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Ambivalent journeys: Writing travel as the feminist stranger in *Desert Places*

Simone Fullagar

...there are new kinds of nomads, not people who are at home everywhere, but who are at home nowhere. I was one of them.

Robyn Davidson (1996:5)

...we do not know how to designate the peculiar unity of this position other than by saying that it is composed of certain measures of nearness and distance. Although some quantities of them characterise all relationships a *special* proportion and reciprocal tension produce the particular, formal relation to the 'stranger'.

Georg Simmel (1950:408)

Robyn Davidson became a famous international figure in the 1970's when she first travelled with several camels across outback Australia. The journey was sponsored by the *National Geographic* and later published as the book *Tracks* in 1980. The lone figure of a woman desiring closeness to the otherness of nature and indigenous cultures – to paraphrase Simmel – is the feminist stranger, an emergent figure in western travel writing (Pratt, 1995). Her traversal and writing of the desert country contested the masculine myths of conquest and mastery that historically inhabit the white Australian landscape and identity (Schaffer, 1988). Yet, Davidson cannot escape her own whiteness as a western woman and while she travels through a desire to encounter otherness, these journeys are characterised by profound ambivalence. In one particular book *Desert Places* (1996) Davison travels with the Rabari people of Gujarat in north western India on a year long migratory cycle that traced ancient nomadic paths threatened by changing farming practices. Throughout this piece of travel writing there is an ambivalent desire to overcome a contemporary experience of disconnection; an estrangement between self and world, self and other. Always the stranger, she moves with a sense of not 'being at home' anywhere. And yet, travel becomes a search, a journey towards a place in which she might belong

for a while; the elsewhere of a western subject's imagining. She says, having left India, 'I 'live' in England but whenever I'm there for too long I find myself longing for that other place, those other people, and I return to India' (1996:275).

Drawing upon Hegel's (1977) theory desire and insights from cultural theory we can deconstruct, or read, the travel narrative as a text through which to examine the ambivalent relation between the western subject's identity and an idealised otherness (see also van den Abbeele, 1992). Within contemporary literature on travel and tourism there has been a curious lack of theory that attempts to unravel the complex formation of our desires to know otherness. Hegel's work informs much post-structuralist and feminist theory that takes up the question of how we understand the social and psychical nature of desire as it mediates our knowledge of self-identity and otherness (Game, 1991). This chapter engages with several key theorists within this post-structuralist trajectory in order to develop a means of analysing the *universal* journey of selfhood written through the *singular* travel narratives of the western feminine subject Robyn Davidson. In this way Davidson's narrative is irreducible to either register and is not simply positioned as a liberatory tale of the feminist traveller's freedom to move. Narratives of travel have more recently become the focus of textual analysis that seeks to undo the opposition between the real and the fictional, emphasising instead the ways in which our experiences of otherness are always mediated by language, myth and culture (Fullagar, 2002, Duncan and Gregory, 1999, Pratt, 1995).

Desert Places is written through a sense of longing to belong elsewhere, a fascination with, and at times horror at the otherness of India. The French feminist Julie Kristeva's (1982, 1991) notion of abjection is particularly useful in thinking further about ambivalent nature of journeys into different cultures. The trope of ambivalence has been the subject of recent post-colonial theory that seeks to consider the nature of communication and empathic relations between self and other. As Len Ang says, 'It is important to examine these ambivalent moments because they have significant consequences for the prospect of our capability to be 'living with difference' (1996:41-2). While Ang speaks specifically of multiculturalism, she flags a broader post-colonial concern with exploring the ethical relations bound up with identity and belonging. This raises questions about the way in which otherness is constituted through travel as an inter-subjective encounter. For example, what does the ambivalent relation between Davidson and India suggest about the ways in which the traveller can know

difference and communicate with the other? Through Kristeva's (1982, 1991) work I explore the possibility of an inter-subjective relation that is both near and far, as a mode of *being with* others.

