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Binarisms, Adaptation, and Love: Albuquerque 2016

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I was fortunate enough recently to attend the Southwest Popular Culture Association meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico in February 2016. This was the third time I had attended the conference; I find it rather unique in its capacity to embrace academics and graduate learners in a non-threatening ambiance, where participants genuinely try to help each other rather than to try and score cheap scholarly methodological points for their own personal self-gratification.

My visit offered more suggestive ideas as to how we might approach the idea of adaptation and apply it to agendas other than the familiar literature-film-media paradigm. I visited a thrift shop while I was there, and was fortunate enough to pick up a stack of books at \$1 each. Although my suitcase was weighed down, I was pleased to find a variety of titles ranging from Katharine Hepburn's autobiography, Neil Simon's ideas on playwriting, and a polemical work by the American talk show host Rush Limbaugh.¹ While Limbaugh might be an extremist, his book offered a salutary explanation as to why binary oppositions form such an essential part of western thought. They provide an intellectual safety-value, a means by which individuals can distance themselves from phenomena that they find uncomfortable or even disturbing. I don't like Obamacare because it's redolent of "socialism," and I believe in the free market; this is one of Limbaugh's favorite refrains. Likewise: the "Middle East" is full of Muslims, and I am a Christian; I have frequently read that in recent reports on the Turkish Republic. Or, more prosaically: I am an educator working with learners, and I find it difficult to understand why they are so reluctant to think for themselves (a familiar lament on Facebook).

It seems to me that "adaptation" consists of the ability to be able to transcend such oppositions and acquire more pluralistic viewpoints. You might be an educator, but you might also try to understand your learners; likewise, you might make the effort to understand the purpose behind President Obama's health policies. I was vividly reminded of the importance of this process when I visited the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. Situated just outside the Old Town, it is a bustling hive of activity; on the day I went, a local history group listened to a lecture and thronged the museum café afterwards, chattering excitedly about what they had just heard. As I walked round the exhibits, I became more and more conscious of how the various communities inhabiting the city – Native Indians, Euros, Mexicans – had spent centuries learning how to live with one another. In particular the Native Indians had had to learn how to accommodate themselves to the experience of white expansion, of having their lands colonized and their rituals policed. Sometimes their sole

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means of expressing resistance was through crafts and/or the practice of religion, of maintaining the belief that they could achieve a spiritual state of grace through sustaining their faith in God.

My perceptions were radically sharpened two days later when I walked round the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center that traced the growth, development and perpetuation of Pueblo Indian Culture, History and Art. One gallery was entitled "Adaptation," and used a combination of archival photographs, paintings and explanatory panels to trace how the Pueblos had accommodated themselves to the major socio-economic developments in nineteenth century America. The myths I had grown up with, of Native Indians perpetually fighting the Euros, were exploded; what I saw was a much more complex story of cultural and religious give-and-take, of cultures trying their utmost to negotiate with one another in an often difficult and dangerous environment. I am not trying to defend the actions of white settlers here; my experience of the Cultural Center taught me that I did not have to think of nineteenth century New Mexican history in such militarist terms. Rather I should focus on the ways in which the Pueblos adapted themselves so as to reinterpret their past traditions in light of present-day realities.

Suitably energized, I returned to the conference, and had the good fortune to re-encounter Jarrod Bolin and his group of high school learners and graduates. In 2015 I had listened to their presentation and had been quite literally bowled over by the coherence and enthusiasm with which they presented their arguments. Any fears they might have had of talking to an audience of academics was not immediately apparent; what we heard was a marvelous set of arguments attesting to the value of forging a community of purpose in a learning environment. This year I wanted to interview Jarrod and his learners, with a view to publicizing their efforts worldwide. They were more than ready to talk about how their entire educational experience had been revolutionized; rather than following a pre-ordained curriculum, they had been encouraged to work on their own and discuss their insights in small groups. Jarrod did not actively tell them what to do, but offered encouragement and inspiration where necessary. He also admitted that he had learned a great deal about person management – more so than he had ever expected when he became an educator in the first place.

