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From Nest to Next: A video essay on Passages

Michele A. Feder-Nadoff

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

“From nest-to-next” is created as an experiment of “living ethnography” that questions what home is, as place and action. We often forget that home is both noun and verb. This aural-visual essay concentrates on this tension between home as verb and home as noun, shifting the mountainous doubled humped *m* and its hum into rhythmic glyphs of embarkment: the beginnings of a trail, the ridges of the road ahead.

As Heidegger and the old testament remind us, home only becomes dwelling through activities of living rather than mere settling. Asad explains (video section 1) home as a temporary nesting. In this sense, home becomes a perch. A hovering point. Although more anchored, Malkah (video section 2) aspires to a roaming home. For the exiled Walter Benjamin, home was the briefcase containing his Passages work¹, the notebooks more commonly known as the Arcades Project.

As a noun, home is related to origin, nationality, identity, family, the familiar. Home can be the comfort of the known, of what is visible. But home is also the invisible, the hidden or withdrawn, or an atmosphere – “the smell of the nest”². Home is our bodies (as nests) and what we carry inside ourselves so we can move on. Perhaps it is the imaginary that weaves the noun-ness of home with its verb-ness. Or perhaps its transience is based in desire, aspiration, a quest for answers.

To wrestle with its meaning, this essay pries home from its built structure as house, to encounter its anti-structure. This is the moment when home becomes an assemblage of floating parts, moveable and transient: nomadic. “Home is a journey,” Malkah explains.

As student exemplars of “home,” anthropologists have long been associated with the art of (its) translation. Walter Benjamin insisted that rather than a literal word by word translation, the translator should surrender to catachrestic errancy. Sylvia Rosman (1998) explains that for Benjamin:

[T]he task of the translator no longer becomes one of restituting in the translation what was first given in the original [...] Catachresis implies a “lack” in the original to begin with [...] The original is already incomplete, in the place of lack, in permanent exile. But of course exile also becomes a dubious concept, given that there is no longer a home(land) from which to be exiled.

Translation as a spatial relation is thus also complicated in catachresis. As a place-holder or marker, catachresis not only does away with the notion of homeland, but also with the notion of a fixed ground or space (Rosman 1998: 25).

This model of catachresis is useful in understanding the dialectic relationship between home as verb and home as noun. As homeland, home is artificially fixed, staked down, and imagined. Measured and bordered. This means its stability must always be reconfigured. Nomadism does not imply homelessness, even as it may include precariousness. In this essay home surpasses its thresholds to hover in its passage.

Muhajirs

Although Deleuze and Guattari (1987) contrast the nomad with the migrant, in this video nomad and migrant intermingle, defined in broader terms, philosophically and practically. Asad identifies himself as a Muhajir, a term which is commonly translated from Urdu as immigrant. In Pakistan, immigrant refers to the many different Muslim ethnic groups exiled from India to Pakistan after the British Partition in 1947. The translation of this word is par excellence catachresis, embodying multiple histories of ethnic and lingual grouping and association.

Both Malkah and Asad are essential workers during the pandemic: Asad, as a documentary filmmaker, and Malkah, as a social worker and family therapist. Malkah is my daughter, and a Jew of partial Arab descent. Both Asad and Malkah see their respective practices as labors of resistance on a path of change.

The hovering figure and tower images

The flying man image was taken in the South Pacific Island of Pentecost, in Vanuatu. Although transformed beyond the original (context), these fabulations resonate with the many-layered history of its creation and its source. The photograph hangs in the living room of the apartment I live in with my roommate in New York, Asad. It documents a rite of passage ceremony, called land diving, which takes place in the Islands and these days as a cultural commodified spectacle for consumption by white tourists. Limited to males, young boys are trained from youth. Originally it was connected to the yam harvest. Its dislocation as an image within this film is a backstory that need not be included, yet resonates in its odd precarious malleability, and as such expands the notions around translation and nomadism, exile and home (as verb and noun).