The Ambivalent Stranger

...I felt more at home here, more in love with life than I ever had in England. Whatever I thought about India, I would find myself, a minute later, thinking the exact opposite with equal conviction. Not for a moment did it allow relief from the discomforts of paradox. Not for a moment did it allow indifference. Robyn Davidson (1996:203)

India figures in Davidson's narrative as an object of her empathy or love, and then, as she suggests above, it becomes the object of her loathing. She feels on the one hand 'more at home' in this foreign place, yet she remains always estranged, not quite comfortably settled. The India of her imagination allows her no peace, she is constantly moving between extreme emotions in a state of ambivalence. Volatile moments of hate, rage and anxiety erupt repeatedly throughout her journey with the Rabari, disturbing her bounded and controlled sense of self. Davidson says, 'The words, "I hate India" did not fit with the person I thought I was' (1996:175). There is also a repeated reference to her inability to communicate through the Rabari language and she becomes 'suspended in a vast loneliness'. Ambivalence has a disturbing effect on the self, dislocating the traveller from the place of self certainty. The other fails to act as a mirror which would secure identity, instead there is a disturbing encounter with the subject's own projection of difference. A cultural strangeness which, in disrupting the inside/outside, self/other boundary inaugurates, what Kristeva (1982:14) terms, a narcissistic crisis - the abjection of self. Before we explore the nature of this abject state let us explore the complexity of Davidson's ambivalent identification with India, and specifically the Rabari.

The sensual images of desert landscapes seduce Davidson, and in turn her reader, into a complex romance with India. She says, 'A squiggle of smoke, a figure in billowing robes, a camel and a bed silhouetted themselves against the horizon. To the east a moon squeezed into the sky; behind me the sun dissolved in the Arabian Sea. This is where I wanted to be. These were the people I wanted to live with' (1996:83). This romanticised otherness exerts a powerful

hold over Davidson, generating a fantasy of finding the ideal Rabari community who will accept (and thus love) her as the stranger. When Davidson eventually finds the 'right' Rabari group, she describes the initial relation through the metaphor of kin-like connection. She says,

Despite the fact that it was impossible to sleep that night – coughing, bleating, gurgling, barking, snoring, sweating, slapping anopheles mosquitoes – I was for the first time, excited by what I was doing. Whatever the discomforts of dang life, here one could breathe. Here would be continuity, friendships. The women were up before first light and called me over for tea. (1996: 77).

Davidson desires to close the distance between self and other through the rhetorical use of 'real experience' in the representation of travel. It is a formulation of truth premised on a notion of empathy as living as the other does. She says, 'At least through the discomforts of my own body, through the exhaustion, illness and rage, I had an idea of how people really lived' (1996: 272). It is a desire for empathy, or nearness, which would allow her inside. This insideness would signify the loss of her outsideness, her difference as the stranger. This suggests a longing to be accepted into an unmediated relation with the other where they would become one, where she would become other. Yet, Davidson has moments of doubt about the absolute nature of this knowledge, 'but even if I had been able to speak his language, how much of Phagu's [Rabari elder] world would I have comprehended? Real travel would be able to see the world, even for an instant, with another's eyes' (1996: 152).

Davidson's empathy is structured by a desire for acceptance into a community of selves premised on a particular kind of inter-subjective relation, or love, that is figured through an imagined oneness. The love of the other is premised on a Judeo-Christian ideal of brotherly love as sameness; to love the other as oneself. The ambivalence in Davidson's narrative reveals the failure of such a notion of empathy as the basis of inter-subjective relations, as it implies a form of cultural narcissism. In the desire to know difference, cultural narcissism positions the other as an exotic commodity within an economy of sameness (you are different from me, my culture is the marker of a human norm). Judeo-Christian discourse abstracts differences between cultures, turning them into aberrations that can be overcome in the quest for a universal humanness. All differences are treated as the same under the authority of God, making it very difficult to love or

know the other as other, as irreducibly different from oneself. Kristeva (1991: 192) argues that such an appeal to human sameness relies on a debt to paternal and divine authority. Such notions of brotherly love or fraternity require a suspension of difference through an appeal to a universal sameness in the eyes of God: 'all men' (1991:84).

Ambivalence is an unthinkable position within such a theological tradition, for one must love the other absolutely, and without question as to the nature of the distinction which separates self from others. As Derrida says, 'One becomes a brother, in Christianity, one is worthy of the eternal father, only by loving one's enemies as one's neighbours or as oneself' (1997: 285). The virtue inherent in such models of friendship, or fraternity, is implicated in an economy of exchange, whereby the 'gift' of friendship procures the subject's own identity (or salvation). Empathy within such an economy of exchange is the means (as a desiring relation) by which the subject comes to know the other through a dissymmetry, as useful to oneself. Difference and contradictory emotions are something to be suppressed, rather than understood. Ambivalence then, is what an empathetic relation is supposed to overcome in the gesture of reconciling felt differences.

