

# (ABSENT) SIGNS OF THE OTHER: HOW TO FIND YOURSELF IN THE GIFT SHOP<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Through a reading of anthropologically invested travel writing of the 19th and 20th centuries, “(Absent) Signs of the Other” attempts to unravel the determined relation between meaning and the other in the formation of culture and cultural identity in scenes of encounter. The essay constellates readings of Charles Taylor, Terry Eagleton, and James Clifford around the auto-eclipsing center of 19th-century traveler and American archaeologist John Lloyd Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel* volumes. The largest thrust of the essay is that the inevitability of the anthropological relation to the other should not be mistaken as a sign for the increasing possibility of tolerance. On the contrary, the anthropological relation to the other, grounded as it is in the positing of the meaning of the other for us, is fundamentally violent, invasive, catastrophic. As long as there is anthropology—and there is anthropology as long as there is culture, identity, representation—there is no other that is not, from the beginning, colonized.

KEY WORDS: culture, encounter, otherness, identity, anthropology, travel writing.

## RESUMEN

A través de una lectura de algunas narrativas de viaje antropológico de los siglos XIX y XX, “(Absent) Signs of the Other” intenta elucidar la relación entre significación y otredad en la formación de la cultura y de la identidad cultural. Este ensayo ofrece una interpretación de las teorías de Charles Taylor, Terry Eagleton y James Clifford, frente a las experiencias relatadas en los volúmenes *Incidents of Travel* del viajero y antropólogo americano del siglo XIX John Lloyd Stephens. Se pone de relieve que la inevitabilidad de una relación antropológica con el Otro no debe ser entendida como un señal de tolerancia creciente. Al contrario, la relación antropológica con el Otro, basada como está en la revelación del significado del Otro para uno mismo, es fundamentalmente violenta, invasora y catastrófica. Mientras exista la antropología —y la antropología existirá siempre que exista cultura, identidad y representación— no hay ninguna forma de otredad que no sea, desde el principio, colonizada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: cultura, encuentro, otredad, identidad, antropología, narrativa de viajes.

The two sources which are relevant for the traditional anthropology... indicate that over and above the attempt to determine the essence of 'man' as an entity, the question of his Being has remained forgotten, and that this Being is rather conceived as something obvious or "self-evident" in the sense of the *Being-present-at-hand* of other created Things.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

"They're wasting their time," the gift-shop lady says. "There's no more past out there to discover."

Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation*

In October of 1839, John Lloyd Stephens, who along with Frederick Catherwood had embarked on a "special confidential mission" to Central America, found himself in a difficulty concerning his diplomatic papers. His passport having been *viséd* by General Cascara in Chiquimula, Guatemala, Stephens had left for the ruins of Copán, where, arriving at what he calls "a picture of a deserted village," he presents his documents to the *alcalde* and several *alguaziles*: "We showed them our passport, and told them where we were going, at which, with their characteristic indifference of manner, they expressed no surprise. They could not read the passport, but they examined the seal and returned it" (Stephens, *Central America* 1.79). This should be the end of the inspection, but in fact it's only the beginning. Later, half undressed and ready for bed, Stephens and Catherwood are accosted by a contingent including "Alcalde, alguazils, soldiers, Indians and Mestitzoes" and led by "a capitan of one of [Rafael] Carrera's companies" (1.80). Carrera himself was the Indian rebel in a tripartite war for control of Guatemala. The *alcalde* requested the passport, which Stephens once again produced. The *alcalde* "handed it over to the young officer, who examined it, and said that it was not valid" (1.80). Additionally, Stephens and Catherwood were informed that the seal they had obtained in Chiquimula from General Cascara was only valid in Chiquimula; they lacked the seal necessary for travel throughout Guatemala (1.80).

A struggle over the passport ensues: the young officer requesting that it be handed over, Stephens refusing on the grounds that it is his only "evidence" of his "official character" (1.81). Ultimately, another man "of better class" (1.82) inspects the passport and, according to Stephens, perhaps he alone actually read it, "for it produced an effect upon the *alcalde* and his *alguazils*" (1.82). This effect notwithstanding, Stephens and Catherwood were to remain in custody. Stephens demands a courier by whom he intends to send a letter to General Cascara; this demand is

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<sup>1</sup> José F. Buscaglia, Michael J. King, and Thomas L. Morgan provided, on short notice and with nothing to gain, invaluable comments on this essay. What they gave back to me, and what was no longer my own, was incommensurate with what I had handed to them.

refused, but upon Stephens's offer to pay for the cost of the courier, the *alcalde* agrees. Not trusting his Spanish, Stephens dictates the letter to Catherwood, who translates it into Italian. It details their arrest and the problem of the passport. Catherwood signs the letter "as Secretary; and, having no official seal with me," Stephens remarks, "we sealed it unobserved by anybody, with a new American half dollar, and gave it to the *alcalde*" (1.83). The letter has the same status as the passport: it's illegible to the illiterate. The seal, however, makes an impression: "The eagle spread his wings, and the stars glittered in the torchlight. All gathered round to examine it" (1.83). They left with it, leaving Stephens and Catherwood locked in the *cabildo*. But the letter was not sent; rather, once again the door bursts open and, according to Stephens, "the whole ruffianly band entered" (1.84). Stephens assumes they've come yet once more to lay siege to the passport, but, he reports, "to our surprise, the *alcalde* handed me back the letter with the big seal, said there was no use in sending it, and that we were at liberty to proceed on our journey where we chose" (1.84). Stephens concludes: "I have no doubt that the big seal did much in our behalf" (1.84).

