

## Eat, Pray, Love: The "White Imagination" of Sanctuary

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### Abstract

The stretched-out Oprah-endorsed *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007) cultural model—what I call the "'white imagination' of sanctuary"—is a troublesome one as we continue to struggle over neoliberal empire-inspired border racialization projects. In this "white imagination" (hooks 1992/2015) of sanctuary, the travels to find oneself often include falling in love—and perhaps even finding an orgasmic cup of coffee—as a confirmation of enlightenment. The *Eat, Pray, Love* peace and sanctuary model effaces the specificities of how the travel between the "Global North" and "Global South" is constructed through guarded nation-state borders and citizenship. In this model, the search for sanctuary à la spiritual awakening is tethered to the discourse of "finding oneself" through transatlantic travels—which requires freedom of mobility across nation-state boundaries—between the "West," e.g., America, to the "East," e.g., India. The discourse of sanctuary bracketed with travel (while drinking sweetened coffee/tea in quaint cafés) is based on "western" (e.g., American) citizenship (and class and race privileges), and it is the legacy of the White traveler on vacation—luxury, leisure, and privilege.

*Keywords:* travel; sanctuary, White imagination, Orientalism, privilege

Roksana Badruddoja focuses on contemporary social inequalities and the voices of marginalized "Others" as her sites of thinking to address social problems in the modern world. She is the author of *National (un)Belonging: Bengali American Women on Imagining and Contesting Culture and Identity* (Brill/Haymarket, In press), the editor of *"New Maternalisms": Tales of Motherwork* (Demeter, 2016), and a contributor of *Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian Daughters in Obedience and Rebellion* (Aunt Lute, 2016).

The stretched-out Oprah-endorsed *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007) cultural model—what I call the "'white imagination' of sanctuary"—is a troublesome one as we continue to struggle over neoliberal empire-inspired border racialization projects. As a critical race feminist, I have immersed myself in the stories of detained children separated from their parents and as a cross-cultural and inter-faith urban shamanic practitioner, I have been energetically tending to the traumas of over 2000 separated families under the Trump administration's actively taking away sanctuaries policy. Here, the *Eat, Pray, Love* peace and sanctuary model effaces the specificities of how travel between the "Global North" and "Global South" is constructed through guarded nation-state borders and citizenship. In this model, the search for sanctuary à la spiritual awakening is tethered to the discourse of "finding oneself" through transatlantic travels—which requires freedom of mobility across nation-state boundaries—between the "West", e.g., America, England, and Canada, to the "East", e.g., India, Tibet and Nepal. In this "white imagination" (hooks 1992/2015) of sanctuary, the travels to find oneself often include falling in love—and perhaps even finding an orgasmic cup of coffee—as a confirmation of enlightenment. The model clearly perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes. Edward Said (1979) writes,

*[Orientalism is] not only a positive doctrine about the Orient that exists at any one time in the West; it is also an influential academic tradition, as well as an area of concern defined by travelers, commercial enterprises, governments, military expeditions, readers of novels and accounts of exotic adventure, natural historians, and pilgrims to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, people, and civilizations. (p. 203)*

In "Contemplations at the Virgin de la Caridad Cafetería, Inc.", poet Richard Blanco (1998) inserts the colonial history of sugar in this legacy:

*...assembled for a standing breakfast of nostalgia,  
of tastes that swirl with the delicacy of memories  
in these forty-cent cups of brown sugar histories,  
in the swirling froth of café-con-leche,  
que será*

The discourse of sanctuary bracketed with travel (while drinking sweetened coffee/tea in quaint cafés) is based on "western" (e.g., American) citizenship (and class and race privileges); it is the legacy of the white traveler on vacation—luxury, leisure, and privilege. Border-control and population protection policies profoundly impact the privilege of travel—i.e., lack thereof—for American immigrants. Immigrants possess a range of immigration statuses from undocumented immigrants, dependents, temporary workers on visas, refugees and asylum-seekers and permanent residents to citizens. Here, the rights and welfare—quality of life and access to livable wages—of immigrants in this country are not top priority, making it prohibitive (e.g., undocumented immigrants) or difficult (e.g., the 2002 National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, NSEERS, for non-citizens) for many to travel back and forth between national borders. The historic xenophobic tenor of contemporary American immigration policies subjects many to profiling and make it difficult to access the rights to which we are entitled.

While the discourse of citizenship affects the privilege of travel—the production of class-based transatlantic travel (Badruddoja 2006)—for (American)

immigrants, their children and subsequent generations, the colonial imaginary American immigration laws are rooted in impact the experiences of travel as luxury, leisure, and privilege. Puar (1994b) reflects, "I clutched on to [my passport] as proof of my right to movement, seeing the American eagle on its front as a sign of democracy, the freedom to move..." (87). The conceptualization of "travel" for many of us diasporic people is neither a "natural" space nor is it nation friendly. Furthermore, travel "functions as a threat to certain homes while becoming the construct of home for certain Others" (Puar 1994a, 76-77). A second generation South Asian-American informant suggests dissatisfaction with the fixed and immobile conceptualizations of "travel" (and "home") (Badruddoja In Press):