Freud (1963[1930]) contests such assumptions, and his contention lies with the historical failure of universal appeals to love, which he argues are connected to the prevalence of a death drive in destructive relations between individuals and nations. He raises the challenge of thinking love and hate together, and of rethinking the opposition in which hate comes to subsume love in a destructive hierarchical relation. In Freud's terms this relation informs the struggle of life and death instincts, and cannot be wished away through an idealised notion of empathic love. He says that the ideal of brotherly love is impossible to fulfil as it denies the force of the unconscious; 'such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not get rid of the difficulty' (1963[1950]: 80). Extending this notion Derrida suggests that the difficulty or ambivalence in self/other relations is connected with envy as the jealous desire for self certainty. He says, 'Love would be the attempt to leap beyond this envy. And the aggression whereby we *make an enemy*, whereby we make ourselves our own enemy, is only a reaction. It hides and reveals, at one and the same time, our vulnerability (1997: 281, original italics). The vulnerability of self, the dependence on the other for friendship, is revealed through the destabilising effect of ambivalence felt in empathic relations with the other.

Freud and Kristeva suggest that the ideal of loving the other as oneself is untenable because of the phenomenon of primary narcissism the other will always be implicated in the self's projections and infantile dramas. Empathy implies one can know the other by becoming the other momentarily, via the projection of self. To love the other as oneself is to exacerbate this narcissistic tendency, rather than encourage ways of knowing the other as other in its alterity (and the limits of that knowledge). In light of Freud's observations on the dynamic of love and hate, I argue that the opposite of love is not necessarily hate, rather it is indifference (an absence of desire or emotion). Davidson is profoundly caught up in an ambivalent relation with India because of the impossibility of feeling indifferent towards the other. She is subsumed by the desire to move closer to the other, and this in turn becomes a demand upon the other to obey her western logic. The question is then, how is one to negotiate the distance between self and other in order to maintain a respect for and understanding of difference?

From Empathy to Abjection

Davidson's fantasy of travelling with a nomadic community is an attempt to enact two seemingly opposite desires; the stability of feeling at home, as connectedness, and the freedom of movement, as autonomy. But India, it seems, will not remain the stable object of such desires, eluding her grasp and revoking her longing to belong, 'but India, how would I ever learn to decipher it, to be at home in it?' (1996: 164). Being 'at home' is associated with a mutual love, a feeling of oneness where communicative relations are somehow transparent. The Rabari culture and language, however, is an otherness she is unable to decipher. There exists a linguistic and cultural distance that cannot be overcome by her identification with, and love of, this imagined otherness. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1991:162) argues that cultural difference is not simply given, but in such circumstances the distinction is produced through a transference which constitutes the other. This is never simply a fixing of an alterity which would mirror back a self same identity. Rather, through the relations of love or hate there is an emotional intensification which also provokes movement within the self. Bhabha argues that cultural difference is not just given, but in such circumstances the distinction is produced through a transference which constitutes the other. This is never simply a fixing of an alterity that would mirror back a self-same identity. Rather, through the relations

of love or hate, there is an emotional intensification that also provokes the displacement of self same identity.

Kristeva says that it is in relations which are characterised by a profound ambivalence, that the desire for self sameness is disturbed, inaugurating what Kristeva calls a 'narcissistic crisis' (1982:15). She takes Freud's notion of primary narcissism further in relation to the experience of ambivalence, suggesting how the ego is always uncertain, fragile and threatened. In Davidson's narrative there are three particular instances in which her ambivalent relation to India becomes the undoing of identity and empathy for the other. I argue that Davidson's experience of profound ambivalence inaugurates a narcissistic crisis because of the nature of her desire to belong; to overcome difference and be one with the other.

Repetitions of Estrangement

Through her projections Davidson is caught in a repetition of estrangement, the imagined community she desires to feel at home in, is transfigured through fear and hostility. The urgency of her wish to become nearer to the other, fuels a growing frustration with the communicative distance that maintains her 'outsideness'. Fear subsumes her love for the other, fragmenting the fantasy of feeling at one with the Rabari community. She says,

When I woke each morning it was to dread. I must face them.
I must sit and eat with them. Sometimes they smiled at me or
laughed but I could not read their faces. They had no inkling what torture
it was to be unable to speak, unable to
order the world in any way, exposed and wretched in a place
where even the sky was strange. (1996:136)

The uncanny strangeness of the other haunts her narrative, and this anxiety appears through metaphors of engulfment, 'going under' in a sea of incomprehension (Freud, 1985). The Rabari otherness refuses to be held still, or to be domesticated by Davidson's 'desire to grasp the strange' (Kristeva, 1991:180). Kristeva suggests that it is not mere rivalry (as he associates it with the Oedipus complex) which is the source of ambivalence, but a more archaic relation with the maternal. The subject's first relation with the m/other is that which regulates identity through an economy of narcissism (Kristeva 1982:63). The fusional nature of self/mother relations generates boundary difficulties for the subject who negotiates dual desires for connection and autonomy. These

difficulties involve working out where the self and its desires end and the other's begin. It is the process of differentiation in which the emotions of love and hate are intertwined. Kristeva, in speaking of this earliest desire says it is, 'a narcissism laden with hostility and which does not yet know its limits. For we are dealing with imprecise boundaries in that place, at that moment, where pain is born out of an excess of fondness and a hate that, refusing to admit the satisfaction it also provides, is projected towards an other' (1982:60).