Some 350 years earlier, on Monday, 15 October 1492, Columbus, first landfall in "el otro mundo" already behind him, makes his way among the islands that today we call the Caribbean. A lone Indian in a canoe comes alongside the *Niña* and several of Columbus's men leap into the sea to apprehend him. Having seen this from the poop deck, Columbus sends for the man and gives him "un bonete colorado y unas cuentas de vidrio verdes, pequeñas, que le puse al brazo..." (Colón 114). He claims to have treated this Indian thusly in order that "nos tuviese en esta estima, porque otra vez cuando Vuestras Altezas aquí tornen a enbiar no hagan mala compañía"; and, in any case, what he gave him wasn't worth much: "y todo lo que le di no valía cuatro maravedís" (115). Columbus then moves on in the direction of gold. What he finds, however, is all-too familiar, strangely so, and the more strange for not surprising him at all. Heading for gold, he finds himself with another Indian:

fallé un hombre solo en una almadía que se passava de la isla de Sancta María a la Fernandina, y traía un poco de su pan, que sería tanto como el puño y una calabaza de agua, y un pedaço de tierra bermeja hecha en polvo y después amassada, y unas hojas secas, que debe ser cosa muy apreciada entr'ellos, porque ya me truxeron en San Salvador d'ellas en presente; y traía un çestillo a su guisa en que tenía un ramalejo de cuentezillas de vidro y dos blancas, *por las cuales* cognoscí qu'él venía de la isla de Sant Salvador, y aví[a] passado a aquella de Sancta María y se passava a la Fernandina. (115, emphasis added)

Perhaps this is the way into the question or problem of the Americas: in both the Columbus and Stephens accounts there is a certain economy of discovery, of progress, a give and take, a return that spells out one's place in the Americas. Columbus knows where he is, traces his route and maps his advance in terms of the *cuentas* returned to him. Being *met* by the man who had already *received* the *cuentas* and who now *returns* them to him, indicates to Columbus his location in the Ameri-

cas: Columbus literally returns to himself. Spain, Europe, the West —if these are determinations in any way related to the columbian enterprise— come *back* to Columbus; they are *before* him. What passes from Columbus to Columbus via a New World or “American” mediation is, then, *both* singularly important in that the *darse cuenta* of the exchange of *cuentas* figures the birth of self-consciousness *and* remarkably worthless in that all that Columbus gave to the other and thus all that came back to him, however figured or accounted for, amounts to no more than four *maravedies*. As important as self-consciousness is, it isn’t worth much.

Columbus is just one beginning among many of a certain modernity. His is just one passage. Of interest is not its priority or privilege, but its repetition, already in Columbus but certainly in Stephens, of the economy of encounter and the aporia of experience that haunts it. At stake in the early 21st century is how to think community, culture, contact without recourse to the economization of the subject. What follows passes the question of multiculturalism and of anthropology more generally —as determined in writings by Charles Taylor, Terry Eagleton, and James Clifford— through a reading of John L. Stephens, the 19th-century Anglo-American traveler who helped establish the ground for American anthropological and archaeological practices. The issue, very simply, is how to account for the other without, at the same time, locating the other in an account of ourselves.

It goes without saying that the narrative account is also a *cuenta*. Hernán Cortés referred to his letters to Carlos V as *carta cuentas* (Cortés 292). If the *cuentas* (beads) are both invaluable and worthless, what of the letter? In Stephens, the letter, the passport, is worthless and, yet, it is the only evidence of Stephens’s (official) character. And the letter he sends, the letter that no one can read, but that they nonetheless do not want to arrive at its addressee, is not even in Stephens’s “own” language. That letter announces itself in another tongue, one no less foreign than Stephens’s untrustworthy Spanish, but perhaps more reliable in that it comes from another. There is no sign of Stephens in that account. This absence should not surprise us: it is perhaps the rule of discovery and conquest, the possibility of encounter or contact in general and in any event. In the place that I encounter the other, I am absent; communication between and among others is marked by translation: “...the padre was thrown back upon his Latin, to be translated into Spanish as required. After labouring a while, he turned to Augustine, and gave him in English the questions to put to the women. Augustine was a good Catholic, and listened to him with as much respect as if he had been the pope, but did not understand a word he said. I explained to Augustine in French, who explained to one of the men in Spanish, who explained to the women” (Stephens, *Central America* 1.30-31). Here’s Stephens’s summation of the transaction: “This, of course, led to confusion” (1.31). It is not a confusion in any one language; it is, rather, the confusion of language and of languages: “...by this time the padre, with his Latin, and English, and French, and Spanish, was in a profuse perspiration, and somewhat confused” (1.31).

This American Babel is not just the padre’s, but that of an entire community of interlocutors, no one of whom understands all the others. It is a community of others, then, wrought of confusion and not identity or common-ness, of misunderstanding and not understanding. A community of differences that cannot be

reduced to *one* identifying or identifiable trait. Such is the scene of encounter: a translation-effect that opens the space of community in the too-loud silence of understanding. There is nothing fundamentally different between this scene of “communication” and that between Cortés and Mutezuma in Tenochtitlán-México in 1519. Both are scenes of conversion that hinge on translation. The earlier circuit was no less complicated: Cortés-Jerónimo de Aguilar-Malinche/Marina-Mutezuma<sup>2</sup>; and no less “successful” in its determination of the relation among others: these babelian communities constitute families. Cortés understands his relation to Mutezuma to be one of fraternity, while Stephens becomes the godfather to a child who will bear his name and the *compadre* to his parents (1.31). If nothing else, it’s clear that such relations have nothing whatsoever to do with understanding and that communities are not necessarily communities of meaning. There are relations without sense, relations that are, then, *Sinnlos*. Indeed, such relations are all around us; we are constituted in and among them, of them, finally. Relations without sense are the effect of the confusion of language and languages. Babel is the name and site of our locus of enunciation.<sup>3</sup>

At stake in these pages, whether those of Columbus and Cortés or those of Stephens, is the limit or border—the problem— of culture. Perhaps not even of culture, not yet assuming there is any. At stake, then, is simply the horizon of the locus of enunciation, the place in which and from which one is spoken and one speaks oneself—and the other, and others.<sup>4</sup> It is possible there is no speaking the self nor any self-spoken without already having taken the place of the other. As saying and being said, the self takes place and takes the place of the other: the other is before it. This is the problem of the self, its limit or border: it takes place in the place of the other. One never speaks simply in or from one’s own place. The locus of enunciation is always more than one, always plural, even in its singularity. In all these texts, whether Columbus’s and Cortés’s or Stephens’s, a confusion of borders—of languages and of language— results simultaneously in the confusion of cultures (of cultural identities and identifications) *and* in the establishment, perhaps in the same place, of communities: Cortés is Mutezuma’s brother; Stephens is a mulatto child’s godfather, his parents’ *compadre*. The scene of encounter is marked, from the beginning, by this double experience: on the one hand, absolute insignificance, meaninglessness, the complete failure to understand the other and, conse-

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<sup>2</sup> To understand this circuit as it operated in the conquest of the Americas, one has to read Bernal DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, for Cortés represents his communication with Mutezuma as immediate or unimpeded and unimpaired by translation (see Johnson, “The Place”).

