



AT
HOME
IN
THE
WORLD

BY MICHAEL JACKSON

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WORLD

Also by Michael Jackson

Ethnography

The Kuranko

Allegories of the Wilderness

Barawa, and the Ways Birds Fly in the Sky

Paths Toward a Clearing

Fiction

Rainshadow

Pieces of Music

Poetry

Latitudes of Exile

Wall

Going On

Duty Free

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FOR FRANCINE

After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeable-ness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. People will say, perhaps, that these games with oneself would better be left backstage; or, at best, that they might properly form part of those preliminary exercises that are forgotten once they have served their purpose. But, then, what is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?—Michel Foucault

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Warlpiri people, who accepted my wife and me into their communities, I owe an intellectual and personal debt. Although I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of those whose experiences, voices, and Dreamings permeate the pages of this book, I am aware that disguising names neither effaces identity nor writes off debts. Like many anthropologists today, I reject the idea that the rationale of our intellectual endeavor is the discovery of “the one and only truth about the world.” Fieldwork provides a heightened awareness of what is and is not humanly possible. Its goal is, to some degree, to work out a *modus vivendi* among people whose cultural values are radically different, to show that human beings *can* coexist in “an atmosphere of tolerant solidarity.” In this sense, anthropology is a form of experimentation and critique in which the anthropologist and his or her culture figure as focal subjects. Method becomes a question of making a virtue out of what others have historically had to do as a matter of necessity—finding a way across cultural divides and social barriers, enlarging horizons, learning new languages, living rather than paying lip service to a pluralistic ethos, attempting to move beyond the received opinions which conventionally condemn human beings to isolation from one another in the name of essential difference. In writing this account of my experience among the Warlpiri I have striven to communicate something of these imperatives, and at the same time convey crucial Warlpiri concerns to those of my own culture who remain oblivious or indifferent to the struggle of tribal peoples in modern nation states. In this measure I hope that this book

may reciprocate the goodwill of those who received me, a stranger, so generously into their world. I gratefully acknowledge members of the Lajamanu and Yuendumu councils and all those Warlpiri individuals who helped me and my wife in the course of our research. I am particularly indebted to Jimmy Robertson Jampijinpa, Shorty Ray Rose Japaljarri, Ian Jimmy Jangala, Abie Jangala, Joe Long Jangala, Paddy Nelson Jupurrurla, Harry Nelson Jakamarra, Henry Cook Jakamarra, Teddy Morrison Jupurrurla, P. B. (*kumunjayi*) Japanangka, and Cecil Johnson Japangardi, who worked closely with me in every aspect of my fieldwork. When I first went to Central Australia in 1989, Petronella Morel and Jim Wafer helped me get my bearings. I owe Robert Hoogenraad thanks for photocopying a Warlpiri dictionary for me at short notice. During my association with the Central Land Council, Angus Green was unstinting in his assistance and advice. Both my wife and I owe a great deal to his friendship and support. Finally, I would like to record my gratitude to the College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University, which provided funds for fieldwork in Central Australia in 1989, 1990, and 1991, and for a return visit to Lajamanu in 1994.

AT HOME
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ONE

Most serious thought in our time struggles

with the feeling of homelessness.

—Susan Sontag



This book is about the experience of home. It is a record of a journey in search of what it means, in the late twentieth century, to be at home in the world. The journey took me to Central Australia, where I did ethnographic fieldwork in 1990 and 1991, but the philosophical and personal impulse to write this book has been with me for a long time, nurtured by years of living outside the country where I was born and raised, by experiences working among the homeless in London, and by what I have seen of the impact of migration, dispossession, and loss in the lives of people in Europe, West Africa, America, and the antipodes. Yet it would be a mistake to locate the origins of this book in one particular moment or one particular place, because personal experience is always foreshadowed and fated by imperatives that belong to our shared history and common humanity. This is why, when I embarked upon this project, I knew I would have to walk away from the familiar. Only with the advantage of distance could I hope to throw into relief the ways in which, in John Berger's telling phrase, "we live not just our own lives but the longings of our century."

Ours is a century of uprootedness. All over the world, fewer and fewer people live out their lives in the place where they were born. Perhaps at no other time in history has the question of belonging seemed so urgent. Since the end of the Second World War, millions of men and women have migrated from the impoverished countries of the south to cities of the industrialized north because they see no future for themselves at home. They sell their labor and hope to return to vil-

lages where they will become heroes. As with the homeless of metropolitan Europe and the United States, census enumerators can never accurately count their number.

"I'm not counted, so I guess I don't exist," said James Gibb, a forty-year-old Vietnam veteran, who spends a lot of time riding the New York subway.

"We don't count for society," said another homeless man. "It's like we're just fleas on a dog."

As if one has to be numbered to be known.

These days, the dispirited comments of the migrant worker, the refugee, the street kid, the vagrant, are metaphors for something we all feel. The quarter we drop into the panhandler's Styrofoam cup on a freezing January afternoon betokens our own mood of estrangement, even when we are well-housed and well-heeled.

