

BOOK REVIEWS

ILHA DO DESTERRO

REVIEWS/RESENHAS

In and Out of “Oursel” Review of Fabian, Johannes. *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.

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The cover illustration of *Out of Our Minds* is a detail from a painting by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, the Congolese “painter-historian” whom the anthropologist Johannes Fabian met in 1973-74. It is part of a broader series of paintings which Tshibumba conceived to tell the history of his country and it is entitled “Livingstone in Katanga.” Reproduced in the impressive *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (1996), the original painting narrates, with the help of a French subtitle, the meeting between Livingstone and a caravan of Katanga villagers carrying copper ingots. On the cover, we do not see the rest of the caravan: the famous explorer of central Africa, dressed in white and wearing a pith helmet, writes in a notebook in front of an African with a stick in his right hand and a copper ingot in his left hand. In his history of Zaire/Congo, Tshibumba also documents the memory of the Eu-

ropean exploration of central Africa. His perspective remains unique as he unfolds the different moments of his country’s history, projecting onto a series of images the processes of constructing a national collectivity in the context of complex cross-cultural flows. It is not by chance that Fabian remembers Tshibumba’s paintings in an endnote following this sentence: “Be it dream or nightmare, the exploration of central Africa is still with us whenever we recall it in popular memory or academic historiography” (52). According to Fabian, Tshibumba “documents popular memory of exploration when he condenses African recollections in images that appear to be inspired by the European myth of exploration. He depicts African versions of first encounters and covers the gamut of possibilities when he opposes Livingstone and Stanley as two extremes” (291). If Tshibumba represents an African perspective on exploration, in *Out of Our Minds* Fabian draws upon a broad corpus of travelogues in order to have a look at what one might call the European perspective.

The period which Fabian covers ranges “from the last quarter of the nineteenth through the first decade of the twentieth century” (14), more specifically from 1874 to 1909. Its main characteristic is the passage from exploration to occupation as the dominant aspect of Europe’s relationship with Africa. Focusing on six German expeditions spon-

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sored by the German Society for the Exploration of Equatorial Africa, seven Belgian expeditions sponsored by the International African Association, three travels to the Congo Free State and two other expeditions led by British and Portuguese explorers, Fabian takes a deep look at the threshold between exploration and occupation in the process of colonialism.

The corpus of works does not include authors such as Livingstone, Cameron, Stanley, and other famous explorers. Fabian sought out less known travelogues by authors such as Jérôme Becker (1850-1912), Camille Coquilhat (1853-1891), Paul Pogge (1838-1884), Herman Wissmann (1853-1905), and Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), among others. He explains what is the common ground that gathers all these travelers as *dramatis personae* (17) of *Out of Our Minds*: “the tension between imagination and observation, between desire and disinterested research, between devotion to ideals and the pursuit of pragmatic goals, had to be maintained if exploration was to be initiated and carried out. It was as a catch basin of all these features – personal, scientific, economic, and political – not just as a geomorphological feature, that the Congo Basin can be said to have defined the space for exploration that united the various accounts we will examine” (16-17).

In “Travel, Exploration, and Occupation,” Fabian describes travel as an operation involving European explorers, their mostly African auxiliaries (from

domestic servants to porters and soldiers) and their African as well as Asian (Indian and Arab) intermediaries (from interpreters to guides), including sometimes their wives or temporary partners, as well as animals and many objects (from weapons to so-called “ethnographic objects”). Exploration was a matter of movement as well as of stillness, be it because the travelers needed to stop due to local politics, be it because they wanted to stop due to assignments such as the establishment of stations. While the myth of exploration projects an image of heroic and solitary travelers opening up the unknown, expeditions moved through space as European-centered multicultural caravans that dwelt upon previous structures of financial and logistical support, configuring what Fabian calls “a veritable travel industry” operating on both African coasts and run mostly by Asians but also by Europeans (33). As Fabian puts it: “If these emissaries of imperialism and missionaries of a superior civilization had one pervasive experience, it was of dependency” (276) on things (raising problems of logistics), on people (raising problems of communication), on the weather, and on their own bodies and minds, which were subjected to expectations of self-control as a condition for the control of others.

