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The irrepressibility of Mangifera

How do embodied memories transmit the effects of movement between places, amongst things, and within people into the contemporary urban environment? In a part literary, part sociological account, a sociologist describes the sensations of Marcia, a Caribbean first generation immigrant to Britain, during a visit to an east London street market. In exploring the conditions that give rise to sensation, the narrative points towards a heterogeneity of movements that comprise sensation in heterological spaces. This underlines the multicultural constitution of seemingly mundane experiences and points towards the dynamism that the activation of this experience imparts to the contemporary city.

The mango trees serenely rust when they are in
flower,
Nobody knows the name of that voluble cedar
Whose bell-flowers fall, the pomme-arac purples
its floor...

Not only are they relieved of our customary
sorrow,
They are without hunger, without any appetite,
But are part of the earth's vegetal fury, their veins
grow...

Ants carry the freight of their sweetness, their
absence in all that we eat,
Their savour that sweetens all of our multiple
juices...

And here at first is the astonishment: that earth
rejoices
In the middle of our agony, earth that will have her
For good: wind shines white stones and the
shallows' voices

Derek Walcott, *The Bounty*¹

Seven years old and crouched at the boundary of a dusty scrubland beyond which the wicket and her brothers stood, she waited, arms outstretched and hands cupped. The red leather ball skipped cheerfully towards her. As it approached, its hops and skips revealing its velocity, Marcia tentatively brought her elbows towards her torso so as to cushion the impending blow. Accompanied by a small ripple of applause, the ball sprang neatly into her palms. Unsure whether the applause was for her or the batsman, she blushed. In that unsteady moment Marcia slowly stood. Taking the ball in her right hand, Marcia moved the arm to shoulder height, twisting the trunk of her body

as she reached her forearm out sideways before swinging the arm back behind her head. Maintaining the flow of the movement she unravelled her body, arm and wrist launching the ball in a steady arch towards her brother's hands.² This time she was sure the applause was for her. From that moment, basking in the approval of her brothers and their friends, the preceding action was inscribed on her comportment; as was her confidence to confound even *her* expectations of herself.

Although the refinement and habituation of the throwing action would quickly attain a subtle importance in Marcia's daily life, it would not be for the same reasons as for her brothers, who derived esteem from their peers for competitive throwing ability. Rather, for Marcia, the mastery over the relations between torso, legs, wrist, posture, hand and eyes was essential if she was to be able to knock the ripest mangos to the ground before they fell and bruised. The best mangos were the ones that ballooned slowly at the end of spindly branches too thin for any of the impatient local children to clamber across. This also meant that, away from the mass of the tree, they were hardest to hit with a projectile. Accordingly, a good throw was essential lest the heavy fruit were to disrupt the night time chirrups and snores of the household when they landed, bruised and laden with sugar, on the corrugated roof of Marcia's hillside family abode.

Throughout her early childhood in Anse La Raye, a small fishing community at the foot of Saint Lucia's domineering mountains, the local mango tree was a central feature in the tapestry of memory and habit that Marcia would carry and work upon throughout her life. Viewed against the heavenly turquoise of the mountains from one side and the infinite blue of the ocean from the other, the tree's Lilliputian flowers were a seasonal source of delight, divination, and temporal orientation for Marcia. The broad crown in which the flowers sat also variously offered welcome shade and protection from the rain, for the dwelling it presided over, and for a considerable area around.

The tree's gnarly and knotted bark also played its part. At first it provided a tableau for the infant Marcia to run her hungry fingers along. Not long after, the same bark became the means by which Marcia would grip, twist, and pull her herself over and through the inner parts of the tree (much to the chagrin of her mother and aunts). On her sixth birthday, Marcia was also inducted into the familial relationship with the trunk. Sat on her aunt's knee, she was told the story of how the trunk saved Marcia's great grandfather in a hurricane that had turned everything else around it to flotsam. The "winds", so decisive in every narrative of the region had, she was told, blown away nearby garden plots, the swaggering eucalyptus saplings that grew on the hillside above *and* the dwelling in which her grandfather lived. The same storm had also carried Marcia's great, great uncle, whose arms were "too weak" to grip the trunk, to death.³ That year the flowers had come late and the fruit failed to ripen evenly. Yet Marcia felt sure that in the time between the tree's adolescence and her own childhood, the trunk had grown thick enough to save at least her and her two brothers should the necessity arise.

