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Neither Here Nor There: Borrowed Bodies, Third Spaces, and the Museum

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The contemporary art world is in a state of great influx and change. In part due to globalization, the arts are producing works that no longer adhere to a dichotomy of male vs. female, black vs. white, Asian vs. American, and so forth. Instead, artists are intermingling these seemingly separate identities into new forms of categorization and selfhood. Using expat artist Zhang Huan’s My America as a vehicle for discussion, this essay examines Chinese post-colonial philosopher Homi Bhabha’s Third Space of Enunciation and its relationship to the rising multiplicity of identity seen in contemporary artists. An argument is made for the need to transform and reinvent the way modern museums deal with cultural ancestry, geography, and the increasing diversity of both artists and the museum audience.
Introducing: A (Chinese) Artist

Fragments of bread soar through the air. Halves and bits of these yeasty missiles sprinkle the floor, seeming to indicate the inaccurate aim of the human trebuchets. In the center of this downpour of baked goods sits the target, Zhang Huan. The source of the barrage à la bakery is a crowd of naked bodies arranged on three-tiered metal scaffolding, which towers behind Zhang. Zhang’s face is screwed tight in a pained grimace – a blurred fragment of bread hangs above his head. The fifty-six missileers find their target after all.

Zhang Huan is an artist born in 1965 in An Yang City of the He Nan Province of China. He earned his BA from He Nan University in Kai Feng in 1988 and worked here as an instructor until 1991. He then studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts of Beijing, where he graduated with his MA in 1993. Zhang rose to national acclaim in the early 1990s for his founding role in Beijing’s East Village, a conceptual artists’ community located in a slum neighborhood of Beijing. Composed primarily of photographers and performance artists, Beijing’s East Village helped cultivate performance as an artistic medium in Chinese contemporary art. This group of artists, notorious for provocative avant-garde demonstrations, conceived the name of their movement from Manhattan’s East Village in the U.S., a place with which the artists felt affinity for and drew inspiration from in performing their experimental aesthetics.

Zhang exemplified the ideals of Beijing’s East Village by placing his naked body in shocking, extreme, physically-taxing settings – notably, meditating in a filthy public outhouse teeming with flies and his body smothered in honey (fig. 1) – to demonstrate his reflection on themes of physicality and spirituality.

In 1998, Zhang emigrated from Beijing to the U.S., where he revisited the corporeal notions he had explored in China. However, after coming to America, Zhang realized that he was no longer simply an artist. Instead, he was an immigrant artist, a Chinese artist, producing Asian work.

Subsequently, Zhang began incorporating aspects of identity, cultural diaspora, displacement, and alienation within his performances. He remained in New York until 2005, creating work that knitted together the cultural and aesthetic threads of the East and West.

My America (Hard to Acclimatize) (fig. 2) (1999), one of Zhang’s first performance pieces created after immigrating to the U.S., shows the artist in foreign territory. Inspired by Zhang’s experience of being identified as a homeless person and offered a piece of bread on the streets of New York City, this work addresses Zhang’s experience as a Chinese immigrant. As he describes, “I moved to New York from Beijing in 1998, I faced a totally different culture and society. It was a new beginning, working and living, to me I describe as: Hard to Acclimatize. I brought Chinese culture of five thousand years from the other side of the earth, something can be changed, but something can not be changed in my life.” My America, then, is Zhang’s attempt to grapple with his Chinese culture while navigating the alien terrain of the West.

10) Throw Bread on Zhang Huan

Zhang Huan’s 1999 performance My America (Hard to Acclimatize), held in the Seattle Asian Art Museum, consisted of an unclothed Zhang orchestrating fifty-six nude American volunteers. Before the performance, the participants received a list of instructions: 1) Pilgrimage; 2) Lie Face Down on the Floor and Do Not Move (fig. 3); 3) Act and Sound Like Animals; 4) Sit in Lotus Position and Pray (fig. 4); 5) Practice Tai Chi; 6) Stand and Face the Audience; 7) Run, Catch the Center of a Circle; 8) Climb Scaffold; 9) Stand Still on Scaffold.
Facing the Audience. Wait for Zhang Huan to Descend to the Floor on a Rope; 10) Throw Bread on Zhang Huan; 11) Descend from Scaffold Onto Floor and Exchange Pieces of Bread (fig. 5); 12) Follow Zhang Huan Outside.