The first example I want to explore exemplifies this narcissistic tendency to project hatred onto the loved other, as Davidson's relationship with the Rabari shifts from an idealised communalism to an uneasy and precarious alliance. As her sense of isolation and loneliness grows on the journey with the Rabari, there is a change in the inter-subjective relationship. She says, 'What had begun as good will was atrophying for want of language to nourish it' (1996:134). Davidson reiterates her sense of a widening communicative gap between herself and the Rabari produces a profound instability, in which the other becomes the object of hate. This dissolution of self highlights the relation between speaking and identity, suggesting that language works to structure the affective dimension of inter-subjective relations rather than being a transparent means of communication. Davidson goes on to say, 'The desire to talk was like some fantastic hunger; they were my torturers, keeping the food just beyond reach' (1996:137). Her longing to speak English is described as a homesickness, a desire for the familiar, as she no longer recognises the other as kin.

Freud describes such experiences in terms of the persecution complex. He says, 'They (the paranoid), too, cannot regard anything in other people as indifferent, and they too, take up minute indications with which these other, unknown people present them, and use them in their 'delusions of reference'. The meaning of their delusions of reference is that they expect from all strangers something like love' (in Bhabha 1991:93). We see in Davidson's narrative a nostalgic desire to experience oneself whole again in a communal relation with the other. For Stewart (1984) such narrative longing is a nostalgic reiteration of an origin story concerning separation from the maternal, the mother tongue in this case. It is perpetual desire for reunion with one's origins, as the origin place comes to figure as stability amidst the crisis of self. For Davidson this is a fantasy of

belonging within an ideal home as a place of transparent communication, where all the subject's needs are understood and met by the m/other.

The Abject Self

Davidson's second narcissistic crisis is produced through her extreme ambivalence towards not only the Rabari but towards India itself. India is conjured metonymically through an abstraction of Davidson's horror; the poverty, waste, exploitation... as they unsettle her fantasy of community. She speaks of a vulnerable moment in which she cannot escape the other's curious look: an ironic reversal of the touristic gaze.

I wanted to be left alone. That was all. I walked around the town looking for a den to crawl into. I was followed by men who hissed and giggled. I found a stone and sat on it. A crowd gathered. I put my head into my hands and absented myself mentally. A few moments later I looked up and there, not a foot from my face, was a row of men's crotches. Above the crotches was a row of eyes looking at me in that dead way. A choking sensation filled my throat, burst behind my eyes. I began hurrying through the streets thinking I hate India, I hate India, I hate India.

Davidson (1996:174)

This desire to escape the others gaze leads into Davidson's feeling of revulsion about the street slums, undernourished children and stench of rotting waste. The gaze is objectifying and masculine, it works to disperse the boundaries of her self as an autonomous white woman. No longer is it her expelling India's otherness but rather, it is as Kristeva says, that 'I am expelled' (1982:4). Davidson encounters the abject within life as a profound sense of loss, of disconnection, with the desired other. She wonders where she is and why she is there at all, decentred by a stare which 'strips her of her humanity'. The other is no longer the benevolent source of community she once imagined. The eye of power is no longer her own, and she hates 'India' for pushing her empathy into despair and rage at her own profound dislocation. Kristeva makes an important observation of such experiences, 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982:4).

Kristeva argues that the abject is not simply a definable object, rather it is what is radically excluded and draws the self to a place where meaning collapses (1982:2). Abjection then is a feeling evoked by the unconscious whose contents

manifest in symbolic practices without necessarily being integrated into conscious judgement (Kristeva 1982:7). Kristeva argues that abjection requires thinking beyond Freud's notion of the unconscious as radically separate from consciousness. The object is something 'excluded' from consciousness, yet not enough to secure a differentiation between subject and object. Abjection then is something that emerges in between the self and its own otherness, and manifests in the ambiguous opposition of inside/outside.

