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The Travelling Lives of Circus Artists

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by

Maria Alzaga

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THE TRAVELLING LIVES OF CIRCUS ARTISTS

Home and Homelessness in a Nomadic Life

Maria Alzaga

The animal tamer tells me with pride that he, his wife, three children, and four sea lions, have travelled around the world four times by now:

We go round and round and round and round. And in the end we always come back to the same places. This is my second year here – I have done all the circuses two, three times (...) In Denmark, I have done it all. Everything: parks, Tivoli, botanical gardens, theatre, everything. There is nothing more there to do. You go to Sweden, the same, from 1975 until now: Scott, Brazil Jack,¹ everything. Theatres, parks, Gröna Lunds Tivoli²... I have done everything. Norway, the same. In Scandinavia, I have been everywhere. In Germany, I have done almost everything. France, everything as well. Spain, everything...

At age 45, the tamer can entertain for hours with his impressive curriculum of mobility. He belongs to the group of circus artists whose families have been touring with circuses for generations.³ Season after season, year after year, he and his kin constantly change where they work and live, each time travelling to a new circus, a new town, a new country.

Though one might be tempted to characterize the circus artists' lives as truly *transnational*, doing so runs the risk of directing our attention only to crossing borders. For circus artists, borders have little more than bureaucratic significance. Most of these lifelong nomads are of Western European nationalities, but the members of the same family may each

carry a different passport, depending on the coincidences of birth. Among circus artists, nationality does not refer to place of origin. As one told me: "I'm Belgian but feel like a foreigner in my own country. I don't feel 'aaaahhhh, I am at my place'." Only inside the circus fence does the artist feel native. As one clown explained, it is between circus seasons that he is away from home (Wizilius & Lindberg 1983: 43). The travelling European circus where I did fieldwork, one that moved to a new town every two days for a short season of six months before everyone dispersed to circuses in other parts of the world, definitely did not match *my* idea of a home. But the identity that was emphasized to me again and again was: "we are artists *from* the circus, *made* in the circus, *born* in the circus". The artist sees the circus as his abode. The mobile, non-local character of this home constituted by provisional areas inside circus fences set up throughout the world awakens curiosity. How does the artist make a reassuring stability out of this constant mobility, how does he find a sense of dwelling in this movement? The question in what manner travelling becomes a home for the nomadic artist, and the threat of homelessness this creation of a "sense of home in motion" creates, are the focus of the explorations here.

As I am concerned with exploring how people who do not dwell in one place create a sense of home, a definition of home that rests on the continuity of an immediate materiality is left aside in order to take a more existential perspective into consideration. Instead of home being a *place* of belonging, it is here

conceived of as a *feeling* of belonging. Hence the dichotomy of being at home as opposed to being away is freed from its connotations of place. In fact, the common opposition of home versus travel dissolves in the artist's life, melting into a paradoxical unity – only to reappear, insistently claiming its dichotomy.

Homey Travel

As Yoram Carmeli (1987) puts it, an essential part of an artist's performance is a non-sharing in time and of place with the locality in which he or she performs. The travelling life has a symbolic importance in the relationship of the artist to his audience and is therefore an inescapable condition of circus artist life. Making a "virtue out of necessity" (Bourdieu 1990: 54), the circus artist constructs an ideology of travel, where travelling is seen as the ideal lifestyle and worshiped as a central part of identity. "In the circus, you are always moving, and I think it is better like that", an artist tells me, reflecting the general opinion that travel is interesting because "you have always a new place to see" and expressing the general view on travelling life as "intense", "exciting", and "stimulating". Collectively, artists say that "if I had to stop and stay in the town, I think I would be bored", because "every day it's the same; I don't think life in one place is interesting". The sedentary life is "dull and monotonous" because you only "go out, come back home, go out, come back home. You work from time X to time Y, and you are only in one place. You can't say: I am going away!" The life of sedentary people is constrained, while the artists associate travelling life with "freedom" because "if you don't like your neighbours, you can just hitch up and drive away". "Locked up" in a town, on the other hand, the artists state they would "feel like in a prison".⁴

The excitement, experience and freedom nourished in this travel credo inspire the artist to perceive travelling as full of virtue and as the most desirable lifestyle to pursue. The artist continually invests in this collective *illusio* and the structures and strictures of the circus are internalised to such a point that the circus artist develops a "feel for the game", an almost miraculous encounter between his *habitus*

and the circus field (Bourdieu 1990: 66). That leads him to accept his nomadic life as natural, sensible and invested with meaning – the travelling life being where his expectations of the world harmonise perfectly with the world as it appears to him.