I was struck by the coherence with which the interviewees recalled their experiences and tried to make sense of them for their futures as educators and university learners. Like the Pueblo Indians, they had subjected themselves to a process of adaptation, by setting aside their (often negative) recollections of education in the past and committing themselves instead to more collective modes of learning. There was a considerable amount of risk involved – would the group actually cope with collaborative rather than top-down methods of instruction? On the other hand the benefits of this mode of education were obvious, not only educationally but personally: all Jarrod's learners possessed the kind of self-confidence and sheer naked optimism that us oldies can sometimes only dream about.²

Listening to the various presentations given by more established academics, I wondered – rather wistfully – why they could not have taken a leaf out of Jarrod's learners' pedagogical books and learned how to talk to rather than at their audiences. That is, until I heard Jillian Saint Jacques' presentation, which offered another mind-blowing experience of how established forms of conference communication could be turned on their head (adapted, perhaps?) to produce something highly stimulating and – in this case – emotionally affecting. Jillian talked at length about his own process of adaptation throughout his life, as he became a transsexual and then decided after a period of time to reassume his masculine identity. It would be invidious of me to summarize his piece in detail (in case he wants to publish it), but what struck me was the honesty and passion with which he spoke. He was talking about "adaptation studies" in a psychological sense, but was also using himself as a case-study to prove his points. We listened, almost stunned, as he talked about how people reacted to his various shifts of identity, and how such shifts forced him to make major personal shifts in values and outlook. Even today, he admitted, he still wasn't sure about who he was, and had to undergo considerable periods of "adaptation" to the most mundane things – having a family, being a parent, even going to work.³ His

presentation vividly underlined what the Pueblos probably experienced over a hundred and fifty years ago, as they struggled to survive in a rapidly changing world.

As I listened to Saint Jacques' talk, I was also struck by the uncanny parallelism between apparently disparate experiences taking place in different cities at different times. I had recently read about the Russian Surrealist painter Kazimir Malevich, whose works had been shown at Tate Modern, London the previous October. Superficially they had little or nothing to do with the material in hand – except in one respect. Art critic Rachel Polonsky had been struck by the subliminal effect the exhibition had had on her consciousness, as it opened windows in her mind to embrace “the endlessly dynamic tension [...] between [...] seeing and blindness; illumination and eclipse; form and dissolution; face and effacement; matter and void.” Saint-Jacques' work explored similar tensions; it was not just “about” his life, but represented a profound exploration of his relationship to the world. Just like Jarrod's youngsters, he took advantage of the occasion to remind us precisely what “conferences” are – not simply collections of papers, but opportunities to refresh and restore ourselves both intellectually as well as emotionally.⁴

What did these experiences tell me? First, that “adaptation” is not only a transdisciplinary as well as a transnational concept, but applies to our daily lives. I have talked about this before, so do not want to belabor the point. Second, I think that we should treat the world as an *anima mundi*, in which apparently diverse experiences prompt us to reflect in similar ways. Through such methods we can understand how the past impacts the present and future, as well as vice versa. Third, I think that the Albuquerque experiences reminded me of just how superficial – yet damaging – the practice of willfully cutting oneself off actually is, as it tends to curtail rather than admit the possibility of negotiation or debate. I was reminded of this as I read a review of a recent book *Superpower: Three Choices for America in the World* (2015), where the author Ian Bremmer called for an “Independent America,” that would liberate itself from the rest of the world's problems and defend its national interest “modestly.”⁵ I believe that no person, community or nation-state can remain self-contained: the only way we can prosper emotionally as well as spiritually is to really listen to one another.

This is not designed as a political piece: far from it. Rather it is designed to show how a mindful awareness of one's surroundings and how we respond to them can help us become more “adaptive” as people, as well as making us more aware of the continuities linking different cultures. Such processes can take place anywhere, anytime, anyplace; but they are most meaningful at conferences such as the Albuquerque event, so long as people can understand them.

Leo Tolstoy once emphasized how the world might become a better place if we learned to love each other more – perhaps these adaptive experiences might play a significant part in helping us to achieve this goal.

ENDNOTES

1. Katharine Hepburn, *Me: Stories of My Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1996); Neil Simon, *Rewrites: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); Rush Limbaugh, *See, I Told You So* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).
2. For more on Jarrod's pedagogy, see “A Right Turn at Albuquerque,” *Mhaynes.org*, 16 Feb. 2015. Web. 13 Sep. 2016.
3. Jillian's talk attracted the attention of Elsie Walker, editor of *Literature/ Film Quarterly*. See her editorial to Vol. 44, no. 2 (2016): iii-iv.
4. Rachel Polonsky, “Windows in the Mind.” *TLS*, 26 Sep. 2014, 18.
5. Ali Wyne, “Rules of Engagement.” *TLS*, 24 Jul. 2015, 12.

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Laurence Raw teaches at the Department of English, Baskent University, Ankara, Turkey. He is currently working on a book of essays about adaptation studies, as well as an edited collection of essays on value in adaptation for McFarland. Recent publications include *Theatre for the People* (Rowman, 2015).

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