But for Marcia, the most crucial facet of the tree was its fruit. There were other mango trees scattered over the hills in the area, but the largest stood in liminal spaces at the edges of farmland. Here they had stood, from the eighteenth century onwards, 7000 nautical miles from home and obliged to fruit. Some of the older trees had fruit comparable to Marcia's. But nothing, she felt, quite matched the sweetness of the relatively small yet plump variety that she felled from the thinnest branches of what she considered *her* tree. Marcia was aware

that compared to the fleshy behemoths that were sold at the nearest market, the diminutive dimensions of the mango led it to appear inferior in the eyes of many of her peers. But as Marcia was fast to point out, their size was the essence of their strength: owing to the near equal ratio between flesh and stone, the fibres emanating from the stone interlocked with those nearer the skin, trapping the fragrant sweet flesh between their filaments. More than anything else, Marcia relished the fact that this meant that the seed itself could be sucked on for over an hour. A considerable part of Marcia's most enjoyable days were spent squeezing the seed between the roof of her mouth and tongue until it relinquished all of its sweetness. She also shared the fruit with her friends who would often come round after attending the nearby Catholic Church. Sometimes they brought mangos and other fruit for her too. Sitting with friends, family, and acquaintances, sucking mangos until they reached the wood-flavoured kernel, was integral to the formation of the relationships that Marcia would cherish throughout her life, and forever inseparable from her thoughts of them.

Not long after her twelfth birthday, Marcia, her mother, and one of her brothers made their way to the shore and, with luggage, stepped onto her mother's brother's fishing boat. Leaving the village always entailed a fusion of excitement and fear for Marcia, but this time she was acutely fearful of the increasing distance between the source of her sight and the shrinking silhouettes of her father and eldest brother amidst the spiky trees on the shore. Nonetheless, by the time that the church bells of Anse la Raye had faded from ear and eye, moving across bays toward the port of Castries, her tears had dried. It was here, getting off the boat, that Marcia first saw mechanised loading systems placing cargos of fish and banana onto the boats that so often passed in front of the bay she called home. It was from here also that Marcia, her mother, and brother boarded a larger boat and set sail for Britain.

It is the middle of an unusually hot summer in 2006 and Ridley Road market in Hackney, east London, is just recovering from a brief drenching. Awakened by the rain, the smell of petroleum fumes, decomposing vegetation, and cardboard dances through the air on swirling thermals of evaporating moisture. Mixing with the incense burning in a nearby stall and the oceanic aroma of the fresh fish across the market, the aromas lend an intensity and transformative quality to everything they meet. Parting the air with her movement, Marcia is slowly but deftly pulling a wicker basket through the cramped confines of the stalls, sidestepping discarded pallets and twisting her aged yet supple torso, with minimum cognition, between the crowds. So far she has stopped at three stalls: once to buy a role of aluminium foil and kitchen paper, the next to buy a tub of hand lotion, the third to pick up two brown paper bags. One contains mushrooms and the second a bunch of asparagus "Fresh from the Vale of Evesham". All the items are carefully placed into her basket.

Although she is wearing a soft brimmed hat, it is far from waterproof, so during rain storm she stands beneath the blue and white striped canopy of the vegetable stall. Here she shares conversation with two other shoppers and the Ghanaian vendor of the stall. They chat, first and perhaps predictably, about the weather. The comparison to the climate of homelands turns conversation toward Ghana's recent defeat to Brazil in the World Cup. Marcia had made it her business long ago to keep up with the latest sports news and had lubricated many relationships with this knowledge for as long as she could remember. This particular exchange ends as the pattering on the shelter fades and the vendor prods the canvas ceiling with a broom. With a splash, the rainwater is reintroduced to the ground from which it came. Turning the trunk of her body

away from the vendor while keeping her eyes as close to his line of sight as her neck will allow, Marcia bids him farewell: "Bye Bye Kwame."

Down the market's main thoroughfare she moves. Glancing at the stalls moving past her left and right, her peripheral vision peruses the creative uses of pavement space beyond them. At first her pace is steady but over the course of about a hundred yards it steadily slows, until all momentum is lost behind a cluster of elbows and blue carrier bags. The faint fragrance of mangos picks its way through the scents of dried fish, polythene, and incense and engulfs the mass of elbows. The fragrance's origin is heralded by the stall vendor. "Bunches-of-banana! Cheaper-than-in-Ghana! Box-of-mangos! Four-for-a-pound!"

Following the harvest season of 2005, the workers of the mango crop in Pakistan remain little-better off than their *compañeros* in the storm-riddled Americas,⁴ yet it has been a bumper season for mangos in India and Pakistan.⁵ The meteorology that yielded the fruit manifests itself globally in market saturation and low prices of a particular cultivar. One major supermarket, having got a particularly good deal on a bulk purchase of the fruit, premiers it in its own television advert, chopped into a bowl of yoghurt. At the market, traders have, for weeks, been ferociously competing for sales of the large, yellow, honey-inflected flesh produced throughout the South Asian region.