Travelling being what is known and how life makes sense, and the shared *illusio* of travelling anchoring the artist in a community of travellers, the travelling lifestyle of the artist has now become the outlines of a home. But how does this "travelling lifestyle as home" offer stability when its very definition is mobility?

The Traveller's Transcendence Leads to a Homelike Stability

What is attractive to the artist is the *movement*, the constant change of environment, not the destination itself. Two months in a winter circus in Berlin, a short stop at a circus festival in Monte Carlo, ten months travelling through Spain during circus season, some months in Paris living in a caravan in the French countryside, half a year spent living in an amusement park in England – it is paradoxically in the *detachment as such* that movement affords in which one can find a certain point of fixity in the mobile life of the artist. Kracauer (1995) points out that when the meaning of travel is exhausted by mere change of location, the transformation of space *in itself* is branded as an event: the thrill of the movement, the slipping through unexplored realms, arouses the passions. Kracauer gives the feeling of freedom and the intense excitement an other-worldly significance. As the traveller gets the feeling of being raised from the "flatness of everyday life" and experiences the "supra-spatial endlessness", he touches "infinity" and reaches the "elevation above the ephemeral" (1995: 71). Wandering through an endless geographical space, an infinite number of possibilities opening in front of him, the artist roams freely through the dimensions, feeling elevated above the world's transience. This transcendence leads him to experience a kind of blessed constancy through the very changeableness of his dwellings.

Therefore, mobility creates a detachment allowing for a kind of stability in an artist's life. In the

next we will explore how this very detachment at the same time paradoxically makes a *kind of* attachment possible that permits the artist to nevertheless be anchored in the world.

The Traveller's Immanence Leads to a Homelike Attachment

Whereas Kracauer defines travel as the "occasion to be somewhere other than the very place one habitually is" (1995: 66), for the artist the foreign place *is* where he habitually is. The artist is therefore stripped of any idea of a privileged locality. He does not experience the world from a *specific* locale, but his perception of the environment as a whole is created *along* his travels – during his physical movement through changing horizons, place after place is brought into view and into being. The artist does not see the world from *somewhere*, but instead from *nowhere*, or rather from *everywhere* (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 67–69). Instead of imagining the world from a point of view above and beyond, the artist experiences the world along his lifelong journeying from place to place through the landscapes. In short, instead of seeing the world abstracted, as "everywhere-as-space", the artist sees the world as concrete places of being, as "everywhere-as-region" (Ingold 2000: 227). As a journeyman detached from any *specific* locality, he experiences an access – and in a sense an embeddedness – in the *whole* world. If a country or a town is mentioned in the company of artists, then a story immediately connects them with the place. Gijón was where there was a full house three weeks in a row; Nijverdal was where it rained so much that the ring stood under water. In the United States, they are more interested in buying souvenirs and candy than in the show, and where the circus is placed in Dresden there is the best, most beautiful view. Experiences anchor the artist in the world, giving him a reassuring feeling of being a citizen *of* the world. Far from being an abstract global space, the world, as a familiar region, offers the artist a home.

So it is *through* the non-local and mobile character of circus life that the artist finds a home in the circus. The transcendence of movement creates stability, the immanence in the whole world anchors life, and the

perfect accordance between the *habitus* of the artist and the structures of a travelling life gives travelling a homelike quality, of being where the world can easily be anticipated, where it is immediately filled with sense and rationality, where a practical mastery eases living and where a shared *illusio* creates membership in a community. In short, this is where the artist has his home.

Accordingly, the feeling of belonging that binds the artist to his travelling lifestyle has important similarities with how the materiality of living in a sedentary home is felt by non-travellers. The sedentary home provides a site of constancy, an ontological security, or a sense of confidence, continuity and order in the world. For the artist, that is provided by travel. With an absolute minimum of *material* constancy – even the private caravan may be abandoned for the changing settings of hotel rooms – the *existential* continuity provided by travel is what ensures a sense of order in the world and a feeling of belonging, one not directed towards a place but to movement as such. Nevertheless, it is a feeling that encompasses much the same qualities of stability, attachment, predictability, meaningfulness and security as is found among sedentary people living in a stationary home.