Zhang revisits this piece with his 2000 exhibition My America at Deitch Projects, New York, which consists of a video and large Chromogenic photo stills documenting the original performance. Organized in a series of eight images, all roughly three by five feet in dimension, the set of pictures show isolated moments selected from the performance sequence. The photos begin with “1) Pilgrimage” and progress through the individual movements until they arrive at the piece’s crescendo – “10) Throw Bread on Zhang Huan.”

The image of “10) Throw Bread on Zhang Huan” presents Zhang in the middle ground, accompanied by a backdrop of naked, anonymous bodies. The photographic documentation of the performance gives the appearance of a singular, large space, but is actually a series of four frames of a smaller space that have been mirrored against one another and stitched together. The nameless bodies actively pose; several stoop down, replenishing armloads of bread; others are angled forward, arms outstretched in combative postures as they prepare to pitch their baked ammunition. Their faces range from intense concentration, to timid hesitation, to zealous enthusiasm. These figures are both male and female, of all ages and body types. All are white.

Scattered around Zhang are the fragmented bits and leftovers of loaves of bread. Zhang sits on a roller chair, legs spread and hands resting on the tops of his thighs, within a small, inflatable child’s pool. He remains here, eyes closed and expression varied. In the first frame, Zhang seems to be in pain; he squeezes his eyes shut, he slants his eyebrows downward, and he puckers his lips, indicting his anxiety and tension. The next frame finds Zhang less apprehensive and more stoic – he draws his mouth in a stern line, and his straight eyebrows and closed eyes demonstrate his inner focus of mind. In the third and fourth frames, Zhang defiantly thrusts his chin upward in a pose that indicates strength and resilience. His eyebrows are no longer knitted together in concentration.

The duplicated bodies in the background emphasize that individual identity is not important in this work. Instead, the significance of these bodies lies in their collective power as a single, working unit. They are Western bodies signifying Western society. The viewer is to focus on the groupthink, choreographed action of these bodies, which perform a singular function of bread-throwing. These white bodies hold power over Zhang. They tower behind Zhang, diminishing and relegating him to the realm of the subservient. They are naked, indicating a particular sense of vulnerability. This vulnerability, however, is quickly dispelled by their forceful, active, and assertive poses. Supposedly, these bodies’ nudity would strip them of their cultural shells. Instead, it seems to emphasize their white homogeneity as a symbol for the Euro-American Western sphere.

These figures stand on three levels of steel, an essential material contributing to the flourishing of the industrial, affluent America. These levels reference the American ideal of success: specifically, the worth of a person based on their rank within a societal scale of power, influence, and wealth. The three-tiered arrangement and frontal structure is inspired by a 12th century Buddhist relief (fig. 6) that Zhang had observed in the Seattle Asian Art Museum – the same place where My America was originally performed. The three rows of figures in this small Indian sculpture are reconstructed by the scaffolding and confrontational poses of the figures in My America. The peculiar actions of My America’s American bodies also bring to mind the outlandish figure studies of Hieronymus Bosch (fig.7). By inserting these references, Zhang instills Eastern rituals of spirituality with a sense of American commerce.

The paradox of Eastern and Western in Zhang’s My America is understood in the way Zhang positions himself within this piece. Unlike the standing, erect figures of the background, Zhang sits in docile submission. This sets him apart formally from the backdrop of figures. He is an outcast -- rejected, isolated, and alienated. Despite his inaction, he is the center of the viewer’s attention. The life-size scale of this image, roughly 3 x 6 feet, draws the viewer into
the foreground of the unfolding narrative. We form a relationship with Zhang’s naked body, which evoke feelings of discomfort and awkwardness in the viewer as we are forced to gaze upon him. As Zhang remarks, “the body is the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me. The body is the proof of identity.”7 Using his body, then, Zhang forces the audience to step into the site of the performance. We, too, become installed in this site of ambivalence.