Davidson encounters this sense of otherness, which attracts and repels at once but nevertheless has hold of her; she cannot remain indifferent. Kristeva argues that abjection 'preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be'(1982:10). It reveals the inaugural loss which laid the foundations of being, the basis of desire and the phenomenon of exclusion (1982:5). Abjection is connected to the state of fusion with the maternal body, prior to the formation of 'I' through identification; as such it is a 'precondition of narcissism' (1982:12). Abjection then, is implicit in the formation of identity and its undoing. Unable to identify or grasp the object, Davidson projects onto India her 'violent mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost' (Kristeva 1982:15). The other constantly slips through her own projections to reveal a disturbing strangeness, a difference she cannot accommodate within herself. Davidson cannot bridge the gap between self and other, she remains within the ambivalent bind of the narcissistic self steeped in a sense of lack.

When discussing the lack that motivates desire Kristeva argues that the object of this desire is irretrievable, and while nostalgic, it nevertheless points towards the conditions of desire itself as always based upon an absent otherness. The denial of loss in separation, Kristeva argues, may generate a fear of being autonomous and alone, rather than an Hegelian sense of mastery. At the basis of abjection there is a fear of aloneness, or perhaps more significantly, a loneliness felt in the failure of communicative relations. Davidson speaks of this fear of being alone in her desire to become closer to the other,

How comforting it must be to pass through life's storms always with the support of the group infusing every action and every thought with one voice extending from the time of one's ancestor's down through the

generations, saying, 'It's all right. We are all here. There is no such thing as alone'. (1996:133)

Davidson's sense of abjection is heightened by the realisation that the other eludes her, that it is irretrievable. Yet unable to let the fantasy go she is caught in a ceaseless to and fro movement of love and hate; a limbo of restless motion. The more she strives to be nearer the other, the further her identification pushes her away. For it is an identification premised on a wish for sameness, to belong to 'one voice', as she says above. This profound ambivalence towards India is the effect of an encounter with her own split subjectivity, her own abjection; the silence which breaches her communicative relation with the other. A gap or breach within discourse, as the absence against which meaning emerges, is an incompleteness which reveals the impossible fantasy of wholeness and the projections of perfect harmony with others.

There is a third moment in the journey in which Davidson's narcissism is mirrored back, provoking a crisis of identity. Davidson realises the impossibility of her all consuming passion for the other; she acknowledges her own profound strangeness, and in turn the other's alterity. Towards the end of her journey, Davidson observes another woman walking conspicuously through the market place, 'I had realised then, with an unpleasant little shock, that no matter how deep my identification with this country went, I would always be seen as alien' (1996:219). Such moments work to displace Davidson's narrative intention of representing the other's reality through writing her experience of nearness, uncontaminated by her own outsideness.

Davidson repeatedly questions the nature of her desire throughout her journey. She asks, 'Where am I? Why am I doing this?' (1996:102,141). Finding that she can't give up, and being driven to arrive at the meaning of her journey, she speaks of unconscious forces which move her to know; 'Always I'd been driven by a compulsion to make contact with the world, to be as aware of my life as I could be, to wrestle meaning out of event - and that compulsion lay at the heart of everything I did' (1996:124). There are numerous references to this 'Protestant' drivenness and inferences to the guilt that feels in failing her goal. The journey is relentlessly hard, lonely and at times meaningless, but she says, 'I had to keep going. I had to. But keeping going had no meaning' (1996:265). And 'There was a deeper motive for the prolonging of self punishment; the quest for meaning, of which, so far, this curious journey had remained void' (1996:182). Such metaphors suggest that Davidson's journey is structured by a

redemptive longing which moves her to endure a near dissolution of self in the quest for the truth of self mirrored in the other.

Redemptive Longing

Davidson's story is a redemption narrative in which travel figures as a practice of atonement, a working of the self, driven by the desire to save (through writing) the other, and in doing so earn her own salvation. Matthews (1968:56) identifies the religious metaphor of the 'hard journey' as it exists within literature of the West. He cites Dante's pilgrim, undertaking a rite of passage through fear and sin, in which travel figures as a movement of purification. The journey is driven by a dream of blissful reunion with God, a fantasy of recovering lost innocence and the discovery of a transcendental truth (Matthews 1968:65).

Through similar metaphors, Davidson's journey becomes a means of expiating a sense of guilt associated with the difference that separates self and other.