*I currently embody everything that the majority of, at least eligible, voters hate. I am queer, Muslim, and brown. What else is there? I was born here [the United States], but there is part of me that feels like I don't belong here. I don't have that draw; that pull it is not the same. Of course, I come back to my senses. ... The last time I went to Bangladesh was seven years ago ... There is an air about the way I walk or the way I talk, even when I am speaking Bengali. Someone even said eye contact marks me a little different, so I am Othered in that way [too].* (p. 5)

The respondent describes her travels to Dhaka by evoking sexual imagery that accompanies what it means to be a Bangladeshi wo/man (and an American wo/man), beauty standards she is far from,

*I remember on Eid I was decked out ... in a sari and my cousin put her wedding jewelry all over me ... We took rickshaws to another khala's [maternal aunt] house ...*

*and on the way all the men in the street were coming up to the rickshaw and leering in my face, [asking], "Cheley na mey?" [Boy or girl?] and they were mean ...* (p. 160)

Certainly, my second-generation South Asian American respondent's—a WOC—traveling is not about freedom and mobility. Blanco (1998) sings,

*...with the palms of this exotic confusion;  
que será, that I too should be a question,  
que será, what have I seen, what do I know—  
culture of café and loss, this place I call home.*

We diasporic subjects struggle with travel as a method to "find 'home'" or the Self.

Influenced by Anzaldúa (1999), I use my citizenship, class, and academic privileges to call out classist, sexist, racist, ableist, ageist, etc. and nationalist rhetoric, policies and imaginations and affirm my loyalty to issues that impact the lives of the marginalized. The contemporary identity "American" as a subject of citizenship is predicated on conquest, the erasure of indigenous history and culture and the desecration and pirating of indigenous lands known as Turtle, Serpent and Heart Island Islands (the Aboriginal Creation Story of the lands that are now known as North America). We identify as Americans by rendering indigenous communities as non-existent as if nothing existed before the arrival of conquest. How many of us "lean in<sup>2</sup>" to ask, were we always known as the Americas? The legacy of the white traveling subject is deeply embedded in a bounded and guarded colonial national identity, (re-) produced.

I name the interest that whites take in traveling to my ancestral motherlands and immersing in my ancestral mother cultures for the advancement of their spiritual awakening as cultural appropriation, the epitome of racialized sexual violence of land, culture and people. The neoliberal white traveler lives in ashrams, studies with gurus, and serves in Mother Teresa Anbu Illam (orphanage) and the immersion in my ancestral cultures and teachings will not be used to unlearn racism in their everyday lives by evaluating their own racial experiences as whites. Rather, the nourishing chai graciously offered at sunrise by sherpas in the hills of Kathmandu is trademarked—®—as *Bulletproof* and the energy concoction conceived by tuk-tuk drivers to be able stay up all night in Bangkok as *Red Bull*. We are quick to take in Other cultures via the Orientalist gaze as part of our neoliberal capitalistic "ethnic chic" consumption, but we do not use our interest to unlearn racism. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992/2015) writes, "While it has become 'cool' for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism" (p. 17). Before adorning ourselves with jewelry embossed with the sacred OM, how many of us invest ourselves in Hindu Vedic literature to learn the OM sound resonates at a wavelength of 7.23 centimeters, which is the average sound of all objects in the universe? The purchase itself is perhaps not problematic as is the lack of imaginative interrogation of our intents.

Consequently, might I argue the platform of spiritual awakening for whites is to take responsibility for interrogating their own racism as part of their racial experiences as whites? In the vocabulary of

intersectionality, I ask, what might it mean to be white as a "white folk" (à la hooks)? What are the racial experiences as a white? What world views/belief systems inform your racial experiences as a white? And, when passports are stamped with "exotic" places as a hallmark of spiritual awakening, how does class travel through whiteness and how does whiteness travel through class? Finally, what is the relationship between a white racial experience and the journey with Spirit? These questions help us to develop a more complicated understanding of whiteness as a racial experience in the journey of spiritual awakening and hopefully will allow whites to use intersectionality more successfully.

In the end, I impart the Self is not something to be discovered, i.e., "self-discovery" (seeking peace and finding it), because the Self is not discoverable. The Self already is (here). The Self is never lost. The Self, like Love, is ubiquitous. The notion of "finding myself" is an old paradigm that must fall away. The question is never "Who am I?" Rather, the question is, "What stories do I/we want to tell about myself/ourselves? The *Tubman House*, a community farming project in West Baltimore addressing food apartheid, makes this evident. Residents in Freddie Gray's Neighborhood of Sandtown demonstrate to us how to build community wealth as they transform a vacant, rundown lot to a thriving urban farm. Then, by logic, being in "search of love" is another misguided paradigm. In our "quest" for love, we Human Earth Walkers have forgotten that there is no need to be on such a quest for love is abundant and continuously present (within us). Love is infinite and omnipotent. The question is never whether we will find love or not. The question is whether we will choose to *allow* love to permeate our contractual Human Earth Walks. In other words, there is no

need for us to search for and find love. Rather, during our sojourn, we simply need to accept and allow love into our lives. The discovery of the Self through travel is part and parcel of Orientalist conquest. The intersection between Self and Love—enlightenment—is the constant and

continual (re-)invention of oneself while taking complete joy in the lessons learned and the process of (re-)invention versus the destination and outcome. There is no need to travel anywhere to find ourselves! All that is required is continual Shifts in Perspectives.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I borrow Elizabeth Gilbert's 2007 book title *Eat, Pray, Love*.

<sup>2</sup> I prod Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) brand of feminism.

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