Zhang sits in a generic rolling chair -- one that is common to Western office spaces and urban environments. The chair is also a product of mechanical processes. Like the unnamed bodies of the background, it references the mass-production of a mercantile, machine-driven American society. The repeated frames of the photograph reiterate this mechanical notion. Bread, symbolic of the body of Christ and his sufferings, is a sacred element of the Judaic-Christian world. In a gesture toward Eastern religious practices, Zhang sits among the manic bread shower in meditative posture. The stoic expressions of the second, third, and fourth frames indicate Zhang’s attempt to relocate his mind from the trials of his body. Zhang inserts his tradition of Eastern religious practices with the frenetic, commercial sphere of the West. His Buddha-like posture implies a sense of perseverance and ethereal transcendence in a capitalistic society. Zhang uses these Western symbols and his Eastern body as a vehicle of discussion for the larger themes of Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality. As Zhang discusses in a conversation with Roselee Goldberg, this work communicates “the contrast between ancient spiritual practices and the spiritual poverty of modern American society. The daily monotony of going to work, making bread, and the pointless of it all at the end of the day.”8

So, while Zhang physically fails to ascend to the height of the white figures and their notions of automated, superficial success; mentally and spiritually, Zhang transcends them. The American bodies live in a culture dominated by material - the mind and body are isolated into separate spheres. Zhang unites these spheres with his body, embracing a spiritual consciousness that is acquired through, rather than in spite of, the body.9

In a more intimate interpretation, the bread is also a symbol of Zhang’s inability to successfully integrate into Western society. Upon first entering the United States, Zhang spoke of an experience he had which seems to greatly inspire the actions of this narrative:

“I remembered one day when I had dinner, I went to find some food for my pregnant wife, walking to Madison Square, suddenly a guy asked me: Are you hungry? Then he gave me some bread. I felt very strange, maybe it hurt my dignity a little? I could not say what exactly were my feelings at the time, and eventually I came home with the bread. Recently someone told me that bread is often provided by soup kitchens to the homeless.”10

As Zhang so clearly observed, bread is not an extravagance; it is not expensive and is not an item those at the top of the affluent, American scaffold hierarchy would need to consume as their sole form of nutrition. Instead, the American bodies use this bread to fuel their humiliation of Zhang and to emphasize his poignant failure as an effective breadwinner for his family unit. In an ultimate translation, they condemn his inept Eastern body as ineffectual within the Western paradigm of success.

Continuing with this idea of power, Zhang sits in this marginal position within a child’s pool, which references several notions. Youth implies a place of untouched innocence, naivety, and ignorance. This may indicate Zhang’s unfamiliarity with the American culture represented by the mass of white bodies behind him. Childhood is also a period in which humans are molded by the societal and cultural influences that differentiate us in adulthood. Zhang’s Eastern body is clearly differentiated from the American bodies behind him. He does not conform to the movements of the rest and consequently cannot assimilate to the culture of the West. The sight of this mob turning on the impassive Zhang as he sits in this pool is both comic and unsettling,
ultimately dramatizing Zhang’s sense that he can never belong to this alien world.

**In-between: “Asianness” and “Whiteness”**

Zhang began his artistic practice in China in the early 1990s, during a time when the Chinese artistic landscape was experiencing great change and repression. The year 1989 bore witness to two important events in contemporary Chinese art. The *China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition* of 1989 was the first collective showing of contemporary Chinese artists’ works. Following several controversial performance pieces, the exhibition was shutdown by the Chinese government and forced avant-garde artists back underground. The exhibition’s closure was symptomatic of larger issues of political turmoil and suppression plaguing the country. After the radical events of this showcase, the Chinese regime became highly reactive to any events that ideologically opposed its aims.

Following the closing of the avant-garde show were the events of Tiananmen Square, where Chinese troops openly fired upon unarmed civilians and students. The consequence of this tragedy led to increased initiatives by the Chinese government to suppress artistic practice that fell outside the traditional mediums of sculpture, painting, and calligraphy. Performance art was particularly threatening for the Chinese regime – its emotional and often provocative powers seemed to harbor revolutionary, subverting tendencies. For Zhang Huan, this meant not only a severe restriction of his practice, but also held potential consequences of imprisonment. It became clear he must leave his home country in pursuit of artistic freedom and opportunity elsewhere.