<sup>3</sup> For an example of the Babel that is American literature, see Shell and Sollors; also Shell.

<sup>4</sup> For the “locus of enunciation,” see Mignolo (5-6) for a definition, but *passim*. For a critique of the notion of the “locus of enunciation,” see Johnson (“Mexico’s” 161-65). For a discussion of the related notion of the positioned subject, see Johnson (“Descartes”).

quently, one's place in relation to that other; and, on the other hand, a kind of radical intimacy: fraternity, *compadrazgo*, affiliation. The most intimate experience of the other is also, at the same time, the most alienated experience of the other. It is possible, moreover, that there is no experience that is not always troubled in this way, which means that every experience is the experience of encounter. We —if we are at all— are always at the border.

If, as Jacques Derrida suggests in a reading of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," experience has the same aporetic structure as translation; if, as he writes, "l'expérience est traduction," then all experience marks a crisis of significance in which every encounter both posits and de-poses the significance of the other (Derrida 246). In every case we *both* recognize *and* refuse the other's significance: the other is *both* my brother/co-father/son *and* alien/foreign; *both* significant *and* insignificant. Who or what we *are* is always determined in and by this relation, which we both *do* and *do not* recognize as a relation. It is understood to be relation at the moment its significance is determined, at the moment, in other words, that we understand one another, at the moment we are "family" and familiar. It is not understood to be relation at the moment before understanding, before determination of significance, before, then, the other becomes something other than other. The other is (not) my brother. No doubt these two moments take place one in the other, which means, simply, that recognition of the other reduces the other to sameness and that misrecognition, while it maintains alterity, ineluctably devalues it. Everything depends on the significance of the other.

Significance haunts Charles Taylor's oft-cited "The Politics of Recognition" precisely to the extent Taylor determines the dialogical foundation of identity as taking place between oneself and one's "significant others," those with whom one has meaningful relationships:

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression... But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us —what George Herbert Meade called 'significant others.' The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical. (Taylor 32)

The difficulty in this remark lies in the assumption of a significance that predates the genesis of the human mind and that in itself spurs dialogue. This is an origin tale that posits at the origin what exists only as the result of its operation —if at all: the meaningful relation to the other, the significant other. Taylor writes, "This crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character," on the one hand; and, on the other, "the genesis of the human mind is... dialogical" (32, emphasis in original). If the dialogical is the fundamental characteristic of human life, then this same characteristic cannot also be what generates the mind that characterizes the human. Before the human, there is no dialogue or no dialogicality. If dialogue is fundamentally human, what makes the human possible must be something else en-

tirely, something inhuman. Moreover, if dialogue is productive of meaning, if, in other words, significant others become such only within a dialogical frame, then the birth of the human is, precisely, meaningless, without significance. Taylor surmises as much when he claims that we don't become human agents dialogically, but that "We become *full* human agents" thusly (32, emphasis added).

There is, then, according to Taylor's logic, humanity *before* humanity. We might say that this first, not-yet-fully human is dialogical but senseless, whereas the fully human is dialogical in a meaningful way; this, however, is not —indeed, cannot be— the case, for dialogue occurs only between (fully) human agents who have the reciprocal status of being mutually significant others. In Taylor, there can be no humanity, no genesis of the human mind and, thus, no birth of the human, before the possibility of dialogue between significant others. The possibility of meaning and of meaningful relations determines the human. This means, of course, that the human is cultural through and through: what will become the human is culturally determined *before* becoming human, in that dialogue —which is a function of culture to the extent it is meaningful, to the extent it only takes place or happens between significant others— opens the possibility of the genesis of the human mind and, consequently, must itself be possible *prior* to the invention of the human.

Taylor's position, then, is exactly contrary to Terry Eagleton's in *The Idea of Culture* where he writes, "Whatever is prior to culture... is always in a sense simultaneous with it too, since we can identify it only by reading it off from culture itself. Whatever puts culture in place and perpetually threatens to undo it can only, so to speak, be reconstructed backwards once culture has already happened. In this sense, to be sure, it does not escape meaning; but neither is it reducible to the symbolic realm" (Eagleton 107). Eagleton here simply points out that it is impossible to think pre-cultural conditions of possibility for thought outside of culture. Unlike Eagleton, Taylor does not argue that noncultural conditions of the possibility of culture, conditions that necessarily precede culture, can only be cognized and recognized within culture. Rather, Taylor locates culture or cultural conditions (dialogicality and significance) before the rise of the human and of human cultures precisely as the possibility of the human and of human cultures.

Despite this difference, Eagleton and Taylor end up in the same place because neither wants to deny the meaningfulness of culture. In the last chapter of *The Idea of Culture*, "Toward a Common Culture," after remarking that "the primary problems which we confront in the new millennium —war, famine, poverty, disease, debt, drugs, environmental pollution, the displacement of peoples— are not especially 'cultural' at all" (130), Eagleton argues that understanding them as cultural problems "risks expanding the term [culture] to the point of meaninglessness" (131). Culture, Eagleton stresses, is not only a set of prescriptions according to which we live, but "it is also, in great measure, what we live for" (131).

What does it mean to live *for* culture? Given Eagleton's list of that for which we live, which is to say, the complex that adds up to culture —"Affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meaning" (132)— it means to live within the horizon of meaning. Remarkably, when the two lists are placed side-by-side, it becomes appar-



ent that the problems facing us, which Eagleton says are not cultural, do indeed have cultural origins according to the list that indicates our cultural determinations. It is perhaps too obvious that war, famine, poverty, the displacement of peoples, can all be understood to derive from assumptions about affection, relationship, memory, kinship, et cetera. And this says nothing about the constitution of “peoples” in the first place. In short, these “universal” problems that we all face and which are not, Eagleton claims, culturally determined, can certainly be comprehended as deriving from the assumption of culture as Eagleton defines it. Eagleton is, however, right about one thing. To the extent his list of cultural traits remains organized by the overriding value of meaning, not only are the solutions to the cultural problems not cultural, but the very idea of culture must be suspended—and with it the value of meaning—if we are to find a way through the problems that face us. Put simply, there will be no end to the problems that trouble Eagleton’s new millennium so long as culture remains. And it appears culture’s remains are always before us. This is the *aporia* that both undermines and sustains Eagleton’s—and any—cultural politics.

