

Reflection 4:

Only Dust

Tripping

27 March 2008

According to Erica Rand, for many people a souvenir is “a memento picked for personal reasons by an individual who will use it mentally to revisit, sometimes to narrate, distinctly personal experiences, feelings or memories.”¹ While I tend to agree with this notion, I highly doubt my mother would be of similar opinion. Indeed, this may be the reason I feel that, like Rand, I must justify any superfluous travel purchase to elevate it beyond mere “souvenir” status. As my mother, quoting her father, always used to say, “Collect only dust, and as little of that as possible.” On family vacations, my mother’s admonition echoed through every gift shop or tourist trap, and it was this same mantra which haunted me during my Alternative Spring Break trip to New Mexico last week. The program, entitled “My Life as a Pilgrimage,” consisted of both service and spiritual components. During the days, we worked on site at Ghost Ranch or helped clear the *acequias* (irrigation ditches) which brought much-needed water from the *cerros* down to local fields. In our free time, we observed New Mexican culture – the people, the environment, the religion, etc. – and had opportunities to participate in its unique conception of Holy Week. Despite the respect I had for my mother’s resistance to notions of collection and commodification of peoples and places, I desperately sought some memento capable of encompassing the deep meaning which I had found in my New Mexican experience. At the same time, I understood that whatever trinket I chose must necessarily transcend souvenir-ness if I were ever to reconcile its purchase with my own conscience. With such ambiguous parameters for acceptability, I wondered whether I would ever find an object sufficiently metonymic of all that New Mexico had meant to me. Fortunately (or unfortunately), I succeeded.

Long before I arrived in New Mexico, I had realized and accepted that my sense of place was deeply fragmented by the different migrations which have occurred in my nuclear family

¹ Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

during my own lifetime.² This geographical understanding, however, has yet to expand to an understanding of my own cultural identity. A part of me relates to and empathizes with the many people who arrived at Ellis Island only to discover that “not all hyphenated identities are permitted entry into America’s official lexicon of ethnicities and races.”³ Another part of me disregards this dilemma, however, by minimizing any differences among the western European countries which comprise a large section of my “roots.” Irish, Welsh, Dutch, Spanish – what does individual culture matter when these roots are so inseparably tangled and I am so temporally and geographically distant from them? And how do I account for my Mexican heritage in this cultural calculus? In short, I do not. Only when I am directly confronted with a certain contradiction of culture – especially linguistic or religious – does my repressed cultural identity crisis begin to surface. Ultimately, it was this very process which, in a town called Chimayó, led me to purchase the rosary of the healing dirt.

Driving from Ghost Ranch to Chimayó, my spring break group passed a long but sporadic line of Holy Week pilgrims diligently making their way to the Santuario de Chimayó. Having just visited a *morada* (something of a monastery for lay fraternities, in this case the *Penitentes*) before embarking for Chimayó, I had already begun to sense the mysteriousness of the faith which propelled such a vast array of people toward their special New Mexican holy site. As we sat silently along the inside of the adobe walls facing a number of blood-drenched crucifixes, our *Penitente* guide sang prayers to *la Virgen de la Misericordia* which had been passed down to him through several generations. The sound of the ancient lamentations overpowered the highly emotive images of the altar, revealing the prayers’ distant origins in a remote culture which “had been largely based on discourse and especially on the sense of

² See *Reflection 2: Far from Home*, 21 February 2008.

³ Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

hearing.”⁴ The antiquated Spanish verses, the syncretism represented in the fixation on blood sacrifice, and the intimacy of the soloist’s chants in the small earthen chamber all affected me in a way which I could not understand. It was as if this *Penitente* was allowing us a brief foray into his mysterious inner circle, but once inside I felt that I had somehow already been there. For a moment, collective family memories rushed to the surface of my consciousness and begged me to remember my roots. For a moment, I was no longer a tourist; I was a pilgrim.

Arriving in Chimayó among “true” pilgrims, however, I was again encumbered by my tourist status. Outside a restaurant with its own gift shop at the front, our local guide met us to begin our tour of the town plaza. He told us about the history of his town as we walked against pilgrim traffic toward the plaza, and only my fascination in his story distracted me from the voice in my head which continued to hiss, “Tourist!” As I listened to the guide, that voice began to soften until I suddenly realized that my own history was not so different from his. The details differed, of course, but I was astonished by the overlapping themes. The nebulous ethnic identity of the people, who called themselves “Spanish” despite obvious Mexican, indigenous, and other European cultural presences; reminded me of my grandmother’s pride in her aunt back in Mexico who had red hair – thus *proving* their Spanish heritage. The shifting value of bilingualism in the community also reflected the trajectory of Spanish usage in my own family over the generations. Furthermore, the religious conflict between the steadfast, monolingual Catholics and the Presbyterian missionaries from Minnesota also closely resembled my family’s journeys through faith: My great-grandfather abandoned Catholicism in Mexico when church after church refused to bury his brother due to his lack of the necessary funds, while my mother has only more recently rejected some of the Irish-Catholic traditions which peppered my youth.

⁴ John Urry, “Sensing the City,” in *The Tourist City*, ed. Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 73.

Sitting alone among the pious *penitentes* in the *santuario*, I could feel this profound tension between my family's Catholic roots and its more contemporary rejection of its orthodoxy. Each Ave María conjured memories of my past, both those that I remember and those I have been told (again I wish English possessed that special tense which Orhan Pamuk can employ through writing in Turkish).⁵ I remember my mother saying them in the middle of the night, after a nightmare had sent me rushing through the shadows of the house to her bedroom. I remember hearing them when a tragedy befell a friend in Argentina. I remember saying them, in Spanish and English, whenever I feared darkness or loneliness, because they had always protected me from them in the past. In this way, the chants of the *penitentes* allowed me to experience a subconscious self-identification that I never could achieve consciously. To honor this connection, I followed the other pilgrims to the final stop of the pilgrimage – to the gift store near the *santuario*. There I purchased the cheap rosary made from Chimayó earth, and inside its hollow crucifix I sprinkled a bit of healing dirt. Ultimately, I realize that this contradictory commodification of faith represents the epitome of all that my family has tried to escape; but it also represents the journey which brought me to this understanding. Therefore, I will feel no guilt for disregarding my grandfather's dictum. After all, it is only dust.

This is really a superb reflection, not only on your recent experience but also on the multifaceted nature of souvenirs. You're doing an excellent job of drawing ideas together from the wide variety of artifacts in this case. Very impressive and intriguing essay. "Off the Map" was right - New Mexico can be a very powerful place.

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⁵ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 8.