Davidson uses metaphors of heaviness - the weight of guilt - to describe her self; '..one carries oneself like a heavy old suitcase where ever one goes' (1996:102). So she must escape her original home in order to feel at home elsewhere, to pursue the fantasy of arriving at the plenitude of oneness again. If we pursue the notion of travel as atonement further, we discover that atonement is a wish for reconciliation, derived from a notion of at-one-ment (Hastings et al 1924:71)..

Davidson's abjection is an effect of being unable to communicate or put into (the other's) words her experience of the journey. In conceptualising abjection as an alterity which provokes the movement of self, Kristeva asks 'is it not that which characterises writing?'. Davidson's metaphors of coming 'adrift' or 'going under' beneath an 'incomprehensible ocean' of difference, are an attempt to grasp the unsignifiable. Kristeva argues, in a reading of Joyce, that it is the word which discloses the abject, and at the same time it is the word which purifies the self from the abject (1982:23). It is not until she returns home and is writing the travel narrative retrospectively that the word is able to purify the abject. Writing figures as the means of salvation, a redemption earned through an economy of words which attempt to give order to the frightening sense of abjection which haunts her travels. The abject shatters the earlier romantic image of belonging within the Rabari group, and generates a profound sense of failure. She asks, 'For a long time now I could not see how to write about my experiences. They were nothing but a series of disconnected events without a shape, without meaning. I had passed through India as a knife does through ice and it had closed behind

me at every step. How does one write about failure?' (1996:275). It could be argued that one writes about failure through a desire for catharsis and the reconciliation of ambivalent emotions.

Through writing Davidson attempts a reconciliation within the self and concludes her redemptive narrative with reference to the hardship she has endured as the means of becoming nearer to the other. In this way the difficult 'reality' of the journey stands in opposition to her initial 'romanticism', which it ultimately becomes part of. She speaks of this empathic experience of the other's reality, 'At least this had truth in it. At least, through the discomforts of my own body, through the exhaustion and illness and rage, I had an idea of how people really lived' (1996:272). For Davidson this notion of authenticity is construed as an immediate truth which is stripped bare of projection and imagination. I would argue that it is itself produced through a fantasy of redemption where the suffering of the body is equated with the acquisition of the truth of the other as it mirrors the self. Understanding between self and other, or empathy, in this Judeo-Christian narrative is premised solely on a negative relation. Pain in this instance is the signifier of the cost, of earning self certainty in an economy ordered by a desire for presence. Davidson does not get rid of her romantic narrative, rather it becomes a story in which she is positioned ambivalently as the anti-heroine who struggles but fails to acquire knowledge of the other, and thus her own self certainty.

Davidson's wish to ravel exists in a complex relation to her desire to write, to represent the truth of her experience of how the other lives. Her projections of the other are implicated in the economic demands of writing travel for western consumption, which stem from the fantasy of knowing the other as a mirror of self. Kristeva (1982:34) refers to such a desire to know everything as *epistemophilic*: as a wish to know what seems to be lacking in oneself. Davidson's failure to secure this knowledge can be read as a narrative in which cultural difference eludes fixing as the object of western desire. Her story, then, foregrounds a problematic about how we understand the effects of our fleeting encounters with other cultures and the displacement of western modes of knowing.

The Being with of Laughter

...one never laughs alone, one laughs at oneself through the other

or, better yet, at oneself as other...We laugh not only at the other, but also with the other, as others do, all together reunited in one laughter...

Borch-Jacobsen (1998: 162-3, original italics)

In this section I examine the fleeting moments of connection Davidson experiences with the Rabari as examples which counter abjection, and reinscribe the cultural relation through a different communication or knowing. As Borch-Jacobsen says in the quotation above, laughter is the means where by we break from our self sameness in the paradox of recognising ourselves in the other. We are different, yet something about our shared humanness joins us in the recognition of our commonality. Laughter shatters the subjects preoccupation with self and hence cultural narcissism. While Davidson's sense of failure dominates her narrative, it is evidence of how a structure of desire premised on cultural narcissism also fails. However, *Desert Places* is not a singular narrative, there are certain moments that offer the reader a glimmer of what a different relation might mean. A relation which is not free of ambivalence, but recognises the paradoxical nature of the inter-subjective relation premised on differentiation and communication. Laughter is a means of unsettling the oppositions of self and other steeped in emotions such as hatred, as well as, the longing to belong premised on a narcissistic love of the other. Such moments enable us to glimpse a mode of 'being with' others, that stands in contrast to Davidson's earlier form of empathy.