Taylor’s anthropological solution to the problems of multiculturalism, a solution wrought from a (cultural) desire “to approach the study of any other culture” (Taylor 66) and thus determined in advance by a principle of comparison, according to Werner Hamacher, “permits every other culture... to be perceived no longer in its alterity but only as a variant of one’s own culture” (324). In Hamacher’s recounting, Taylor’s account of Kant too easily equates respect and recognition. Hamacher attests, however, that respect in Kant can only occur within a moment of incomparability, whereas cognition (and thus recognition) is fundamentally an accounting or calculation, an operation of equivalence, hence, a comparatism. Hamacher writes:

For Kant, respect is a ‘self-produced feeling’ that ‘demolishes my self-love’; it is therefore immediate auto- and hetero-affection, auto-as-hetero-affection, and therefore always respect for an other irreducible to my self. This respect for the other always precedes the cognition of the other—as well as its recognition—because the other only ever appears in the perspective of respect, his arrival only occurs in respect, he cannot exist as the object of comparative theoretical cognition and can never exist merely as an object, but only in his pre-objective and pre-subjective arrival. The other is incommensurable only for respect; for cognition it is one among other comparable objects which can be assigned a determinate exchange value. (320)

The implications of Hamacher’s critique are severe: to the extent the other in Taylor is always already recognized, the other is always already thought in a relation of equivalence to “us” (a community homogenized in Taylor as “North American civilization”); “our” values dominate the other. One result of such domination is the closure, despite Taylor’s insistence on its opening, of any possible dialogue with the other. This because a dialogue that takes place within a Gadamerian fusion of horizons or cultures, a dialogue of the same, is a monologue. This would be the dialogue of the recognized. But, Hamacher argues, “There can be no recog-



dition without respect: without asymmetry, without nonreciprocity, without a gift that precedes exchange, that opens dialogue... It must open up the possibility of a dialogue, but must in doing so keep open the possibility that the dialogical form might transform itself" (323-4).

Hamacher sounds the death knell of anthropology, for anthropology is infected with recognition rather than respect, or, more exactly, it repeats Taylor's misunderstanding of Kant and conflates respect and recognition. In doing so, it ineluctably values the other as meaningful, comprehends it in a comparative relation to itself.

We, of course, assume our recognizability: witness the Columbus and Stephens examples. Columbus recognizes himself, his progress, in what (the other) returns to him; Stephens is recognized in the universally valid image of US coin. "Who" faces "us" is not always quite so obvious, however. And it is precisely the question of the "who" that preoccupies American anthropology from its origins in "the 1840s historical-philosophical investigation into the Mayan ruins of Spanish America" carried out by John Stephens and his co-traveler Frederick Catherwood (Michaelson 164). Scott Michaelson indicates the site of an aporia of recognition at the very foundation of the American anthropological project when he remarks on Stephens's and Catherwood's second journey to the Yucatan peninsula and their "careers as photographers and eye surgeons in the Mexican city of Merida" (Michaelson 180). Explaining their foray into the business of taking ladies' portraits, Michaelson rightly notes, on the one hand, their "constant attention to the apparatus" (180), to the daguerreotype camera, and the techniques for obtaining "that one particular point of view which presented it [i.e., the subject] better than any other" (Stephens, *Yucatan*, 1.56; qtd in Michaelson 181); and, on the other hand, the impossibility of locating that place: "Suffice it to say that we tried plate after plate, sitting after sitting, varying light, time, and other points of the process; but it was all in vain" (Stephens, *Yucatan* 1.57; qtd in Michaelson 181). Stephens and Catherwood had already experienced this incommensurability on their first trip to the Central Americas: the what-ness of the ruins defied all representation, all calculation or measurement. Michaelson writes: "The problem of Copan has returned with a vengeance, albeit in a slightly different register because the photographic subjects are a different 'species' of ruin. The inhabitants of the country now present the problem of unrepresentability due to light and angle as the issue shifts from the 'what' of the buildings to the 'who' of bodies" (Michaelson 181).<sup>5</sup>

Stephens recognizes in this scene not the other but the failure of recognition as such. The other remains incommensurable to the "apparatus" Stephens hauls around with him. In Kantian terms, there is a failure of the faculty of the imagina-

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<sup>5</sup> For a related reading of the unrepresentability of the ruins, see Johnson ("Writing").

tion to effect the synthesis of reproduction that would allow a sensible intuition to be related to the faculty of the understanding. Such reproduction, which is a function of the imagination, is necessary to any perception. There is no recognition of the other without perception, without the synthetic reproduction of the imagination that constitutes the possibility of any possible experience. But, Hamacher notes, in the absence of such reproduction, there would be respect, for respect happens only before recognition, prior to the commensuration of the other, prior, then, to the other's becoming reproduced or represented, and, perhaps, prior to becoming a memory for us.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceive such respect as itself being a form of resistance: neither in Stephens nor in Kant does resistance play any role in incomprehensibility. Indeed, resistance is already understood within the frame (or "box" as Stephens might have called it) of a certain calculation, of a certain compensatory relation to the subject. Respect is always respect for an other to whom we are exposed without, however, knowing in any way.