Going beyond the skin of the film

This video essay approaches its material non-linearly, that is plurispatially as well as multi-perspectively. Any systematic order correlates with the cubist composition of

space and planes, in which transparency and opacity arrest and disarm, connecting visual gaps through imaginary movement.³

The fragmentary and the anti-systematic, as methods of video making, are the parallel equivalents to life itself and the quest, or non-quest for home. Images become flotsam. The detritus woven into the nest or left behind to disentangle and float. Following Benjamin's example, in the Surrealist tradition, this video preserves fragmentation, forging mimesis and representation through disintegration and dissonance. This is intended to reveal rather than entrap, to free experience, rather than capture it.

The camera goes beyond the "skin of the film", in Laura Marks (2000) terms, to enter spaces felt but unseen. The flat surface of the screen, as proscenium becomes elastic, visceral: provocative. This follows Benjamin's notion of the camera lens as a tool of distributed agency bringing into intimate range what the eye would not normally see. The camera moves as a shuttle or spindle through warp and weft. It is as if the camera lens was attached to the tip of the spinning spindle, the spoke of the wheel or the wing of the bird. Each of the three sections dissect the plane of the screen image in different ways, providing access to many positions in which the viewer can hover and intermingle, become nomadic and home-in while listening closely to the stories told and their imaginaries. The latter fills in the gaps on the screen and aurally leads the viewer, as much as somatically, inside their own bodies, as outside. This permeability is meant to jostle the viewer, bringing them into closer range to the speaker's voice and the moving or still images.

Notes

1 See Alter, 1991:10.

2 Hubert Tellenbach by Gernot Bohme (2017: 1-2).

3 See Alter's (1991: 9) description of Benjamin's method of thematic construction and narrative composition as drawn from an application of "philosophical Surrealism".

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All photos, video, drawings and paintings, by the author.

Except for:

Details by author of the Diving Man, were taken from from the original photograph made by Tim Clayton (https://timclayton.photoshelter.com/index/I0000Ysn7_9sOlgs) and in the apartment where Michele and Asad live.

All still-life photographs and views of the Hudson River Bay, in the middle section are authored by Malkah Nadoff.

Michele Feder-Nadoff is an anthropologist (PhD, El Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico), artist (MFA, BFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago), and Fulbright Scholar to Mexico (2010-11). She is the editor of *Rhythm of Fire: The Art & Artisans of Santa Clara del Cobre*, Michoacán, Mexico and director-producer of *Night-Blooming Jasmine*, the accompanying poetic documentary video. Her practice is informed by community-engagement, including experiences as founding-director of the arts and culture non-profit, Cuentos Foundation. Feder-Nadoff is currently working on the manuscript, *Presence of Absence: An Anthropology of Making* based on long-term apprenticeship with master artisans in Santa Clara del Cobre. Rockford Art Museum and Brauer Museum of Art presented mid-career-retrospectives in 2013. Recent projects include a permanent mural and sculptural installations for the University of Wrocław, Poland, 2019.

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Asad Faruqi is an Emmy Nominated Cinematographer/Filmmaker with a decade long experience behind the camera. Asad has lensed a number of award winning films, including 2016's Academy Award winning film, *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, and 2012's Academy and Emmy Award winning film, *Saving Face*. Both produced for HBO Documentaries by SOCFilms. He was the cinematographer and co-director on *Armed With Faith* (2017) produced by G2P2 Films. The film played on PBS and Al-Jazeera. Asad was the cinematographer and co-producer on *Song of Lahore* (2015) produced by Ravi Films. The film was distributed theatrically by Broad Green pictures and was available on Amazon prime for viewing. Other notable works include Emmy and Alfred I Dupont Award winning, *Pakistan's Taliban Generation* (2009), *Transgenders: Pakistan's Open Secret*. (2011), *Peacekeepers: A Journey of a Thousand Miles* (2015) and *New Homeland* (2018).

Malkah Nadoff, LMSW is a therapist at Trauma System Therapy Preventive Services at the Jewish Board of Children and Family Services in New York City. She received her Masters in Social Work from Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work and her Bachelors Degree from New York University in Urban Poverty and Inequality. She has experience in community organizing, public benefits advocacy, school social work, and supporting children and adults with disabilities. Malkah is a Jew with both Mizrahi and Eastern European heritage and has served in various leadership roles in the progressive Jewish community to help organize spiritual gatherings and advocate for social justice. She currently lives in Brooklyn, NY with roommates and many plants, and, recently, with her mother as a temporary neighbor across the hall.