One trader, actualising the potential generated by the aggregation of fragrant fruit, moist air, and passers-by with change rattling in their pockets, has sliced up some taster chunks of the mango which he forks out from a paper plate, while his assistant lifts small rectangular boxes over the front of the crowd to the mainly female customers. After briefly ruminating on her semi-conscious arrival into the crowd, Marcia steps into the fray. Over the next minute, she shuffles and twists her way to the front of the throng. Here she abruptly dispenses with the tasters and casts an eye over the fruit. The sensitivity to colour she acquired in the rainbows of her childhood overrides any need to squeeze the fruit for ripeness. Taste and texture are conferred by hue and scent alone. In exchange for her coins the vendor's assistant hands Marcia the orange and black cardboard. She undoes the incongruous ribbon of blue tinsel wrapped around the box, opens it checks its contents. Having placed it into a nearly full basket, she re-performs, in reverse, the earlier twists and shuffles through the sea of globally inflected East End elbows.

Although no clear decision is reached about the matter, primarily because she carried no shopping list, Marcia now *feels* that her trip is complete. The rhythms of her current movements are fading out and a new set are being cued up. As she steadily moves towards the bottom of the market, the experience of her body is already elsewhere... at her grand-daughter's house. "One mango for me, one for Rhiannon and one for little David, and maybe one for Granville over the road," she thinks to herself without, as it were, thinking about it. She overlays her walk through the market with a silent rehearsal of future actions: a small twist at the waist and reach behind her into her basket followed by the handing over of the fruit to Rhiannon, her eldest granddaughter. She feels herself picking up her great grandchild David from the glossy white kitchen floor that he loves so much to slide from side to side on (in thick socks between cupboard handle and washing machine). Keeping his eyes in her sight see reaches blindly to the plate behind her and offers a carefully prepared sliver of the fruit to his mouth. He will either eat it straight away or throw it at the floor then giggle uncontrollably before wriggling out of her arms and mulching the pulp into his fluffy socks.

She glances down and extends her step over some glass crumbled into the granular floor of the market. As she glances back up, her nose meets the distinctive hot doughy smell of the nearby Bagel Bake. She recalls the trembling hand of a close friend who recently died of heart failure compounded by diabetes. Musing on her mortality, of friends and relatives lost, her thoughts quickly return to the fruit. She imagines handing Rhiannon her fruit.

As a determined young vegetarian, Rhiannon took special delight in receiving a mango or some other fruit from her grandmother, so much so that the exchange became central to the formation of the more enduring aspects of her sense of her self. However, following a family holiday to Saint Lucia, where Rhiannon was shown the old tree that her grandmother used to clamber around, Rhiannon can no longer smell the fruit without contorting: given her dietary constraints, she was offered little other than mango for breakfast (pulped or sliced), lunch, as a snack, starter or dessert for the entire ten days she was there. Yet despite this, she generally concedes to take the fruit, feigning an excitement at its presence. Seeing a mime of her enthusiasm for the fruit, authentic or not, always pleased Marcia. Knowing this seemed to genuinely please Rhiannon too.

Still rehearsing the future, Marcia has already turned out of Rhiannon's door and moved up the hill to the bus stop from where she will travel three stops further down the road to her own flat. Having walked up the stairs (it takes only a second in her imagination), she will sit down in her chair with a knife, plate and several folded sheets of kitchen paper laid upon her lap. Then she will turn the mango on its end and, following the direction of the small cleavage in the fruit, slice it into thirds: two cups of flesh and a centre piece containing the seed and whatever flesh remains attached to it. She will turn the cups inside out and bite the flesh away from the wall of the skin, then pick up the seed, remove the remaining skin and suck the flesh off that.

Yet as delicious as the locally bought mango is, its flesh slips off somewhat dissatisfyingly. No sooner will she have cut into the ochre flesh than the consumption of the fruit will be over. The experience brings forth the constellation of the childhood mango, the squeezing of the seed between tongue and pallet, the sucking and sharing of the fruit. Cross referenced against the present a distance, both geographical and temporal, is instantiated in her mouth and moves through her tired bones.

Approaching the very exit of the market, where the smell of petrol intensifies and the main road nears, Marcia is approached by a young, nervous looking young man clutching a clipboard and microphone. He had been following roughly the same path and pace that she had made through the crowd. She puts his familiarity down to the fact that she'd seen him sometime, someplace before, recently. She is not sure where or when.