This unrecognized and unrecognizable other is the other we are: personality, which according to Kant is the source —“the root of thy noble descent”— of respect, is the human being's freedom “from the mechanism of nature” (Kant, *Practical Reason* 90). “This idea of personality,” Kant writes, “awakens respect; it places before our eyes the sublimity of our own nature” (*Practical Reason* 91). Now, in *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant explains that “we call that *sublime* which is absolutely great” and, further, “if we call anything, not only great, but absolutely great in every point of view (great beyond all comparison), i.e. sublime, we soon see that it is not permissible to seek for an adequate standard of this outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a magnitude which is like itself alone. It follows hence that the sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas” (Kant, *Judgement* 86, 88) The sublimity of our own nature thus means that we are incommensurate to ourselves. We are incomparable —to ourselves. Self-respect is fundamentally respect for the other we are: self-respect, then, is simultaneously auto-respect and hetero-respect. Our freedom from natural law, from the law of cause and effect, is effectively our freedom to alterity, to the exposition of alterity in the position we occupy. Indeed, given that we “sense” or, better, “hear” the command of the moral law in what Kant calls the moral feeling, a purely intelligible feeling completely divorced from any pathological determination, we might say that in this “feeling” we “hear” the law in our own absence, for the respect that is this feeling is a respect for the freedom that enables the moral law. Yet, this freedom is noumenal; it is the noumenality of our own nature which we nonempirically encounter in its —i.e., in our “own”— sublimity: as that which cannot be experienced at all in that all experience passes through sensibility. The sublime takes place in us, Kant claims, but does so without our knowing (anything about) it: the sublime is without compare and thus always other to our knowledge.

Anthropology doesn't take Kant seriously. Otherwise, it would have folded up its tents a long time ago and abandoned the field. In fact, the *Anthropology* doesn't even take Kant seriously: there, in the section “On the Character of the Species,” Kant writes: “In order to sketch the character of a certain creature's spe-

cies, it is necessary that the species be compared with and referred to in terms of other species already known to us” (Kant, *Anthropology* 237) Anthropology, in short, is fundamentally a comparative practice, and this presents Kant with a dilemma: “But if one kind of creature which we know (A) is compared to another kind of creature which we do not know (non-A), how, then, can we expect or demand to sketch the character of A, when we have no middle term for the comparison (*tertium comparationis*)?” (Kant, *Anthropology* 237). The name of this “creature” beyond comparison is the human:

The highest concept of species may be that of a terrestrial rational being, but we will not be able to describe its characteristics because we do not know of a nonterrestrial rational being which would enable us to refer to its properties and consequently classify that terrestrial being as rational. It seems, therefore, that the problem of giving an account of the character of the human species is quite insoluble, because the problem could only be solved by comparing two species of rational beings on the basis of experience, but experience has not offered us a comparison between two species of rational beings.<sup>6</sup> (Kant, *Anthropology* 237-8)

Anthropology of the other, either with or without an other—a nonterrestrial rational being to which our terrestrial rationality could be compared—is always already anthropology of the same. Not only does this rule govern the possibility of anthropology, but it regulates Kant’s critical project as such: “By a critical elucidation of a science... I understand the investigation and justification of the fact that it must have precisely the systematic form which it does have and no other *when compared with another system which has as its basis a similar cognitive faculty*” (*Practical Reason* 93, emphasis added). This sameness, however, which grounds anthropology, is aporetic: such is the upshot of the sublimity of our nature. In our own incomparableness, we are beyond recognition.

It is not surprising, then, given our aporetic relation to ourselves, that “we”—the Euro-North American subject, but perhaps *any* subject—turn from ourselves to the other, that we found a practice devoted to seeing the other *in order to see ourselves*. Accordingly, it makes sense that the camera figures in—focuses, in a way—the texts Michaelsen claims open the site of American anthropology, Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel* volumes; and, moreover, that the camera would be turned toward the other only after, Stephens writes, “Having made trials upon ourselves until we were tired of the subjects, and with satisfactory results, we considered ourselves sufficiently advanced to begin” (Stephens, *Yucatan* 1.54). The anthropological observer trades one blindness for another and calls the results insight, for despite calling the results of their

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<sup>6</sup>For readings of Kant’s anthropological project, see Eze, Spivak, and Clark. Clark’s essay is especially interesting on questions of comparatism and what Kant puts in place precisely in order to determine the human according to his own principle of comparability.



self-portraiture “satisfactory,” Stephens and Catherwood cannot see themselves seeing themselves in their attempts to represent—or capture—themselves on the exposed plate. They cannot be before and behind the camera at the same time. In order for Stephens to take his own picture, he must focus on an empty space (or on a space itself held open and determined by another object—perhaps even Catherwood) and then rush to that site prior to taking the picture—at which point, of course, he is the unseen object (subject) of the photograph (daguerreotype).<sup>7</sup> The camera makes possible the remainder of self-representation, literally framing that possibility, even as it marks the impossibility of seeing oneself seeing oneself. How could the results not be satisfactory? Who am I to say that I don’t look like that? No doubt one very quickly tires of that subject.

In its place Stephens locates another on whom he can keep his eye, but whom he nevertheless cannot properly frame. Of the cause of their failure to represent the other, to fix the other’s image before them and thus to recognize it as such, Stephens has not a clue. Even were all technical precautions taken, everything properly timed, all processes “right and regular,” as Stephens writes, “there might be some other fault of omission or commission which we were not aware of” (*Yucatan* 1.56). And, upon failing in their efforts—this following many successes—Stephens remarks: “What was the cause of our complete discomfiture we never ascertained” (*Yucatan* 1.57). But he knows the camera isn’t necessarily the cause of the problem and, hence, does not excuse the inability to see the other in the proper light. That the other does not come out as we expect perhaps has nothing to do with the camera or with the other and everything to do with the apparatus—the representational machine—that we are. It is possible that we cannot not get in our way of seeing the other.

Hard upon the failure of the portrait studio, Stephens and Catherwood become involved in another venture no less concerned with seeing aright. Although Stephens claims there was no connection between photography and eye surgery, Michaelsen rightly points out that the connection is nearly transparent: “the problem of the production of right vision” (Michaelsen 181). Remarkably, however, Stephens wasn’t sure if the inordinate number of apparent cases of “strabismus”—“squinting eyes, or *biscos* [*sic*], as they are called” (Stephens, *Yucatan* 1.58)—among the citizens of Mérida, was not the result of “our attention” being “particularly directed to it” (*Yucatan* 1.58). The longer we look at the other, the less likely the other sees straight. But Stephens isn’t sure that the other’s bad sight is not, in fact, his own: “my head was actually swimming with visions of bleeding and mutilated eyes, and I almost felt doubtful about my own” (*Yucatan* 1.64). Eye surgery follows the same trajectory as portraiture: initial successes followed by painful experience. Whereas repetition should

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<sup>7</sup> What I’m describing here would have been impossible with the daguerreotype camera, which required a still subject, immobile for about ninety seconds.

make the procedure —whether portraiture or eye surgery— easier and more reliable, it does not: “The repetition of the operations has not accustomed me to them; indeed, the last was more painful to me than the first” (*Yucatan* 1.64).