Davidson speaks in a different tone, of the nature of this communicative gap between self and other. There is a desire which stretches between self and other, as a labile connection unable to be forced or consciously determined but emerges through an openness to difference. There is a tone of humility in Davidson's narrative, a recognition of the other's power to move the self, which stands in contrast to an arrogance underlying her aggressive outbursts. She says, 'What is it, this force of attraction, that leaps across every barrier that humans have been able to construct? In situations like this, when you are receptive to the point of rawness, you become acutely aware of it' (1996:123).

An inter-subjective relation emerges in counter the abjection that Davidson has remained engulfed in, yet it is equally difficult to represent. Davidson speaks of the way the Rabari extended themselves toward her, breaking into the blackness of her self absorption;

The goodwill in particular kinds of smiles, the ability to extend themselves for others without any expectation of gratitude: these aspects of their humanity had the power to haul me back out of the pit. I would find myself chuckling with them, almost against my will, until affection returned like fresh air behind a storm. (1996:150).

The abject, which provoked Davidson's writing is contained within the narrative order of events, we feel it bordering all that she can say, even those moments of laughter. Yet, is it humour which counters the negativity of abjection and shifts Davidson's projections from hate to affection, allowing another understanding of difference. As she says, 'It was for this, their use of laughter as a survival tactic, that I most admired them' (1996:151). Kristeva argues that laughing is 'a way of placing or displacing abjection' (1982:8). For it is a flash of connection across the abyss, a significance generated not necessarily through language but the sharing of a comic interpretation of life from different, but coinciding positions.

Kristeva (1982:141) speaks of the 'necessity of going through abjection', of facing the void - our own abyss in order that we may find ways of being separate and thus able to live in relation with others. This is a very different sense of endurance to Davidson's Protestant drivenness, which is in effect a repetition of hardship rather than a moving through. Cixous (1991:124) also speaks of the passage of descent into one's own otherness, as that which Christianity ascribes the negative connotation of 'hell'. Such a movement through this abject place Cixous argues, involves the crossing of borders which separate and connect the self with others. It is these separations and non-separations which are at the basis of all our archaic and poetic experiences (Cixous 1991:124). To traverse the abject is to potentially refigure the boundaries which constitute the narcissistic self, shifting the conditions through which desire emerges. Abjection serves to expose the destructive narcissism in which the other is called upon to fill the subject's own lack. This lack is implicated in a horror at the self's fundamental separateness, as it is marked in Davidson's narrative by the other's difference.

Kristeva and Cixous suggest that in order to live in relation to the others difference, the subject must also be able to live in relation to themselves, to their own strangeness. This is an inner region which remains unmapped and irreconcilable, as it is premised on ambivalent desires; for autonomy and separateness as well as belonging and connection. The passage through

abjection is then not one of mastery, as Davidson discovered the self inevitably fails in the desire to grasp otherness and secure self certainty. It is instead a movement in which otherness passes through the self, transforming the very boundaries which define the inter-subjective relation.

Derrida (1998: 107) argues through his reading of French philosopher and Surrealist Georges Bataille, that laughter bursts the boundaries of meaning, disrupting an Hegelian economy of desire premised on an abstract negativity (see Botting and Wilson, 1998). Bataille says laughter is contagious, a profoundly social experience. Laughter is not negative because it exceeds dialectics, it is absent in Hegel's economy of life aimed at conservation and the accumulation of Knowledge. He argues that, "communication" cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: it requires beings who have put the being within themselves *at stake*, have placed it at the limit of death, of nothingness' (in Derrida, 1998:115, original italics). The question of communication raised by Bataille opens up the possibility of moving in relation to difference through a respect for alterity, and not just in the quest for recognition as that informs the Hegelian desire to belong.

Kristeva argues that a denial of one's own inner strangeness, leads to the disavowal of external difference. Because in confronting that which is foreign or strange to the self, we experience the possibility, or not, of '*being an other*' (1991:13). That is, we experience a moment of recognition or negation in our relation with the other's cultural difference, potentially producing a more positive desire. As Kristeva says, 'It is not simply - humanistically - a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself' (1991:13). Implicit in this call for new understandings of cultural relations, is a different notion of empathy. In Davidson's situation empathy, as a movement towards the other, is also connected to guilt about the distance between. Empathy in this sense figures as the emotional bridge between self and other, yet as I have argued it's formulation within the Judeo-Christian tradition is profoundly problematic in terms of recognising otherness.

There are moments when Davidson is able to experience 'being with' the other, through a sense of connection different to a Judeo-Christian notion of empathy. For it implies not a standing in the place of the other, but remaining the stranger who shares a sense of human connection while allowing the others uniqueness.