The Exile of the Traveller

Yet constructing this "home", which is not synonymous with a place, and finding a sense of "belonging" that does not lie in an attachment to materiality, has severe consequences for the artists. Artists have numerous experiences in their daily travelling lives that undermine the feeling of security and stability examined above and introduce a fear of – in the end – being doomed to an existence of uprooted homelessness.

After telling me about the difficult and dangerous circumstances of travelling with caravans in Norway, one artist, expressing her feeling that there is a gap separating her from sedentary people, says: "I can't talk about this with someone who isn't from the performing world ... who doesn't know it. It's difficult to say 'you know, at the circus Merano, with the travel in the mountains...'. He would say 'ahhh?' Voila." There is a widespread feeling of not being able

to share sociably with a local person who “has gone for 30 years to the office. In *one* place.” And when the artist really feels that “we have nothing to talk about because we are different, from another world”, he senses an isolation from his surroundings stemming from his unique lifestyle. Though the collective investment in the ideology of travelling *does* form a kind of community inside the circus fence, the individualistic nomadic life does not free the artist of feeling the burden of a lonely existence, exemplified by an artist’s comparison of his existence with that of a lone wolf.

The positive valuation of nomadic life is also undermined by an uncomfortable feeling of exclusion when an artist has to face accusations made by locals of being like a gypsy, a travelling bum, or a trouble-maker. Not having a stationary home expels the artist, and he stands on the other side of a strict boundary drawn by the sedentary. Though he may try to think positively of his unique lifestyle, an artist cannot but regret his lack of acceptance by the surrounding populations. Artists painfully feel how they do not belong to the societies they travel through, and this feeling of marginalization and discrimination is reinforced by the many bureaucratic problems associated with not having a permanent address. “Today you have to be registered to be a human being. And to be registered you need a residence”, is the bitter experience. Although the artists have a nationality on paper, they do not feel that the nation that ought to be their own accepts their membership. The world refuses their version of belonging, and the wistful wish of there “just being a place where they accept me” is seldom fulfilled.

The artists feel rejected by a world that is not inhabited by their kind, and roam through country after country without finding community or acceptance. “It is difficult, you have nowhere to go” is the painful feeling of homelessness told in numerous stories.

Homeless in a Strange and Unknown World

Circus artists have “nowhere to go” but go everywhere instead: we visited 102 cities in the six months I travelled with them. My initial wonder of how little interest they took in the locales lying outside the

very restricted area of the circus camp – especially as their travel ideology stressed their interest in seeing new places – was quickly replaced by my own weariness at finding myself in a strange, unknown town with every succeeding day, a town with a life that did not concern me and had nothing to do with the daily activities in the circus. I was disturbed by how difficult it proved to find the necessities of life in a new locale each time, and of never gaining a sense of access to a city. And then we were already on to the next one. It made me feel detached, unconcerned, like an outsider whenever I ventured outside the familiarity of the order existing inside the circus camp. Among the artists, there was a constant, penetrating feeling of being a stranger that came to the fore as soon as they left the confines of the circus enclosure.

Tim Ingold describes how natives are bound to the landscape by their continuous involvement in their environment, and through the stories that anchor them there. Natives internalize their surroundings along their lives and are reflected in the landscape, “attuned” and in “resonance” with their environment (Ingold 2000: 196). The world comes into existence for natives as “our” world, in which they feel at home, through what Merleau-Ponty calls “the ‘interleaving’ of objective landscapes and bodily subjectivity” (Jackson 1998: 175). The artists, on the other hand, must always move through new landscapes and – not as natives but as what Ingold calls strangers – must always navigate with the help of a map or a GPS. The materialities around them are always new and foreign and no previous involvement in the environment attaches the artist to what he sees. The artists never get “in flow” with their environment (Ingold 2000: 219–243). No stories bind the artist to the *concrete* landscapes he moves in and therefore he does not feel the relation natives experience between their inner world and the world that exists around them. As eternal strangers, artists therefore move in an external, unknown world, and it is then unsurprising they involve themselves as little as possible in the surrounding localities. When they do, they meet the world with a certain anxiety and a disquieted, defensive attitude. In the local setting, the circus artist can never feel at home.