Immigrating to New York in the wake of these events, Zhang became acutely aware of the malleability of one’s identity. His migration and experience as an immigrant in New York have helped him attain the perspective of one who exists in-between both Chinese and American cultures. This sense of liminality is clearly conveyed through *My America (Hard to Acclimatize)* in an exquisitely biting and raw commentary of the collision of Eastern and Western cultures.

Zhang uses body as a vehicle of language - Western bodies: poised, aggressive, industrious; and his Eastern body: first pained and desolated, then meditative and reflective. Stark divisions of space in posturing and spatial composition set up a distinctively Western versus Eastern dispute. These anxious, intermediary spaces impart feelings of conflict and tension – ironically, for an audience that is primarily Western. These liminal spaces invite the Western viewer to join the narrative and compel them to reflect upon the interstices that exist between Eastern and Western bodies.

Zhang’s body consciousness operates in a number of ways. Physical differences in Asian and white bodies formally separate Eastern and Western spheres. Yet, it is the same awareness of body that links the viewer and Zhang beyond borders of society. The bodies in *My America* and the bodies of the viewers are connected in their shared human form. It becomes apparent: we are unable to choose sides. Zhang forces us to participate in the piece, and then leaves us in a space of ambivalence where we are unable to join ranks with the American bodies or enter into Zhang’s own personal meditations. Suddenly, we are the outsiders, stuck in-between. Zhang encourages the viewer to enter this space of in-between with him, and to remain here, meditating with him in his inflatable pool, asking ourselves about the ways in which we subscribe geographical location and nationhood to the body and cultural identity.
Homi Bhabha’s Third Space

A recent trend in intercultural communication theory focuses on this idea of liminal space, specifically related to neglected and marginalized groups and individuals. Specifically, individuals that transcend dichotomous categories like Western/Eastern, male/female, and like. One of the foremost theories comes from postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, in an idea which he describes as the “Third Space of enunciation.” As Bhabha expresses,

“The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.”

In other words, Third Space belongs to neither East nor West, but is open to both. It is both a physical space – a space where these may intersect, such as in the body of Zhang Huan or within the cultural classroom of the museum – and a metaphysical space for the relationships that exist between cultures. It is a significant site of cultural effervescence.

In keeping with such notions, Bhabha dismisses ideas of fixed and homogenous culture as untenable: “It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation [i.e. the Third Space],” he writes, “that we begin to understand why historical claims to be inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity.” According to Bhabha, hybridity is the result of an identification process by others; it is interpreted as a “recombination of elements that are rooted in different traditions and that are creatively combined in the interstitial space between cultures.” Hybridity is significant because it addresses the fluid and flexible nature of identity and culture. If, instead, we perceive culture as consistent and unwavering, the boundaries between contrasting cultures seem to be rigid and unbridgeable. As a result, cultural differences seem to be enduring and unchangeable. We consequently do not take into consideration the reciprocal impact that cultures have on each other. Multiplicity emerging from the blending of people and cultures is disregarded. Consequently, culture is essentialized to matters of cultural difference, and borders separating cultures are reinforced. This binary rationality results in the polarizations observed in Zhang’s My America: Chinese versus American, Eastern versus Western. This makes it difficult to consider them as anything other than mutually exclusive cultures. It becomes an “us versus them” mentality, where we perceive foreign cultures as a threat to our own identity that requires defending.