Who’s in pain? At the origin of American anthropology —“American” in the sense of both subject (U.S. anthropology as a disciplinary practice) and object (as the name of the location of an anthropological intervention)— Stephens locates the anthropologist’s pain and desire to turn away from the object (“I felt willing to abandon forever the practice of surgery,” Stephens writes). In short, curing the other’s inability to see (us) causes us pain and requires us to avert our eyes. Or, perhaps, seeing the other see (us) pains us and necessitates our looking away. Anthropology is the name of this aversion: the refusal to look that aporetically grounds all looking, the abandonment of sight that opens the site for what Taylor calls the “approach” to “the study of any other culture” (Taylor 66-7). But Taylor fails to see that the same aversion or looking awry makes possible the location of our own culture. Seeing our culture —and that is perhaps all we can ever see— we can’t see ourselves; which means, simply, seeing ourselves we cannot see ourselves or, for that matter, our culture. This, too, Kant knew. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the “Antinomy of Pure Reason,” specifically the section in which he explains the cosmological idea of freedom and the way in which terrestrial rational beings belong “to two worlds,” as he put it in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (90), Kant avers that according to the laws of nature —and thus in the empirical or sensible world— and as regards the human being’s “empirical character,” “there is no freedom; and yet it is only in the light of this character that man can be studied —if, that is to say, we are simply *observing*, and in the manner of anthropology seeking to institute a physiological investigation into the motive causes of his actions” (Kant, *Pure Reason* 474; German pagination A 550/B 578).

The conclusion to be drawn from Kant’s remark and from Stephens’s successes and failures in the mid-nineteenth century, not to mention those of later anthropological practitioners, is obvious: anthropology, as a science of the empirical, can never ground an ethical relation to the other. For example, the failure of Stephens’s photographic work depended on his inability to reproduce the image, to make the plate represent or match the subject; but the singularity of the daguerreotype, precisely its uniqueness and inadequacy, indicates its ethical possibility. In “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin claims that Daguerreotypes “were one of a kind” and he cites Dauthendey the photographer, who reported, “We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see *us*” (508, 512). Stephens missed this. He looked away: the thought of an other seeing him —when he could not yet see that other— pained him and led him to abandon the practice, ironically, in favor of anthropology, which simply institutionalizes such blindness. To the extent anthropology is limited, as Kant claims, to the empirical, to phenomena, it can only tell us what is, what has happened; it cannot tell us what ought to be. Taylor’s entire project for the future survival of the historically French-speaking community in Quebec, which is the example par excellence of “The Politics of Recognition,” is itself determined by the misunderstanding that one can derive *what ought to be* from the knowledge of



*what is.*<sup>8</sup> Anthropology of the other, then, is constitutively unethical. The other is always put in its place in order that we might locate ourselves.

It is a question of method, for sure, but this does not mean that anthropology may yet develop or find a method to save itself. Though no doubt it will keep trying and no doubt it will find many to herald its survival, to find some good in it in spite of its ethical shortcomings. The relation to the other whom we are (not) is always read and imagined through one or another technology or metaphor that allows us to place ourselves in relation to others in order to see ourselves in relation to ourselves. From Columbus's *cuentas* to Stephens's daguerreotype photographs and surgical apprenticeship, from participant observation to the observation of participation, including the notions of affect, dialogue, hybridity, and family resemblance, anthropology locates another to enable itself to see itself. In the process it both misses the other and loses itself.

James Clifford has followed Stephens south in his travels to Palenque, one of the sites Stephens and Catherwood visited on their first journey to the Central Americas in 1839. "Palenque Log" records at least a second coming to the ruins, this time to explore their recent renovations. The note at the text's conclusion reports that the log was "written from notes made at Palenque in July 1993" (*Routes* 237). Further, Clifford also explains that "Everything is written from the location of a meta-'independent traveler' within the tourist circuit" (*Routes* 237). Clifford's account begins at 7:15am: outside his hotel, he flags "a bus for las Ruinas" and joins "some other early-bird tourists and people who work at the site" (*Routes* 220). Between 7:30-8:00am Clifford is in the "mostly empty" parking lot. "My camera," he writes, "which I dropped on the bathroom floor this morning, jams. After some futile attempts at repair, I give up on it" (*Routes* 220). We are still too close to Stephens. "Palenque Log" reproduces four photographs, to which we might add three narrative snapshots and a late (4:00-4:15pm) reference to stopping "for a few photos: cornfields above the ruin, the entry to the national park, a statue of 'La Madre Maya'" (*Routes* 236), for which Clifford pays the "combi" driver extra. Clifford takes the photographs with a new camera he purchases at a camera store, a "memory maker" (*Routes* 227).

On the one hand, the camera doesn't work, it jams, and Clifford gives up on it. He won't be seeing things —others— through it today. On the other hand, he can't see without it, he can't locate the other without his memory maker: "I pay three street sellers for a portrait. The money's good, but the three girls are nervous about the snapshot and want to get it over with" (*Routes* 227). The difference between Stephens and Clifford is that Stephens took portraits for pay, while Clifford pays for them. Both have camera troubles neatly resolved. In Clifford's case, the optical problems happen off-stage, outside the frame of the log; before leaving the

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<sup>8</sup> See Lyotard and Thébaud, for a discussion of the impossibility of deriving an ought from an is.

hotel, before leaving the bathroom, and before the start of the *timing* of his log, he had already dropped the camera. What went wrong with his vision, we might say, were his hands. Within the time of his account, his *cuenta*, the camera is beyond repair: “after some futile attempts at repair, I give up on it.”