It is a sense of 'being with' others which allows the space of difference to be experienced as a mutual strangeness. A strangeness which while always far from the self also has within it a sense of nearness or commonality. As Simmel says, 'to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation, it is a specific form of interaction' (1950;403). The positive moment here is a reference to the formation of friendship as a mode of negotiating between self and other. It is, as Stephen Muecke observes, the beginning moment of something different. He says,

Something new begins when the answer the local gives is not forced into a universal language of rationality in order to have an understanding determined by this interrogator from a more powerful place. Something new begins if such interrogators have to invest something of their subjectivity, if they have to negotiate, change, and learn to belong.

Muecke (1997:184)

However, such a relation is glimpsed only in moments when the striving for nearness ceases; in the recognition of alterity there is a different knowledge generated. In Kristeva's words such connection occurs when 'meeting balances wandering', where there is a mutual recognition of difference in rituals of sharing, in the 'cosmopolitanism of a moment' (1991:11). Such a moment can be observed in laughter where we identify ourselves with the other. Yet, the nature of this being-with creates a third term or inbetween self and other, which exceeds both. Borch-Jacobsen speaks of the way this relation, '...gathers us together around our own loss, our own death. All of which, obviously, cannot take place unless we let ourselves go, unless *we ourselves* burst out in laughter' (1998:150, original italics). There is, in the moment of experiencing difference, one's own and the other's, a shared sense of the absurdity of life lived in proximity to death and loss. Laughter works to alleviate the tension implicit in the subject's ambivalent holding onto life, meaning and identity as somehow fixed and masterable. To laugh is to lose the serious investment in oneself, through engaging in a moment of lightness with the other.

Kristeva argues that to move beyond cultural narcissism difference must be the starting point, for the stranger is within me, hence we are all strangers to ourselves. Otherness is framed not in terms of self as centre and other as different but same, and neither is it a matter of difference as simply relative in a universal sense. Rather, the strange is something other we always negotiate through its specificity, for it always signifies the 'improper' part of ourselves; our

own split subjectivity. Kristeva suggests that, 'It is through unravelling transference - the major dynamics of otherness, of love/hatred for the other, I become reconciled with my own otherness-foreignness, that I play on it and live by it...as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable' (1991:182). Perhaps it is through the ironic distance of laughter that a relation of near and far may be glimpsed, as it displaces the tendency toward cultural narcissism and hence the intensification of ambivalent projections. To laugh at oneself, is to break the binds of abjection that work to fix the self within an identity that privileges sameness through an idealisation of difference.

Concluding Remarks

Marked by the ceaseless movement between a love for, and hate of, India's otherness, *Desert Places* is a disturbing travel narrative. The violence of Davidson's reaction to India, at times frightening in its narcissistic repetition, unsettles the confessional tone which invites the readers identification. It is a compelling story because of the constant ambivalence produced through a particular desire to intimately know the other; to be so near as to belong to one voice. Yet, Davidson finds in the absence of the mediating work of a shared language, anxiety and misunderstanding erupt in her everyday encounters into what Kristeva (1982) calls a 'narcissistic crisis'. Haunted by a profound sense of disconnection and loneliness, she experiences a state of abjection arising out of an ambivalent wish to belong. As a violent mourning for the other who remains ever a far, the journey is one long struggle to reconcile the emotions of a fascinated love for, and a loathing of difference. In her desire to belong, to become intimately part of the Rabari culture, Davidson remains irreconcilably the stranger. Through the other she encounters the strangeness of her self, its conflictual and contradictory impulses.

Within the failing of Davidson's nostalgic desire to become one with the Rabari and thus secure her own acceptance through belonging, she importantly identifies the irreducible difference of each culture. A difference that refuses to be reified, or held still, just as it cannot be dissolved or wished away. While the theme of ambivalence is the dominant trajectory in Davidson's story, there are also experiences which counter the narrative of estrangement and disconnection. These are particular instances of connection between herself and the Rabari, which in Simmel's (1950:407) words involves a relation of 'near and far at once'. These moments stand in contrast to ambivalence as a movement

between near *and* far, where difference is negated in a desire for an absolute proximity or empathic knowledge of the other. This sense of nearness is premised on a narcissistic desire for the same. Moments of stillness emerge unexpectedly, through relinquishing the desire to possess a knowledge of the other. It suggests a mode of 'being with' others as a form of knowing as communicating, negotiating, accepting the other on their own terms. Within Davidson's narrative these moments generate an alternative trajectory of belonging; a story of a desire for otherness which starts, as Kristeva says (1982), from the recognition that we are always strangers to ourselves.

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