As Bhabha relates with his notion of hybridity:

“All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge...the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”

If these binary notions are deconstructed, it is possible to strengthen intercultural communication and awareness and reduce the potential for conflict.
The concept of Third Space provides a different kind of thinking about meaning and the significance of geography and culture. It provides a new framework for understanding the complex dimensions of identity in a cosmopolitan, globalized world. This place, where members of different cultures meet, is presented as an in-between space of the original cultures. It is a place that facilitates cultural 'encounters'. It does not do away with the binary inscription – its existence relies on their existence, after all – rather, it asks the viewer to approach objects with a critical consciousness of their existence. The viewer must take into account these boundaries of nationhood and geography: first acknowledging, then deconstructing, and finally transcending them. This is a vision we see in Zhang’s work. Zhang first heightens our perception of difference by pitting Western bodies against his own Eastern body. The conflict between Zhang’s body and the external environment then compels the viewer’s participation in the piece. Once we enter this experience with Zhang, we realize we have become united in this amorphous space. The boundaries we perceived originally are not as insurmountable as first believed. Zhang’s meditative posture, while certainly referencing Eastern religious practices, also demonstrates Zhang’s union of mind and body. Zhang asks us to enter into this mental state with him, where we begin to see distinctions collapse as Bhabha’s theory of Third Space and hybridity come to fruition.

Borrowed Asian Bodies in Western Museums

Zhang’s tale of migration is indicative of the larger trend of globalization. We live in a world constantly in transit. There are an estimated 214 million international migrants worldwide, increasing from 150 million in 2000. One in every thirty-three people in the world is now classified as an immigrant. Despite these staggering statistics, people who live across borders continue to face legal, educational, and other standardized systems that remain obstinately inside the constraints of the so-called nation-state. We are witness to an age of rapidly growing, diverse urban spaces, which demand new systems and institutions that can cater to this multiplicity. Because migrants from a wider range of countries are settling in more places, new patterns of identity are emerging. This cosmopolitanization begs the question; how do we create participatory institutions that reflect and respond to contemporary global mingling?

Cultural institutions like museums both react to and fabricate the backdrop against which these intergroup relationships crystallize. Each nation conducts itself differently, and museums act as the Third Space stage upon which these identities are intermingled, articulated and disseminated. Moreover, the museum realm itself is becoming increasingly global. More and more museums belong to international networks, although museum supervision and regulation remains primarily domestic.

As Tony Bennett proposes in “Exhibition, Difference and the Logic of Culture”, the challenge, then, is to “reinvent the museum as an institution that can orchestrate new relations and perceptions of difference that both break free from the hierarchically organized forms of stigmatic othering that characterized the exhibitionary complex and provide more socially invigorating and, from a civic perspective, more beneficial interfaces with different cultures.”

Some may contend that museums have made several strides in the past decade to reach underrepresented groups. Museums are certainly acknowledging previously marginalized groups -- inviting their members to tell their own stories through events like artists lectures, combining exhibits with informative programming, and repatriating objects with contentious pedigrees.

However, some, such as Ghassan Hage, see museums as simply too faulty to rectify their historical wrongs. When writing of “zoological multiculturalism,” Hage argues that museums become “collections of otherness,” controlled by a White majority, which proudly display
diversity as a national possession in a self-applauding manner.

I disagree with Hage’s rather harsh assessment of museums, but also think that museums can do more to consider the complex dimensions of identity that make up both the artists and the audience. The survival of museums hinges on their provision of experiences that are meaningful for their audiences; consequently, I prefer to adhere to the perspective of James Cuno, who asks his readers forthright: “Is this your experience of museums? Do you walk through the galleries of your local museum and feel controlled in any significant way?”

The primary question then becomes, how will the museum, as a signifier of our culture and society, successfully reflect the diverse population and audience of the world? I believe we can find part of our answer in Zhang’s *My America.*

Zhang lives outside the boundaries of binary constructs and exemplifies marginal and in-between existences as an expat artist. This mobility gave complexity to his identity, which can no longer be compartmentalized by ethnic or cultural origin. Zhang’s work seems particularly symbolic of peripatetic people who create a home wherever they travel. The multiplicity of Zhang’s identity poses important questions for modern day viewers and curators. Should Zhang be identified in Western institutes simply as an artist producing work that is strictly Chinese? Should he even be labeled by the canon of nation at all? *My America* argues against this essentializing framework. Zhang’s work is simultaneously Chinese and American. As a member of the Beijing East Village, Zhang found similarity with and derived inspiration from the diverse, avant-garde Western city of New York. His migration to this city effectively propelled both his body and his artwork into the realm of the in-between. Using American iconography and Eastern tradition, *My American* oscillates back and forth in this realm of Third Space, creating meaning and discourse for viewers of both Eastern and Western descent.

