

Encountering the Return

*Nina Ginsberg**

I've just completed fieldwork with the Lunsar community in Sierra Leone. The return is going to be hard. I feel it rising as I sit on the plane at Lungi airport, waiting to take off. Bearing 'home'. The taste of Lunsar chili oil is strong and incessant. Kissime made crain-crain and rice for lunch and even now, three hours on, my mouth holds traces of capsaicin and saltiness. My stomach grumbles and I smile. I look up at the ceiling. I look out of my window. I look down at my seatbelt. I'm still waiting – but waiting for what? My forearm prickles as recycled air-con evaporates equatorial sweat. Ribbons of light red dust settles in the skin folds of my arm. Temporary environmental tattoos of my body-being in provincial West Africa. I think of the girls and families I am leaving behind.

While there, I moved and was moved. I travel(ed) to places, saw and did things that will stay with me forever: portaging research equipment over flooded bogs barefoot, squeezing eight people into a overheated taxi, falling asleep to Temne drumming, ferrying precariously-filled mango baskets on our heads to market, consulting a ceremonial chief about voodoo, traversing bamboo bridges holding bicycles aloft, farming with the Widow's Collective, single-tracking cassava fields on fire in the mid-morning sun, and visiting dusty classrooms with 70+ under eights. I close my eyes and cycle through them all. I see the smiling faces, urgent conversations, invitations for introductions and earnest health clinic visits. I feel the festive sport carnivals, sweaty late-night dancehalls, secret women's business, and walking-worlds divided. Breathe in. One near miss that deserved the glares. Breathe out. Local kid's affective alarm of an approaching 'white foreigner' shouted house to house just ahead of me: "Aporto! Aporto! Aporto!" Twice daily trips to the well for water. The idea of trying to shape this whole experience into 'research' is unsettling as I (re)write and (re)right words and worlds. Now as I (re)turn, I feel tired. And I feel guilt and warmth. How can I possibly repay and honor these experiences and encounters?

Airborne, I pull out my researcher journal and continue worlding. With scholarly papers littered haphazardly around me and in deep thought, a near-by businessman leans over.

Managed to sneak away, huh?

Sorry, what?

Good for you! Forget the family! So, did you go on Safari? What an incredible landscape, hey? And the animals!

No, actually, I was here for work - research in fact.

Oh.

Conversation ends. Silence.

Has he lost interest because I don't meet his conception of a lone female traveller?

*Nina Ginsberg teaches Gender and Literacy, Public Health and Research Methodologies for Health Sciences at Griffith University, Australia. She is also a PhD candidate with Griffith's School of Education and Professional Studies. Her research employs New Materialisms to explore how bodies and dynamics are shaped by relational materiality. She can be reached at n.ginsberg@griffith.edu.au

Transiting between airports, time zones and cultures is ritualistic, curious and jarring. Globetrotters copycatting, noses sniffing, aspirations oscillating between duty-free stands. I prop myself up against a frigid wall of windows and marvel at the oddities, myself included. Travelers are purposeful, but listless. They walk to entertain while inflated velvet neck pillows hang precariously around collars as glaring artificial lights burn down. Countless wabbit bodies are contorted into deliberately ill-fitting blue plastic chairs as if poured inappropriately into a row of seats. Some spill out, while others spill over. A chairfull of human spillage, pillage, s/pill-aged.

A chapter later and I attune to the rhythmic. Despite the crowds, there is an unnerving quiet to it all. Mechanical hums. Hushed conversations. Rubberized footsteps. Papers rustling. I am immersed in this sensorium, both consciously and unconsciously. I marvel at arrangements that are both familiar yet abhorrent, meaningful yet abusive, habitual yet divergent. A dark-skinned female in a cleaner's uniform walks by with a heavily stocked cart equipped for any sanitation emergency. Hard work(er). Wafts of disinfectant precede, surround and trail her. A wave of self-conscious angst hits as I realise I am examining her. I watch her labor(ing) from afar. My privilege bites.

