show: has the funding denied some local artist the possibility to show work? Is this the non-Canadian artist to be inviting at this time, that is, is this artist relevant when considering the vast bank of artists available internally (read, Canadian) from whom to choose? Is there such thing as a (collective) cultural community in this nation-state or is the cultural community international and outside the boundaries of Canada? Where or with whom do I belong? What is or will be the shape of the Canadian canon of art if nationalism is at risk? How are issues of national unity and internationalism addressed? What takes place in the space between art carrying a national voice and *imported* art, that is, art exhibiting on Canadian soil? But moreover, what happens when that imported product refuses to be isolated as a precious foreign object but rather insists on integration, however subtle, with the local fabric.

In order to highlight these issues, I would like to offer the example of Narelle Jubelin. She is Australian, lives in Madrid, exhibits internationally, and recently showed in Toronto at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario) and the AGYU (Art Gallery of York University) simultaneously. She is preoccupied in her work with issues of tourism, migratory patterns and cross-culturalism as they highlight the contexts of cultural authority and identity. Narelle Jubelin likes say that her work focuses on an ethics of displacement. While her project may at times seem hopelessly sanguine, still, she is attempting to come to terms with positions of discomfort, periods of anxiety and fear (after Jameson), of cross-cultural complexities in her work such as the blasphemy, for many, of transgressing cultural place. She is mindful in her work - and compulsively so - of the complicated issues of how international exhibition (that is, moving across international borders and being parachuted into foreign countries as an invited guest artist) may exacerbate issues of race and gender when generic (that is, pan-world, uniform, unidentifiable) works seem no longer to reflect local individuals, gendered and racial positions. And as we are aware, accounts of

racial and gendered production are in and of themselves fragmented and marginalized in a minority discourse.²

Thinking about Narelle Jubelin's work and issues of national and cultural identity underlines that belonging is the operative term of my argument. It is woven into a fabric of identity-building. At the heart of cultural production, after all, is very often an aching identity issue, a politic of who is this artist, what is the nature of the work, and what connects the two?³ So to look at issues of identity is really a micro-inspection of nationhood, with its corpus of related matters such as what a "collective" sense of belonging (to a group, to a set of ideas) means and in what ways that sense of belonging ties the artist, the critic, the group to other artists, critics, communities, races, religions, genders or nations.⁴

The anxiety of attempting a uniformity of vision and a uniformity of production across a geographic space (such as Canada) where issues of nationhood are constantly at play is an impossible and in fact unimportant task. Furthermore, in a world of fragmentary production (that is ideas and things produced in bits and disjointed parts between diverse participants or a transnational effect at perceiving culture, as would have it Fredric Jameson⁵ in the new mapping of a global and postmodern world), even the notion of a localized, geographically specific cultural construction needs to be re-evaluated since the idea of what is local, as we think we have known it, is somewhat at risk. I use the term risk advisedly, since, as Homi Bhabha warns, in the move to a transnational global subject traced on a "decentred, fragmented subject"⁶ we are fraught with anxiety because what must take place is what Jameson's has forecast as the attenuation of local space. Bhabha, however, prefers to offer the image of the in-between space for a cultural globality. Partha Chatterjee proposes yet a third space: the idea of a capital community (vs. state-civil society) that focuses on occluded partial presences of the idea of community. And this idea can be traced in a "subterranean, potentially subversive life within [civil society]...because it refused to go away."⁷ Yet whichever of the metaphors one struggles to define, what we have before us is the necessity to struggle with gendered and racially encoded spaces of cultural production and the need for some sort of as yet unmappable international space that holds news sets of cultural expression and is not fixed in a geographically physical site nor bound by temporal exactness, however unrealistic or optimistic this may sound.

In short, the linear narratives of nationhood (or how we belong and identify) are in the process of very serious reconsideration (as they either buttress or demolish existing ramparts) because they do not seem to fit any longer into, around, with a spatiality and a temporality that transforms existing notions of the representable. It is clearly a move toward commensurability with others beyond the geographic limits (through international media-fication: internet, the 19th invention of magazines and subscriptions disseminated internationally, and all that Harold Innis or Marshall McLuhan after him teach us about the effects of cultural brokerage),

and an incommensurability with the effects of historical narratives and homogeneous wholeness within borderlines anywhere.⁸

Hence the double bind of naming identities and splitting or dismissing of the subject. In thinking about feminist cultural production any attempt to underline positions of the destabilization of place - issues, I would argue, that have been the mainstay of feminist art. To think of work that gently nudges at the boundaries of national definition is one of the approaches to addressing the problem of a perceived unity and homogeneity of the people. Imagining Chatterjee's subterranean (which is a spatial) metaphor across geographic divides of nation-states, Jubelin's strategy may be seen as one in-road (again that spatial metaphor we have difficult reconfiguring) for disrupting two-dimensional images of homogeneous, national, communities. However, Jubelin attempts to force us to remember the recall local geographic memory in a referencing of the interdependence of local, global and the in-between while problematizing the simple *separatist* notion of the act itself.