In its manifold dimensions, control is both a personal and a political issue that manifests itself in a regime of tropical hygiene. In the process of European colonialism in Africa, the concept of hygiene plays an important role, because

of its "religious roots", in the communication "between colonization's religious and secular discourses" (291). From the logistics of exploration (its expeditions and caravans, its stations) to what Marcel Mauss called "techniques of the body"; from language learning, communication and the various forms of relationship with Africans (be it leadership or friendship) to the stance towards cultural difference (in its noises and sounds, in its things and spectacles); from memory and other psychic phenomena to the practices of knowledge production; from the measurement of time with clocks and calendars to habits of feeding, drinking, cleaning etc. – every dimension of the explorers' lives were potential objects of the regime of tropical hygiene.

Hygiene as a regime of controls dealing with the conditions of life in tropical Africa involves both concerns for the body and its health – admonishing cleanliness as a sign of discipline – and prescriptions for the mind and its sanity – admonishing the distant and disembodied practice of science as a sign of self-control. The concept of tropical hygiene ends up acquiring a broader historical reach (that links it to later phases of colonialism) as well as a transversal application (to both sides of the colonial situation): "Especially in later phases of European penetration, tropical hygiene was one of the most explicit means by which colonial powers exercised their regime, controlling colonizers as well as colonized" (78). In the travelogues, fever emerges as the negation of hygiene:

"FEVER (often capitalized in the sources), far from being regarded as just a medical condition and a reaction of the immune system to multiple causes, became essentialized as the ecstatic counterstate to ascetic hygiene. Fever was an ideology, a myth needed to make sense of the mortal dangers of exploration, a metaphor giving meaning to what would otherwise have remained brutal facts." (61)

By means of a careful, if maybe fragmentary, portrait of travel as a way of life in Africa – between the tropics, its perceived or imagined dangers, its seductions and promises, on the one hand, and the regime of hygiene, its controls, its rules and directives, on the other hand – Fabian dismantles the myth of exploration and gradually approaches "a simple two-pronged question: *is* science a controlled practice, and *should* science be a controlled practice?" (278-79). Although scientific knowledge is usually thought of as a controlled and disembodied practice of reason and rationality is usually thought of "as outside and above historical contexts" (4), Fabian interrogates knowledge as embodied and contextualized practice. Seen through the travelogues, the exploration of central Africa is, for Fabian, "a historical detour toward critical reflection on the processes of ethnographic knowledge," within a history of anthropology's "ways of searching, that is, of the practices of knowledge production and presentation" (10). Ethnography inherits exploration and it is this inheritance that Fabian, revisiting the complex and

widely discussed issue of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism, seeks to interrogate.

If, on the one hand, science requires control and participates in the regime of tropical hygiene, on the other hand it is not the only dimension of knowledge. Based on an acknowledgement of “negativity as a condition of knowledge” (10) and on a dialectical approach, Fabian argues that control must be thought of as “an assertion that must include its negation” (279) and proposes that such negation be called ecstasis: “it is not the theoretical, logical opposite of control but becomes its pragmatic and existential negation” (279).

Those questions are developed throughout the book’s chapters. “Living and Dying” approaches the travelers’ reports about illnesses and medicines and their ideas about death. It includes notes on the uses of opiates and alcohol (ranging from medicinal purposes to forms of getting “out of our minds”) and comments on conviviality and friendship as forms of potentially open interaction as well as means to accomplish socio-political objectives.

In “Drives, Emotions, and Moods,” sex and eroticism are seen as forms of relationship with Africans that trap Europeans between the ecstatic seductions of the tropics and the rational injunctions of the regime of tropical hygiene. The tropics also hide dangers, but the “images of a dangerous wilderness that belong to the myth of intrepid travel do not fit the prosaic realities encountered

by our explorers” (88). Confronting insects – in the place of the mythic wild animals that threaten the explorers – and hunger and thirst as fundamental experiences of exploration, the travelers’ heroism becomes a mixture of moods and feelings: “Bliss and despair, elation and depression often were close companions”, writes Fabian (94). Humor and laughter show up in “five kinds of evidence”: reports on humor and laughter among Africans; reports on what made the travelers laugh about Africans; reflections on humor as a measure of hygiene; reflections on the usefulness of humor and laughter in communicating with Africans; and the use of the discursive modes of irony, parody, and caricature. Shared laughter between Europeans and Africans becomes the object of tropical hygiene: “European humor is safe behind an enclosure that marks resistance to the pull that Africa exercised on the minds of explorers – the thousand ways to absorb its sounds, sights, smells, and tastes, the countless temptations to join in feasts and conversations” (101).