Zhang’s “borrowed body” is physically present in the museum, and metaphorically present in the spatial realm of Third Space. Extending this metaphor, Zhang’s artwork, which has made its home it the museums of America, is also representative of Third Space. These “Western” viewers look at this “Eastern” work in “Western” institutes. Supposedly, under these constructs, viewers would read Zhang’s work differently, according to the generalized notions of their separate cultures. However, the new dimensions of cultural identity exemplified by Zhang reject this stereotyping of cultures and selfhood based simply in geography. Zhang encourages thinkers to set aside demands to make an either/or choice and contemplate the possibility of a both/and also logic; one that not only permits but also encourages a creative combination of identity and perspectives. Zhang dissolves the institutional walls of the museum in the same way he deconstructs boundaries between cultures. He melds mental states with physical spaces, Eastern meditation with Western participants, the space of the museum with the Third Space of his work, until we, the viewer, find that we have no choice but to accept that we no longer know where one ends and the other begins.

Museums have strongly influenced how people imagine the nations where they live. As Peggy Levitt points out in *The Bog and the Beast,* “Even now, visitors to the Danish National Museum or the American Wing at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art feast on paintings, furniture, and decorative objects they are told represent the nation.” I contend, however, that museums must embrace Zhang’s practice and Bhabha’s calling for a fluid identity and begin to understand that binary boundaries are dissolving and we must adapt to a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings. Museums must adopt new mentalities; namely, a mindset that keeps the consciousness of and theorizing of culture and hybrid identity radically open.

This is not an argument that rejects the location and origin of the artwork and the artist as important – clearly, these are vital to fully understanding the piece and its symbols of
representation. Rather, I hope this acts as a call to consciousness for museums to not simply rely on notions of geography and origin as criteria for exhibitions. By claiming an exhibit as “Great Contemporary Works from China,” does it not become easy for the viewer in Western museums to set up a barrier between themselves and the work? We may borrow these Asian bodies for display and exhibition in the U.S., however, if we simply write them off as distinctively Chinese (or Korean, or Japanese, or simply Asian) and examine their differences without recognizing their value in terms of their culture, history, language, etc. then all we are doing is simply borrowing bodies and then discarding. There is no lasting impact and no cultural exchange.

Conflict and tension within My America are micro reflections of a macro-problem. Many Western institutes are trapped in a tradition of exhibitions designed around artistic ancestry and geographic location. We still define problems and their solutions nationally. If global interconnection is the promise of the future, then understanding how a global disposition is cultivated, who gets to embrace is, and what it looks like from different national standpoints is of critical concern.

Zhang asks the viewer to re-assess these essentializing assumptions and museum systems by inviting them into the liminal spaces of My America. It’s life-size scale draws the viewer in; it is here that Zhang asks them to remain, meditating with him in his inflatable kiddy pool among a manic shower of bread in Third Space.
Figure 1: Zhang Huan, 12 Square Meters.
Figure 2: Zhang Huan – My American (Hard to Acclimatize)

Detail 10: Throw Bread on Zhang Huan
Figure 3: Zhang Huan, My America (Hard to Acclimatize)
Detail: 2) Lie Face Down on the Floor and Do Not Move

Figure 4: Zhang Huan, My America (Hard to Acclimatize)
Detail: 4) Sit in Lotus Position and Pray
Figure 5: Zhang Huan, My America (Hard to Acclimatize)

Detail: 1) Descend from Scaffold onto Floor and Exchange Pieces of Bread
Figure 6: Jain Relief from Rajputana
12th Century, Marble, The Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection

Figure 7: Hieronymus Bosch, Studies: To Strike the Buttocks, 1516
Graphische Sammlung Albertina
End Notes

8. Ibid., n.p.
12. Ibid., 14.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 33.
17. Ibid., 58.
20. Ibid., 30
25. Ibid., n.p.
26. Peggy Levitt, The Bog and the Beast