Clifford arrives with a damaged view-finder; he arrives in time with a framing device already marked by disfunction. This broken device disturbs the rest of the log: first, it requires the detour into a camera store to replace the defective apparatus; second, it shadows all the ensuing references to photography and snapshots. In what way are these reproductions of the other and of the sites and sights of anthropology, of tourism and contact, not from the start themselves the effect, the remainder, of an incapacitated gaze? While another, for example, Moises Morales, is owed “special thanks... for several *illuminating* conversations about the ruin [Palenque] and its history,” nevertheless, “he bears no responsibility for my [Clifford’s] general optique” (*Routes* 237). Morales provides the light —or at least he shares in “illuminating conversations”— but does not have any relation of responsibility for what that light makes possible: Clifford’s general optique. Put bluntly, this makes no sense. There is no general optique that takes place in and around the site (Clifford’s sighting) of Palenque that is not itself an effect of a *particular* illumination. Clifford wants to provide his own light, even as he acknowledges the illuminating place of another lost in the shadows of his more powerful sight. An obscure illumination that lights a scene even as it is washed out by a brighter, more general light. In locating himself as a “meta-‘independent traveler’” who lights his own way, Clifford obscures the other even as he appears to find a place for him.

It is the interest in obtaining a particular view, illuminated perhaps by this general optique, that clarifies the displacement of the other. Clifford’s first narrative snapshot of “Palenque Log” captures “a man followed by a boy” as they make their way directly toward the entry gate and the parking lot beyond. They carry heavy loads; they “look neither at the giant pyramid on their left nor at the tourists squinting into cameras” (*Routes* 222). Clifford moves “into the shade halfway up the Palace steps,” whence he can see the trail that “climbs into the hills behind the Temple of the Inscriptions” (*Routes* 222). He had followed that trail two years before,

in search of a ‘pre-excavation’ feeling: the tangled foliage and intense sounds which would have greeted early explorers like Del Río, Dupaix and Castañeda, Waldeck, Walker and Caddy, Stephens and Catherwood. A few hundred yards in, I found the partly cleared Casa del León, trees still gripping its roof, the ‘romantic’ ruin made famous in a drawing by Count Waldeck in 1833. This was something like what Catherwood actually saw —not the cleaned up renditions Stephens published, and nothing like the manicured, rebuilt monuments of the current *parque nacional*. (*Routes* 222)

This feeling is Clifford’s souvenir, but it isn’t for all that a postcard of what Catherwood “actually saw.” We know from Stephens that what Catherwood actually saw was *unintelligible* and thus unrecognizable as having been seen in the first place: “the designs were... so different from anything Mr. Catherwood had ever seen before as to be perfectly unintelligible”; and, just pages later, “As we feared, the





designs were so intricate and complicated, the subjects so entirely new and unintelligible, that he had great difficulty in drawing. He made several attempts, both with the camera lucida and without, but failed to satisfy himself or even me, who was less severe in criticism” (Stephens, *Central America* 1.117, 1.120). Catherwood sees nothing, or what he sees, what presents itself to him as an intuition of sense cannot be reproduced or represented: the imagination, which according to Kant is the reproductive faculty mediating the sensible and the intelligible, fails Catherwood. As Stephens writes, “Often the imagination was pained in gazing at them” (*Central America* 1.158). Perhaps this painful failure of the imagination produces the squinting Clifford remarks in the tourists and the *bizcos* Stephens sought to correct in the citizens of Mérida.

Clifford, too, needs an operation, for he looks too hard. The feeling he hopes to carry off cannot be had. Its unintelligibility does not depend on its being too sensible; on the contrary, it isn’t sensible at all, for what is sensible is always understood as being a possible experience. Rather, the unintelligibility of what Catherwood (never) “actually saw” testifies to the sublimity of our nature, as Kant would have it, and thus to the blindspot that is the I of our sight. In other words, although Clifford remarks that tourists “aim their cameras where they’re [indigenous labourers] not” (*Routes* 222), we are nonetheless left with the double question of our optique: how not always to have aimed our lens where, on the one hand, we’re not? And, how not to have always already centered ourselves in the frame? We can neither see ourselves nor stop seeing ourselves. And precisely in order to go home with a feeling —not for the other, but for ourselves, a feeling of ourselves— that cannot be felt, that will never have been felt, by oneself or by another.

“Palenque Log” and *Routes* more generally concern the place of the other, or the site of encounter, in the context of globalization and transnationalism. The locus of enunciation of the encounter that *is* globalization is necessarily a site of exchange: in this it is no different from the place of encounter that located Columbus and the site of exchange that determined Stephens’s relation to the other. The gift shop is the way into globality, into both modernity and postmodernity, modern and postmodern entanglements with and among others. There is, perhaps, no way out.

What does Clifford buy?

*Later that evening:* My souvenir: a bas-relief carved in soft stone by some boys who work in the “Taller de Artesanías” outside the hotel. It’s a reduced copy of Pacal, from the sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions, shown at the moment of his last breath.

I ask the oldest boy, about sixteen years old, about life at Palenque, the ruin, and so on. “For us,” he says, “the ruin is no big deal. We respect it, sure, but it’s nothing special. Palenque... people say its exciting, but for us... We do this *artesanía* for money, that’s all.” It’s said without apparent bitterness. A fact.

[...]

I answer with the cliché that our homes always become too familiar. Travel makes things fresh. I don’t really appreciate the beauty of my home in California, and so forth.

[...]



The boy doesn't respond. My words seem to fall flat. The difference in our situations, the privilege assumed by my cliché, is too apparent. I *can* travel. He can't... at least not for novelty and pleasure. Pacal's hands and feet are marvelously expressive, sensuous. I feel I've gotten something special. (Clifford, *Routes* 236-7)

For them, citizens, inhabitants, the ruins are nothing special. They offer only work. For us, they are special, something to be possessed in miniature if not in themselves.<sup>9</sup> For us, they are a site of our pleasure; they make possible our experience of novelty, even if that novelty is only experienced as our cliché: namely, that travel is universally desired as a corrective to the in(-)experience of home. The inability to see oneself at home, to experience one's home as such, absent the effects of travel or displacement, may well be the effect of anthropology, of the anthropological relation to the other. Not everyone has or needs a home, has or needs an experience of home, but it is easy enough to understand that a culture determined in its relation to home may well be a culture that generates the nostalgia for something other than home—the experience, for example, that Clifford cannot have of the ruins—if only, finally, in order to secure the knowledge of the beauty of one's home. Such a traveler never leaves home, never crosses the border, never loses himself in the gift shop. And, being in the gift shop, located within that economy of the duty free, the traveler is lost: “Betty at the gift shop at Mission San Antonio tells me even non-Catholics usually buy something for their Catholic friends back home—‘just to be taking something away with them.’ They come for an hour. They drop coins in the fountain. Just to be leaving something behind” (Rodriguez 127).