“Things, Sounds, and Spectacles” addresses the issue of the material culture of exploration, from the repertoire of objects that traveled with the caravans since the beginning to the diversity of so-called “ethnographic objects” that were to be collected by each expedition. The fictions of African fetishism must be linked to the facts of European obsession for collecting. Colonial encounters were occasions for the staging of identity by means of objects deployed

in veritable moving museums. In this staging, musical instruments and the playing of music "reveals what the exhibition of objects may hide", for music "is a performance demanding a sharing of time, based on the co-presence of participants in an event" (109). Nevertheless, tropical hygiene imposes itself as a refusal to this sharing of time, a "denial of coevalness" (Fabian, *Time and the Other*). Performance and rituals appear in the travelogues as mainly African phenomena, ascribing theatricality to Africans, but it is necessary to recognize exploration as theater, imperialism as "a theatrical enterprise": "The drama had its heroes and villains and a grand plot called the *oeuvre civilisatrice*" (121).

In "Communicating and Commanding," language comes to the foreground. Because language learning needs time and presupposes an anti-hygienic "surrender to a way of speaking rather than its control" (130), interpreters were absolutely necessary. Scientific method, as part of the regime of tropical hygiene, also included the practice of literally collecting vocabularies and texts (dialogues, myths etc.), objectifying language and instrumentalizing knowledge for the political goals of colonialism. Indeed, the question of politics is crucial, for "communicating occurs in contexts of power that range from rhetoric to violence" (141). Leadership and authority often involved a shift from rhetoric to violence. Indeed, the performative aspect of violence is crucial in the history of colonialism and it constitutes the link between communicating and command-

ing that inhabited the enterprise of exploration and remains one of the main predicaments of ethnography nowadays. In the travelogues, as well as in ethnography, knowledge about Others results from interaction and communication across cultural boundaries, in the context of power relations and circumstances that need to be acknowledged as constitutive dimensions of that knowledge.

Throughout all these and the other chapters of the book, Fabian produces a double critique of the myth of exploration: on the one hand, he questions the myth as an abstraction that "calls for deconstructive literary analysis," addressing "the limits and faults of representation" (5); on the other, he questions the myth as an extract whose "active ingredients" potentially affect ethnography in its modern ideas and practices, calling for an antidote "distilled... from a contemporary counterstory" (5).

"Charisma, Cannabis, and Crossing Africa: Explorers in the Land of Friendship" disturbs in many ways the myth of exploration by focusing on an impressive moment of the passage from exploration to occupation of Africa: the encounters with the *bene diamba*, "the children of hemp," who lived in the land of *lubuku*, "friendship," or *moyo*, "life" (151). Fabian asks: "Who were these Bashilange, sometimes simply called Luba, and what was hidden, literally and metaphorically, behind ominous clouds of hemp smoke?" (160). Surrounded by an atmosphere of "myths,

partial truths, and outright fabrications" (156), "the children of hemp" are an ecstatic cult or movement of the Bashilange, a people led by Kalamba Mukenge and Sangula Meta (brother and sister). Fabian warns: "We cannot, and need not, try to reduce this confusion of observation, hearsay, and speculation to a coherent picture." (160). Fabian describes the movement's iconoclasm towards African traditions: undoing many preconceived images of savage Africa, this portrait shows the Bene Diamba as an "invented tradition" that developed around hemp, constructed by the charismatic leaders Mukenge and Meta as "a cultural and political symbol" (163), against "a tradition of endemic warfare, executions, and (alleged) human sacrifice and cannibalism" (163). What is at stake here is a critique of colonial ideology and the role of anthropology in the construction of primitive savagery as opposed to modern civilization. Fabian suggests that the incorporation of two travelers (Wissmann and Pogge) in the hemp cult can be read as "a paradigmatic event, expressive of the potential of ecstatic experiences, and a glimpse at a utopian meeting of the West and Africa on equal terms. Of course, eventually control took over" (279), the Bene Diamba ended up playing an important role in the passage from exploration to occupation as forms of the European colonization of Africa.