We dispose already of some mechanisms that navigate transnationally. These are sights of 'media-fication' (taking to heart the lessons of cultural brokerage foregrounded in the work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan) such as: the internet in our 20th century, magazines and subscriptions that disseminate internationally but originated in the 19th century, and of course, we can move right back to the printing press and to the origins of trade. But it is here and now, in the example of Narelle Jubelin, that I see many of these ideas converge. For it is in her work that the early stages of some formulation of the shocking cancellation and affirmation of the relevance and ambiguity of place is addressed. Her aim is double-pronged: to declare the presence of the local and its sense of place while concurrently subverting it with strategies of destabilisation. Take, for example, her highly patterned fabrics and busily-textured cloths in painfully subtle colorations that render the dialectic between image and surface close to invisible. And it is this will to fix and displace, among others, that mark it as profoundly feminist. She at once names the subject, identifies the objects (obsessively so), immerses herself in the task of transposing texts (again, obsessively so) in order to simultaneously dismiss the subject. This act of declaring and dismissing the subject forces us as viewers to re-position ourselves, to find our own place within the spaces she has at once re-created and undone. The quantity of potential links between this or that object, between this or that text, between this or that archival document, are mechanisms to tug at the seams of a written, canonical, national narrative. It is this undoing that forms an environment that is highly destabilising, yet its strength lies in its inherent ability - by a sparsity yet rich textural density of elements - to recover the threads and begin anew.

That she is Australian (a fact we articulate in all the literature but curiously deposit with our coats and packages at the door), and now resides in Madrid, exhibits internationally, and is preoccupied in her work with issues of cultural authority,

identity and what she calls the "ethics of displacement" is not to be discounted. The accompanying literature to any of her shows ensures that her nationality is clearly announced. Then, knowingly and above all, slowly, we unravel a thesis that helps us speculate ourselves. Jubelin forces us to remember the recall local geographic memory through her elaborate scheme of referencing local events, objects and features, as well as local aspects of Sydney, Madrid or Philadelphia, while problematizing the simple separatist notion of the act (of destabilisation) itself.

In *Soft Shoulder* (The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1994), Narelle Jubelin sets up possible links between disparate narratives and objects around the unpublished autobiography of Marion Mahony Griffin (former architect in the office of F.L. Wright, Chicago). Part of this "collection" includes correspondence between Anaïs Nin and the Australian writer/bookseller/publisher, David Pepperell. I am describing this work only briefly for two reasons: the first is that I never saw this work save from slides and catalogue reproductions, so I cannot enter as easily into the discussion or participate in the work quite as well.⁹ But the second reason is to demonstrate the earlier grappling in her work with the notion of destabilisation. Through a laborious exercise of playing archivist (that is, by establishing a solid material trail of her presence within a site and between sites) she has constructed a collection of living traces set out as a treasure hunt with not determinable treasure. But cleverly, she has also managed, by the deposit of diaries, correspondence, found and/or precious objects, to abandon us, to lead us to believe that there are - through the possibility of multiple connections - no connections at all: that local objects, personal threads, a strategy of displacement and destabilisation may at once evoke a pathway through a subterranean passage underneath the local site of the installation, but as well, a labyrinthine multichannelled opportunity to explore the realms beyond any pre-determined boundaries (creating thereby endless possibilities for new ones).

In *a la vez* Narelle Jubelin at the same time, we are presented with two specific art-bound and defined sites (could this be a possible site of location as well in order to effect dislocation?): the AGYU and the AGO. The site downtown assembles a sumptuous pink and reddish silk curtain inscribed with the hand-written text of the Penelope section of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. We may begin to guess, but we are also told in the accompanying literature that is a requisite part of the journey (ours and hers), that this is a transcription by the artist, by her own hand; that is, of the version of the original text she accidentally discovered in Philadelphia during her research trip there to work at the Fabric Workshop.