Perhaps it is the pace of historical change that makes a mockery of any expectation that one might ever live, as W. B. Yeats put it, "like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place." Home, observes Salmon Rushdie, "has become a scattered, damaged, hydra-variant concept in our present travails." Certainly, it is difficult now to find anywhere that abets the illusion that one's own world is also *the* world. Edward Said describes exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home." For a lot of people this describes the state of the world.

Yet homelessness isn't always experienced as a mutilation of one's life, an insurmountable sorrow.

In 1917, the poet Blaise Cendrars, having lost his right arm in the war, returns to the 5th arrondissement in Paris. He is a changed man. So too is the old quarter. Some of the street names are different, Saint-Séverin has been stripped bare, la place Maubert is bigger, rue Saint-Jacques has been widened.

This is the neighborhood where the twenty-year-old poet exchanged his Swiss birth name for the sobriquet Cendrars, assuming a French identity and being born to poetry. Now, ten years on, rather than mourn the changes, he celebrates them—in a poem from *Au coeur du monde*—as expressions of the liberating spirit of modernity. It is the first time he has written a poem with his left hand:

Je porte un visage d'aujourd'hui
Et le crâne de mon grand-père

C'est pourquoi je ne regrette rien
Et j'appelle les démolisseurs

Foutez mon enfance par terre
Ma famille et mes habitudes
Mettez une gare à la place
Ou laissez un terrain vague
Qui dégage mon origine

Je ne suis pas le fils de mon père
Et je n'aime que ma bisaïeule
Je me suis fait un nom nouveau
Visible comme une affiche bleue
Et rouge montée sur un échafaudage
Derrière quoi on édifie
Des nouveautés des lendemains*

The word "home" is shot through with ambiguity. "To be rooted," wrote Simone Weil, "is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." But isn't it also true that we often feel an equally strong need to uproot ourselves and cross the borders that conventionally divide us? According to Freud, "the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother's womb." He forgot to mention that it can also be a tomb.

In 1950 the Australian anthropologist Kenneth Read was on a patrol in an area of the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea where people had never before seen a white man. One morning, as Read and his companions were breaking camp, a young boy from the village approached them. Using gestures, he made it clear that he wanted to return with them to the place they had come from. The boy was perhaps thirteen or fourteen. He spoke no language but his own. Yet he was prepared to throw in his lot with these outsiders and undertake a journey, Read wrote, "immeasurably greater than the distance involved, virtually a transition from one world to another." Even though the terrors of the unknown were mitigated by a kind of visionary opportunism (since, to have any hope of becoming a leader in one's natal village, a man had to brave the hazards of the outside world and seek out the power and wealth said to exist only in alien lands), this "leap through time," Read notes, "took a measure of courage and a degree of foresight almost

*I wear a face for today/and the skull of my grandfather/It's why I have no regrets/and call out to the demolition gangs/raze my childhood to the ground/my family and my customs/build a railway station there instead/or leave some waste ground/to erase my origins/I am not the son of my father/I love only my grandfather/I gave myself a new name/as legible as a blue and red/poster pasted on the scaffolding/behind which they are dreaming up/innovations for the days to come.

impossible to comprehend.” Did the boy, Susuro, whose new name was an affectionate diminutive of the name of his adopted village, ever succeed in his aspirations? Thirty years after leaving “The High Valley” Read went back. Old acquaintances told him that Susuro had remained in Susuroka for several years, growing to manhood there and working from time to time in a nearby township. He then returned home. Of Susuro’s subsequent fate, all Read could learn was that he was dead, killed by sorcery among his own people.

Thomas Wolfe made famous the phrase “You can’t go home again.” For him the words were filled with the forlorn realization that we cannot reverse time, cannot retrace our steps along a certain road and expect to experience ourselves as we were when we first walked down it. But Susuro’s story suggests an outlook pervaded less by nostalgia than a yearning to open oneself up to the world at large. It brings to mind the famous anecdote about Diogenes, who, when asked the name of his hometown, replied, “the world.”

Susuro’s story also reminds us that history has made go-betweens of us all, and that anthropology is itself a product of an age of trespass and travel, a world in which frontiers no longer contain those born within them. Crossing erstwhile boundaries in order to transmute local into global knowledge, anthropology has usurped the restive role which the German Romantic poet, Novalis, accorded philosophy: the urge to be at home everywhere. There may be something heroic about this, as Susan Sontag suggests. Rather than be oppressed by the intellectual vertigo of living without determinate borders, one celebrates the possibilities that are opened up for understanding oneself in otherness.

This is how I understood the journey I embarked upon. Much had been written on the subject of home and homelessness in the Western world, but what of the experience of home elsewhere? By going to Aboriginal Australia, I hoped to explore the ways in which people created and sustained a sense of belonging and autonomy when they did not build or dwell in houses, and house was not synonymous with home.

This search for what it is to be at home in the world entailed another: I wanted to develop a style of writing which would be consonant with lived experience, in all its variety and ambiguity.

Nowadays, one must have recourse to art and literature if one is to keep alive a sense of what hard science, with its passion for definitive concepts and systematic knowledge, often forgoes or forgets.