What are we to make of the exchange between Clifford and the boy? Clifford trades in clichés: the *cuentas* of the postmodern, ironic traveler. Clichés appear to be of value, they're worth giving away to the other; but they're all glitter, worthless, to us. Columbus, Stephens, Clifford. then: three names that metonymically sign the history of American anthropology, its relation to the other and to itself. Columbus's *cuentas*, Stephens's passport sealed with U.S. currency, Clifford's clichés: these are the worthless signs of our worth. We leave them behind in the assumption of their value to others, an assumption that locates the other in a relation of value to us.

Two more snapshots conclude Clifford's earlier book, *The Predicament of Culture*: they are pictures of witnesses on the stand in the trial of *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury et al*, which took place in the fall of 1977. The last snapshot frames an

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<sup>9</sup> On Stephens's first visit to Central America he bought, for fifty U.S. dollars, the ruins of Copan, arguing that they more rightly belonged to us, U.S. citizens, than to the unworthy inhabitants of Central America. Transporting them home, however, proved too difficult. “The reader is perhaps curious to know how old cities sell in Central America. Like other articles of trade, they are regulated by the quantity in market, and the demand; but, not being staple articles, like cotton and indigo, they were held at fancy prices, and at that time were dull of sale. I paid fifty dollars for Copan” (Stephens, *Central America* 128).



exchange between “Chiefy” Mills and the attorney for the defense, James St. Clair. The judge intervenes in the exchange when it turns toward questions of dress, to a headband in particular:

Q.: “How long have you been wearing such clothing?”

A.: “Oh, I have been wearing a headband as long as needed, when my hair is long enough.”

Q.: “How long has that been?”

Judge: “That which you have on there, is that an Indian headband?”

A.: “It’s a headband.”

Judge: “it has some resemblance to an ordinary red bandanna?”

A.: “Right, that’s what the material is.”

Judge: “A bandanna you buy in the store and fold up in that manner?”

A.: “Yes.”

(Clifford, *Predicament* 346)

We’re still in the gift shop. Something is taken: a red bandanna; something is left behind: Indian identity or perhaps only the difference between Indian and nonIndian identity, if that difference must be brought to account. If we must be able to tell the difference—and if the telling of the difference must be meaningful—then there is no difference. An Indian headband is a red bandanna. This is not to say, however, that there is a more fundamental and meaningless difference between these two: Indian/nonIndian makes sense only so long as cultural difference happens within the borders or frame, the “general optique” of meaning or understanding. The trial record, which is the account, the *cuenta*, of the exchange, “stenographically preserves,” Clifford explains, “by a precise but not infallible technique, the meaningful spoken sounds of the trial... It does not, of course, provide much information on the *effect* of witnesses or events in the courtroom. It omits gestures, hesitation, clothing, tone of voice, laughter, irony... the sometimes devastating silences” (*Predicament* 290).

What the trial record fails to record, Clifford notes, are *inaudible but meaningful signs*. Thus, even devastating silence is comprehended as a meaningful articulation. We could say what its effects were, as with everything else on Clifford’s list, if only we were present. All of this is legible to everyone in the courtroom, every one *observing* every other in the courtroom, that is.

There is an other silence, however, one that cannot be heard or sensed; one that cannot be intellectualized or understood. Indeed, such silence may well be the other of understanding that is nevertheless not simple misunderstanding. At the outset of the book that organizes her various attempts over some thirty years to understand the writings of Walter Benjamin, Carol Jacobs reminds us that “for Benjamin it is always a question of, and a questioning of, understanding. Less perhaps of *under*-standing, as the inevitable English translation would have it (for *un*-derstanding proposes a relation between reader and text in which one might position oneself properly and solidly with respect to an object) than of *Ver*-stehen, a dispersal of that certainty of stance” (1). Within any understanding of the other there ineluctably comes the other of understanding; understanding the other is

also, at the same time and in the same place, the *under-mining of our standing*, the dispersal of the place in which we “hear” the other in our own voice. This is not the silence, then, of the voice of reason or conscience, as Kant would figure the call of the moral law, its call to duty. That voice inexplicably comes to us across the divide of our own incomparableness: Kant’s is the call out of the impossible experience of our own sublimity and as such it is the call we could never recognize. We would have to hang up on it.

Rather, silence bespeaks itself in and as the difference, the interval, of sound; it opens the space for sound as such within each and every sound. I can recognize that I say anything at all only in the silence that spaces the possibility of sound—but that silence I cannot hear in any way. This silence, if it is a single silence, is not meaningful; nor is it cultural. Nor does it suggest the possibility of an inter-cultural place to live beyond tolerance. It is *just* silence. Such silence never appears except in the place of its evacuation, in what is spoken. It makes no difference in itself (and therefore cannot be said to have either an “itself” or value) even as it makes possible the possibility of the difference of sound, of sounds as different and, thus, as meaningful. What might be the sign of an ethics of alterity, of an ethics that never approaches the other as an object of knowledge, as some-thing to be placed in relation to my understanding? The hyphen: the graphic mark that appears to disappear in every word, between every sound of every word, in order that sound and word might form themselves. Yet, in a word, the hyphen makes no difference. The hyphen marks—without framing, without capturing—the spacing of sound and voice. In indicating this spacing, however, the hyphen—the silence of the hyphen—adds nothing; it makes no sense in the word, *la voz*. In a word, the hyphen makes no sense: it spaces. Its effects, then, are incalculable. What becomes possible in and over such spacing, the hyphen does not determine; even as it makes whatever-happens possible, whatever-happens is nonetheless not necessary.

At that border, the border of alterity, we keep vigil in s-i-l-l-e-n-c-e.



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