The site also presents us with photographs by Günther Förg of the reconstruction of the German Pavilion in Barcelona by Mies van der Rohe, commonly called thereafter, "the Barcelona Pavilion". In an adjacent small room, the exhibition includes wall vitrines with photographs of objects by her friend, Jacky Redgate, as well as the inclusion of *Moon Head* (1964) by Henry Moore.

At the Art Gallery at York University, Canada Narelle gives us three texts on Mies (Quetglas, Colomina and Vinci) again on sumptuous pieces of cloth, as well as texts running across some of the painted surfaces alluding to the memory of the Barcelona Pavilion, a photograph and two vacuum cleaners. I do not wish to embark on multiple interpretations of the work and the infinite relations each of us can begin to establish here (if we give it the time it deserves). I do, however, want to point out that with diligent and meticulous reference, her archival manner of documenting provenance (of cloth, texts, letters, photograph, vacuum cleaners and so on) recorded in her *Notes to the Exhibition* which she sees as a crucial element among many in this massive yet minimal assemblage. She is concurrently burying and recovering the links that are not there and are always present in our everyday lives. We see this all the time, everywhere. When we want to buy a yellow car, suddenly all the cars on the road seem to be yellow. She is underlining the common significant and insignificant practices in our everyday lives, the things we do not normally see. And when she names those things, she also erases them: a necessary strategy then, to undermine and displace historical continuum and national narratives.

The installations she arranges have been described as a presentation of disparate objects, events or narratives that are emblematic of travel and the necessities of displacement. But rather than observing this work as Narelle's voyage, let us turn this around and fashion our own voyage through the discursive space that results from the travel from the site downtown to the site uptown, between the objects near and far. Janet Wolff has pointed out in her anthologised review of the differences she has observed between male and female travel, that feminist critique of travel and displacement is not about nomadic (as Deleuze would have it) wandering but rather a critique of stasis.¹⁰ That in order to achieve a critique of stasis, it is crucial to first, acknowledge the dominant centre and second, demonstrate that a critique of destabilisation originates from a place. These are useful guides for exploring the work of Narelle Jubelin. She quickly spells out for us that the dominant centre she problematizes is the very soul of nationalism and identity within it, while her place of origin can be labelled as woman, Australian (far away and down under, or, a historical link to our concept of previously colonised, now nation-state, artist with an agenda of international exhibition). In other words, her position of dislocation is within the margins of culture.

Her work signals the conflictual moments of an operative strategy that is not about migration (which is the moving of one place to another usually understood as the settling in one place from another), but rather is about the possible ability or inability to transgress and translate, to transform narratives of nation-hood that are pre-occupied with notions of linearity and identity. She tears at the seamless fabric of cultural and national oneness and at the same time, subverts

any ideological nationalism. It is a work of that subterranean meandering, infected and affected all the while by the roots of modernism, indeed the very strictures of the Miesian modernism she attempts to unravel yet honour as one and one only agent of change.

Notes

- 1) See, for example, Robert Thacker's "neverendum" reference regarding what he sees as the ongoing tedium of discussions about the place of Quebec in Canada, in "Editorial: English Canada and Other Proximations" *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 25, 2 & 3, Summer/Autumn 1995, p. 173.
- 2) Cornel West quoted in Homi K. Bhabha *Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) p. 229.
- 3) I will not and cannot speak for artists, I can only make highly subjective and random collections of thoughts about what some artists, critics, etc. say or write.
- 4) I defer to that trusty canon of thinkers who have contributed to this argument over the decades in far more sustained ways (Innis, Grant, Frye, McLuhan, etc).
- 5) F. Jameson *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*
- 6) Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, see Chapter 'How Newness enters the World,..' pp. 212-235.
- 7) P. Chatterjee, 'A response to Taylor's 'Modes of civil society', *Public Culture*, Fall 1990. (U.S.A.: Princeton University Press), p. 130.
- 8) We have only to recall Germany and W.W.II or Bosnia as two cases that demonstrate this point.
- 9) What is interesting about Narelle's work is that because it assembles bits and pieces from local and distant communities, its success is guaranteed by the intertextual play and continual engagement that each object contributes as well as the investment each of us as viewers make in the work. For we find ourselves always asking, just where is the work located?
- 10) Janet Wolff *Resident Alien: feminist cultural criticism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), refers to this in various passages.

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