The dialectics of control and ecstasis becomes the frame through which exploration and ethnography can be related to each other: "I want to under-

stand metonymic connections between exploration and ethnography. There are contiguous, albeit not necessarily continuous, links between past and present research practices and discursive habits." (240)

In "Making Knowledge: The Senses and Cognition," Fabian argues that "the explorers of central Africa shared a conception of science as natural history" (181) and this resulted in a denial of other forms of knowledge: "alternative conceptions of knowledge – historical or aesthetic – were, if not ignored, assigned a low status" (181). Two main activities constitute the practice of science in this perspective: measuring and collecting. Observing, naming, classifying, and mapping must be added to the picture of the daily scientific activities of the explorers. The conception of science as natural history that underlies the myth of scientific exploration assumes the superiority of vision, what Fabian (1983) called "visualism." The other senses become sources of uncertainty, disturbing the "cultural ideal" of the "objective gaze" (186). Thus, hygiene applies to hearing, smell, taste, and touch, but leaves vision out of its regime of controls. Within this epistemological and pragmatic context, ethnographic knowledge was produced within a double bind: "explorers who subscribed to ideals of ethnographic knowledge of other peoples based on meeting them as human subjects *and* tried to follow positivist rules of observing Africans as objects of natural history faced contradictions and, in-

deed, existential tensions and anxieties" (183).

"Making Sense: Knowledge and Understanding" addresses the gap between sense and knowledge: "The sense we make of things affirms and supports us; knowledge changes us" (227). He approaches the way in which the travelers made sense of exploration: their motives for traveling (science, sports, adventure) and their explanations for what they found in Africa that contradicted received ideas (with focus on three *topoi*: race, magic, and cannibalism); their capacity of recognition (as cognition, memory, and acknowledgement) and aesthetic judgments; their ways of overlooking contradiction and maintaining their sanity.

"Presence and Representation" addresses the complex issue of the relationship between experience and representation. Genre emerges as a crucial question not only regarding the travelogues as literature but also regarding practices of knowledge production. Generic constraints and orientations mediate between the general and the specific and thus frame any reading of the travelogues. Composed to be published in metropolitan contexts, the travelogues imply a juxtaposition or combination of texts of different (sub)genres: from diaries and transcriptions of native texts and dialogues – configuring writing as a common activity of the travelers, as Tshibumba's painting of "Livingstone in Katanga" suggests – to the adventure of jungle stories or the comicality of an-

ecdotes – reminding us of reading (especially literature) and its role in exploration as well as in ethnography. But travelogues were not all about words and travels were not all about reading and writing. Visual images play an important role in keeping the myth of exploration alive and they were part of the routine of any expedition and often illustrated the travelogues. Although Fabian warns the reader that he failed to provide detailed interpretations of the imagery of exploration, he formulates interesting questions: "What, we may ask, are our habits of 'reading' illustrations in travelogues? Do we really stop and ponder semiotic messages and relations? Or do we let pictures affect us as much as the type-setting, the paper, or the binding do, that is, as material, sensual aspects of a book? If the latter is the case, we may find in the illustration of travelogues an aspect of the presentation of knowledge that resisted rational control" (261). Hiding and revealing at the same time, illustrations carry the same tensions and contradictions that constitute the practice of exploration and mark the texts of the travelogues. Nevertheless, looking at the "practices of illustrating exploratory travel," Fabian suggests that, however contradictory illustrations could be, they gave the travelogues "an aura of realism and credibility that smoothes over the rough spots, breaks, and outright contradictions" of the texts (265).