"Um. Hello. I'm... I'm a writer... a sociolo... would you... mind speaking to m..."

A lack of patience, a weariness of questioners, and an appreciation of the man's nerves propels her to interject.

"What are you writing about?", she asks quickly but kindly.

"Well, I'm... this might sound weird, but I'm interested in this market and what it means to the people that shop here... And the food, I'm really interested in what the food here means to people."

"Ok. Who are you writing this for?"

"Myself at present but we'll see. Can I ask... what have you bought today?"
 Marcia reels off the list... "Kitchen paper... asparagus, mangos."
 "What type of mangos are they? I spoke to a guy up there that's selling
 Ghanaian mangos, he was quite proud of them..."
 "These are the Pakistani mango."
 "I see... You got a box. You must like them?"
 "They're not the same as the ones from home."
 "Where's ho... where did you come from originally?"
 "Saint Lucia."
 "Oh. I don't know it. I mean, I know where it is but... I quite like the Pakistani
 mango.
 They're the ones that taste a bit like honey, aren't they?"
 "Yes but..."
 "They're not your ideal choice?"
 "Well, they sell mangoes from home too, but they're quite expensive and
 they're not very nice... We had a mango tree and we'd climb it and pick them
 from the tree when it's mature. It's a *very* nice mango, but now they pick it
 young and bring it here and by the time its right it's not very sweet. The
 Pakistani one you know... it's sweet but when you reach the seed... you know
 the seed?"
 "Yes."
 "It's just there's not very much to suck on the seed. The flesh goes off it too
 easily you know?"
 "I don't think I do," the researcher replies to Marcia.
 "You can't suck on it," she says. Light flits across her watery eyes. "You don't
 miss much from at home you know... apart from the mango."

Marcia goes on to talk a little longer about her antagonistic relationship with
 the doughier elements of her youthful diet. Closing the exchange, the
 researcher thanks Marcia for her time, tells her how interesting it has been
 talking to her and returns to the crowd clutching his notepad. It is raining again
 and Marcia heads for the nearest bus stop. Rhiannon's house is a little too far to
 walk in this heat and rain and it feels as though she has been around the world
 twice already today.

"Sensory memory, as the meditation on the historical substance of experience
 [...] brings the past into the present as a natal even";⁶ it is a generosity that
 imparts an indeterminate effect on the present and future. Embodied memories
 can never be thought of as repetition or simply as reproductive. They are rather
 creative and (re)productive. Flames that fly across eyes can be mistaken for
 tears but are quite different. They are the surface expression of a poesis, a
 productive and generous⁷ remembering. But in the same way that this
 generosity is unrequited by culture at large, this entire account has verged on
 effacing the contributions of its erstwhile and most generous protagonists. As
 Derek Walcott suggests of the ever adaptable *Mangifera*:

They are without hunger, without any appetite,
 But are part of the earth's vegetal fury, their veins grow.

¹ Derek Walcott, *The Bounty*, London: Faber and Faber 1997, vi,
 13.

² The description of the throwing action is drawn from Erwin Straus' 1966 description in "The
 Upright Posture". The idea that for a woman to undertake such an action involves
 transcending the limitations inscribed on feminine comportment is drawn from Iris Marion
 Young's 1978 critique of Straus, "Throwing Like A Girl". See: Marion Young, *On Female*

Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2005.

- ³ The idea of mortality being determined by the strength of the mango tree's trunk is drawn from Edouard Glissant's 'fiction', "The Fourth Century". See: Edouard Glissant, *The Fourth Century*, (trans B. Wing), The University of Nebraska Press 1997. On his occasional sojourns, the author too has noted solitary mango trees on erstwhile plantation-laden slopes.
- ⁴ According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Pakistan saw a 44 per cent percent increase in their yearly mango yield between 2004 and 2006. See: Mango Growth Statistics <http://faostat.fao.org/site/567/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=567> Data on the Americas are forthcoming but anecdotal evidence suggests it reflects a decrease.
- ⁵ 2005, of course was the most active Atlantic Hurricane season recorded since records began (Katrina, Wilma, Dennis, etc.).
- ⁶ Seremetakis, N. (ed.), *The Senses Still*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996, 4.
- ⁷ Rosalyn Diprose defines such pre-reflective, corporeal and sensuous acts of generosity as central to the intersubjective relations of any given culture. Typically, she also states they are disregarded at the expense of the givers. While such gifts contribute to habitability and perhaps transform landscapes of structural inequality such those of the East End and its affiliated geographies, they are also effaced by the political economy that underpins officially approved interventions into the context. See: Rosalyn Diprose, *On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, Albany: Suny 2002.

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