The Necessity of Travelling

Therefore paradoxically, staying at one place and getting to know a locality gives the artist the sneaking feeling of being homeless. Only movement can save him from the suspicion of being an outsider that he gets when he involves himself in the surrounding environment and when he faces the demarcation separating him from the surrounding communities. Having listed all the circuses, countries and regions he travelled through, the animal tamer expresses his regret:

AT: There is nothing new to do.

MA: And you don't like coming back to the same place?

AT: It's... monotonous because you come back to the same place. If my life is the life of the circus, it's travelling all my life and having a new place to see. Not go to the same places as always.

When the familiar never-ending stream of new horizons is replaced by the alienating recognition of known localities, the artist suffers from homelessness. Through travelling, the artist reaches the transcendence providing him with stability and the immanence anchoring him in the world. His internalised structures fit harmoniously with the structures surrounding him and the world is again *his* world. The travelling, which excludes him from community, alienates him from the local surroundings and makes him homeless, is the very same movement that *does* give him the stability and belonging that gives him a sense of dwelling. Therefore travelling becomes like a drug: it stands between the artist and the unbearable pain of exclusion, and is the only means to fight the threatening meaninglessness of homelessness. The movement gets in the blood until nothing except travelling can keep the artist alive. The animal tamer swears:

It's impossible to retire from the travelling. I would have to do a job where I have to travel. Now that I have travelling in my blood I can't stay in a ... a lot of people have tried and it doesn't work. Or they die, or they lose everything, family and everything, and they return to the circus.

The Ambiguity of a Home in Travel

Seeking home, the artist is thus driven towards continuous mobility, compulsively engaging in never-ending movement. In a world where home is closely associated with place, constructing a home independent of locality is not easy. The artists recognize this by themselves sharing the expectation of home being a place. Although locality in the practical life of the artist results in homelessness and although the feeling of belonging I have defined as home is solely reached through travelling, the *idea* of a place to call home is immensely appealing to a circus artist.

The animal tamer, whose identity is intimately linked to travelling and who has never associated himself with one place, has just bought a piece of land and an old house on the countryside in France. "It is for the children", he explains, and happily tells me that his daughter is already calling it home, although she was only there for a few days once. Reflecting on the feeling of never having rights in a locality, he dreams of "having a place that is yours, where you can shut the door and nobody enters (...) I think it will give them security". In the end, though, his wife tells me, they will likely not even bother moving their things to the house and just stay in their caravan when they are there. It won't be worth it to really install themselves in the house because they will soon be on the move again.

Conclusion

The character of the home artists construct in the circus can best be described as ambiguous. Despite a minimum of material continuity, a certain stability, attachment, predictability and security that is connected to the travel itself leads to a feeling of belonging. However, a lifestyle deprived of locality continuously endangers this existentially important feeling. The contrast of home to travel dissolves in the circus, but in the encounter with a world that in the end consists of places, it reappears with urgency and necessity. The travelling life of the artist encompasses this contradiction, making a life that is one simultaneously of home and homelessness, and one of both belonging and not belonging to, and in, the world.

Notes

- 1 The names of Swedish circuses; Brazil Jack is Sweden's oldest travelling circus, established in 1899.
- 2 Amusement park in Stockholm, first opened in 1883.
- 3 The artists working in the circus are a heterogeneous group. Some identify themselves as being of circus descent, artists whose families have been working and living in the circus world for generations. Two other groups, not discussed in this paper, also exist: performers educated at circus schools, and performers (often from Eastern Europe) who turn to circus work after a career in sports.
- 4 It is the feeling of being enclosed that artists most strongly reject in sedentary life. But one should keep in mind that "practice has a logic which is not that of the logician" (Bourdieu 1990: 86). The artist's practical experience of life *in the circus camp* is also one of acute and unbearable claustrophobia due to the stresses and constraints imposed by living closely together. The painful *experience* of not being free is balanced by a strong *credo* of freedom though. Saving one's own imagined way of life – the mobile, free circus life – from the meaninglessness of being exposed as an illusion leads to forcefully oppose the sedentary as the materialisation of being enclosed.

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- Maria Alzaga worked in a travelling circus during a six months season and conducted ethnographic inquiry into the lived day-to-day experience of a group of circus artists. She just finished her book, *Cirkus af generation: Nomadiske cirkusartisters smerte og drøm*, which explores the circus as a field with its own hardships and virtues, stakes and gains and particular pains and pleasures.
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