The myth of scientific exploration – its practices of knowledge production and its ways of making sense of colonialism

– depends on this smoothing over of contradictions in order to project the rationality of colonization. Indeed, as Fabian writes, “if our thesis holds – that the myth of exploration has been a centerpiece among the images of Western rationality – it follows that a critique of that myth should and could be ... a critique of reason” (275). Indeed, this double critique of myth and reason belongs to the history of iconoclasm: “an ecstatic element of social and political critique” (270).

To articulate the critique of the myth of exploration and the critique of reason, Fabian emphasizes “contradiction rather than contestation, though the two are of course related” (6) – and this emphasis epitomizes the differences between his and Mary Louise Pratt’s study of travel writing. Fabian maps “a pattern of incongruities and contradictions” in the travelogues: “our aim is to find out what got explorers into contradictions, regularly and predictably, not to note random or accidental occurrences” (121). Nevertheless, one of the strengths of Fabian’s approach consists in “documenting the chaotic” (197) and he constantly reminds the reader of the absence of consistent and conventional patterns in the travelogues, from their titles (244) to their illustrations (258). And while he states that “random or accidental occurrences” are not what he seeks to document, he notes and documents them as part of the chaotic – and ecstatic – aspect of exploration.

Emphasizing contradiction and documenting the chaotic, *Out of Our Minds*

tracks down the ecstatic in the exploration of central Africa. Understood as an epistemological concept, ecstasis is not so much a kind of behavior (such as religious practices of trance) but “a dimension or quality of human action and interaction – one that creates a common ground for the encounters” (8). This common ground can be created by conviviality, music, performance, friendship, sexual and erotic relationships, palm wine and maize beer, hemp. Indeed, when Fabian identifies the recurrent topos of the encounter between a European explorer – representing science, reason, civilization – and the African chief (real or presumed) – representing his society and appearing in a state of inebriation, caused by drinking and occasionally deepened by smoking hemp – he gathers evidence showing that the European explorers frequently were also “out of their minds” due to many possible causes: alcohol, opiates, medicines such as quinine and arsenic etc. Ecstasis is the pragmatic and existential (rather than theoretical and logical) negation of (self-)control (279). It “can be an act as well as a state” (8) of “stepping outside” or “being outside” of oneself, of one’s own identity and reason – in the case of the explorers, ecstasis is related to stepping and being outside of “the rationalized frames of exploration, be they faith, knowledge, profit, or domination” (8).

The title of the book raises the question of stepping or being outside one’s self: the expression “Out of our minds” assumes a collective subject position and

it is possible to read the whole book from the point of view of a single, however hugely complex and manifold, question: Who are “we”? Whose minds are those? A direct answer to that question could be: “we” may refer to the European explorers who wrote the travelogues that Fabian interrogates. Gradually broadening the focus, “we” may also refer to their European readership, to Europe not only as a geographical but as a geopolitical concept (in order to include its well-succeeded offspring, so to speak), and finally to the West as collective subject position and ideological projection that inhabits the travelogues as a sort of prevailing myth.

If “in Western thought – if we may use this summary notion to cover a vast variety of individual and collective processes – identity requires control” (278), the ecstatic disturbs any closure of identity and opens up spaces for identification as identity-in-difference. The collectivity of “we” never configures itself as a closure of identity: a sort of structural ecstatic break constitutes “we” as an index of openness, a contested field of identification: “Out of our minds” may somehow refer to both Europeans and Africans. Fabian writes: “In gaining knowledge of Others – knowledge that we can state discursively, or knowledge that shapes our understanding – we must pass cultural boundaries to reach a common ground” (278).

Madly, “we” can become the mo(ve)ment of a drive towards Others, out of ourselves, out of themselves, in-

venting some common ground that doesn’t erase the boundaries, but is the boundary: the common ground as movement in and out of *ourself* (if we may recall James Joyce’s “themself” in *Finnegans Wake*). With his critique of the denial of coevalness in anthropological discourse about Others, Fabian attempts to fashion “representations of other cultures that do not erase their immediacy and presence” (120). The shared time that underlies the collective pronoun “we” – in its ecstatic drive and in its mo(ve)ment of opening up bridges for potential cross-cultural identification – discloses itself as “a dimension, indeed a condition of possibility, of disciplined knowledge about Others that exists within physical, social, and political circumstances” (280).

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