A traveller groans with pockets of pilgrims, thrill seekers, strung out families, couples holding hands, two team-theme travel groups, and a few funky over-60s. They lean heavily on the moving rail trying to balance take-away food, mobile phones, coordinated luggage sets and plastic bags bursting with gifts. As always, people are telling stories and playing games. On a TV in the corner, a news broadcaster asks the guest for clarification as colorful statistics roll urgently across the bottom of the screen. *What did they just say?* The muted strain. The audience is turned off. Everybody is watching, but no one is listening. Ten days from now, others will navigate this same s/pl/pace with heightened pandemic-panic with the volume turned way up. Self-isolation for a fortnight on arrival for them, but not for us. We are the just-throughs. The 'lucky ones'. In a month, all airports close. But for now, I'm content to watch the glow of kinospheres pause, push and parry as traveller-news cycles. The air here still smells of confidence and convenience. Only some smiles are set just a little too hard. Just as I watch and judge others, they too are doing the same to me. What a sight. We are all passing time/part-time researchers until our departure-arrival.

I am haunting transit lounge wormholes. At Gate C3, a friendly automated public announcement acknowledges COVID and reminds us to wash hands and avoid coughing, in four languages. Eyes dart nervously to others, then quickly to the floor. Children are pulled closer. Speech is muffled behind cheap, disposable face masks. We are all newly ordained quasi-health enforcers spreading dis-ease. My last plane landed me unwittingly amidst an unfamiliar Sci-Fi-Medico co-production, full of (un)known characters, props and choreographies. A glitch that requires immediate attention. I tumble inside and out. My travelogue is changing me, but this worlding I am returning-absent-present, is also changing meanwhile.

Touch down. Mothers start to gather, rouse and organize. A teenager playfully punches his mate in the arm and is shushed by an embarrassed girlfriend. We are reminded of the local time, to give to charity and thanked for our patronage. We wait. Dry eyes sting from being suspended in high pressure. Door opens. I collect my bags and wait to alight. Holding, I note the changes in passengers as they funnel past: half-finished coloring-ins, indistinct ear-bud

rap music, a crushed hand-knitted green cardigan starting to unravel, the acrid haze of freshly applied *Lynx Africa*, sugary crumbs clinging to T-shirts, and far more buttons pressed than before. Messy, disorientated, grateful. Post-humanity on display. Everyday models showcasing the micro-realities of life on an awkward aviation catwalk.

Inside the airport, newly replaced fluorescent lighting makes us blink and lick our lips. My face is puffy from lack of sleep, dehydration and confused vulnerability. I rub my eyes and Lunsar grit bites. My skin is grey and I need to pee. Attunement. Taking a breath, I merge with the accumulating flow of human bodies and baggage that feeds immigration. Port Passing. Biosecurity Screening. Culture Shifting. In custom's queues, agitation shifts to anticipation, then to excitement, and back again.

We stand hypnotized as we wait for our bags: around, around, around, ever potential, never getting any(w)here, but always (t)here. Anticipation is a tangible force that hugs us nervously and draws us nearer. We are seduced by the im/possibility of having our public-private baggage processed through the bowels - and then presented through the mouth - of an impedimenta carousel. Travelers shuffle, kids yawn, authorities monitor. Without warning, each of us is allowed to break free at the very moment our 'goods' are made public. Mobile phones and faces light up. Steps quicken toward hand-held signs and exits. Convergence.

Outside, I swim in the fresh air. I make my way to our agreed upon pick up point: the purple lamp to the far right under the Audi banner – just like always. Goosebumps in the balmy sunset. Nearly home. I draw Aunty Mariato's shawl around me a little more tightly – and hold on. Beneath the traffic fumes, honking and yelling there is a faint hint of eucalypt. Husband arrives. Car door opens. Hugs and 'Hello beautiful'. How was my trip? I burst into tears.