The painter who dispenses with framing in order to reunite the field of artistic vision with the space of the world, or the composer who breaks down the boundaries between what is deemed music and noise (I am thinking here of John Cage*), find a natural ally in the philosopher who, aware that concepts never cover the fullness of human experience, sees the task of description as more compelling than that of explanation.

John Berger writes: "If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories. As things are here, life outstrips our vocabulary."

Theodor Adorno called this the untruth of identity, by which he meant that concepts plunder but never exhaust the wealth of experience. Life cannot be pressed into the service of language. Concepts represent experience at the cost of leaving a lot unsaid. So long as we use concepts to cut up experience, giving value to some things at the expense of others, we inhibit our sense of the plenitude of Being. We gain some purchase on the world, to be sure, but claiming that our concepts contain all that can be usefully said about experience, we close off the possibility of critique. It is only when we cease trying to control the world that we can overcome our fixation on the autarchy of concepts.

It is because no word is able to contain the moods of a moment, or capture what Gerard Manly Hopkins called "things counter, original, spare, strange," that writers approach the world so tortuously and obliquely, using "inept metaphors and obvious periphrases" to draw attention to a subject they are unwilling to name. It is their way of recognizing that life eludes our grasp and remains at large, always fugitive. Like a forest in which there are clearings. Like a forest through whose canopy sunlight filters and falls.

A hundred years ago William James observed: "Our fields of experience have no *more* definite boundaries than have our points of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops . . . and supercedes them as life proceeds." But many of us are intolerant of indefinite things which overflow boundaries and plunge us into the confusing stream of direct experience. We tend to single out ex-

*John Cage asks: "Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?" It is one way of underscoring the need for a musically open-minded "attitude that is non-exclusive, that can include what we know together with what we do not yet imagine."

periences which we can handle, with which we are comfortable, with which we can live. Other experiences go by the board, thrown back into a world we repudiate as Other and try to forget. So we set more store by nouns than the words that conjoin them. "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use."

Perhaps the fault lies with the English language. Many of the words we think of as stable nouns should really be called verbs, in as much as they refer to fleeting things. The Hopi language is more natural in this sense, classifying lightning, stormcloud, and flame as verbs because they are transitory. In Nootka, you don't say "house," but "it houses," or "a house occurs" because, for the Nootka, houses are impermanent.

Sometimes, the places where we feel most at home are like nouns in sentences. We are comforted by the way they appear to be sealed off from the world, complacent in their own definition. But sometimes it is imperative to unsettle that sense of being housed, to risk oneself in the world, to recognize the power of verbs, prepositions, and copulas.

"To approach experience," writes John Berger, "is not like approaching a house."

I left the United States in the dead of winter and flew to New Zealand on my way to Sydney.

It was an odd experience arriving home, and thinking about home, when I had been living away from my native country for so many years.

There is a Maori saying that for as long as a person lives on the land or returns regularly to it, a fire burns there (*ahi ka*). But if you go away and do not return, the fire goes out (*ahi mataotao*). Hardly a year had gone by without my visiting family and friends in New Zealand, but, like many antipodeans of European descent, I had an ambivalent relationship with my homeland. You feel estranged from your European roots yet cannot identify wholeheartedly with the indigenous culture of the land. You live betwixt and between, uneasy about your origins, unsure of where you stand, in two minds about your identity and allegiance.

The quandary is, of course, rooted in the problem of how indigenous and European cultures can coexist. The Maori are the *tangata*

whenua, people of the land. Others are guests, strangers, interlopers.

Perhaps it is the land which holds the answer.

Whata ngarongaro he tangata, toitu he whenua (human beings pass away, while the land remains), goes the Maori adage.

Certainly, it is always the land I think of when I think of New Zealand. In winter, rainclouds scudding over indelibly green hills. In summer, the smell of dry grass and river water. The blueness of the mountains in the south.

In Auckland I rented a car and drove to Coromandel. I wanted to look up old friends who lived on a commune near Waikawau Bay.

The asphalt road shimmered in the heat and the air smelled of lupins. It had been a long time since I had experienced the exhilaration of the open road, and snatches of Walt Whitman kept running through my head.

Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road . . .

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and
imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
Listening to others, considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of
the holds that would hold me . . .

Now I re-examine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet may not prove at all
Under the spacious clouds and along the
Landscape and flowing currents . . .

Along the narrow Coromandel road, gnarled pohutukawas clung to embankments of yellow clay. Dishevelled shags roosted on black rocks. The stench of the sea filled my nostrils.

My first morning at the commune I woke at first light and went for a run along the beach. Oyster catchers and plover skittered away. The sand was slicked with pale blue, like the slip smoothed under a potter's hand.

I kicked off my running shoes, stripped naked, and walked into the sea. It washed around my ankles and gouged a hollow under my heels. I hesitated. The water was cold, the beach deserted. I looked out beyond the breakers for telltale signs of a rip, wondering vaguely

who would come to my assistance if I got into difficulties. I felt foolish and vulnerable. Then, as another wave began to break, I ran forward and plunged in. It knocked the breath out of me, but my trepidation vanished and I struck out for the horizon.