

TWO STONES: A nonce ritual of juxtaposed cultures

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[At home] *I explore my daughter's garden. The border outlining the rose bushes presents a fine collection of stones, size as requested. There is one with a particular pink hue. I weigh it with my eyes. It differs in my hands - more than I imagined.*

[Premise] We are asked to “take off” our own personal functional and conceptual frameworks of thought and action in order to engage, *tabula rasa*, the ancient, cultural act of pilgrimage. This is our obligation to a new context. We wish to absorb without bias and allow experience to become impressionable in our memory.

Where does our consciousness lie within this framework? In order to recognize the unique and special qualities of the moment as something more than novel, would it not be appropriate to consider them as part of a continuum of history with which we can associate? Perhaps the terms *palimpsest* or *juxtaposition* are more appropriate than *tabula rasa* for this discussion. They acknowledge a base from which we may interpret an experience and a union or comparison of potentially contrasting meaning.

An action that may make the comparison consciously legible is the ceremony or ritual. Rituals are the foil through which we may frame our perception and find meaning. “In ritual, a bit of behavior or interaction, an aspect of social life, a moment in time is selected, stopped, remarked upon” (Myerhoff: 130). In *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Old*, anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff describes the construct of the “nonce” ritual as the juxtaposition of secular and sacred actions whereby the latter’s sense of specialness and significance is applied to and translated through something familiar and comfortable. We better understand the meaning of the unique in its association with the familiar. It is made palatable and relevant. In a like manner, the concept of the nonce ritual may be applied to culture and time. We may propose that a nonce ritual that juxtaposes familiar and special, contemporary and ancient, “American” and “Mayan,” will serve to heighten our awareness of the unique qualities of both. In so doing, we acknowledge the importance of our own contemporary cultural and social norms as they serve as an armature against which the experience of the pilgrimage may adhere.

[Salon del Mar] *I've been so engaged with the activities of the morning that I hardly let my eyes wander, but my body noticed the lure of the pristine beach where we were building – no blemishes. During the break I investigated the eastern shore, rough in contrast. I confess that I went into this one blindly, defining my limits with my toes until I found the perfect specimen. The cool water evaporated quickly in the sun and I could feel this new stone drawing warmth from my skin.*

[The Cairn: significance of form and making] The nonce ritual gives us a framework by which we can explore unique tendencies, but also identify similarities

that speak of primordial associations. Within the context of the Mayan culture, we find the iconic pyramid temples of renowned (sometimes hyperbolized) religious action. The stones stack high to the heavens, serving as platform for temples and observation. Pyramids and similar ziggurat forms belong to the archetype of the stone or earthen mound. At a much more intimate scale are their cousins, the cairn, standing stone, and trail marker. Found throughout the world, these erected or stacked stone assemblages hold universal connotations, marking spaces of prayer, promise, and commemoration (Graesser 1972; Walhouse 1878). They may reveal the sacredness of a burial mound or may gain significance simply by marking a meaningful journey.

Another important aspect of the nonce ritual is that it involves engagement. Participants perform rituals collectively in time and place, activating their bodies haptically and temporally. "Action is indicated because rituals persuade the body first; behaviors precede emotions in the participant" (Myerhoff: 129). Movement is associated with body memory (Bloomer and Moore, 1977; O'Neill 2001). The making of a cairn may serve as a nonce ritual, affecting participants at a collective and individual level through active perception of space and engagement. As individuals, we respond to the weight of the stone, its smoothness or roughness, its temperature and tendency to weep as a response to water-saturation in the air. Our hands pose around it, our fingers arch, and depending on the size of the stone, our back and hips may come into play. En mass, our singular stone contributes to the fabric of a form. We place it either in turn, conscious of respectful eyes upon us, or collectively with friends whose bodies we respond to. As participants we act with awareness.

[Salon de Viaje] The colors of this place are impressionable. Accompanied by a new story, I travel from the ruins to the activity. I mix my collection of pigments with the waters from the well and brush them on my original stone. There was something familiar in the Mayan pattern - it reminded me of Augie's first drawings. I replicate it as much as possible by memory. Bob writes a word the scholar used yesterday, phonetically spelling the ancient sound. I see that my fingers are stained.

Back at my room I examine my stones. These sisters, one painted and one naked, will rest together on the stoop tonight, sharing the cool night air.

[Nonce Ritual Structure] The proposed nonce ritual is a multi-day group performance that involves the preparation for and construction of a small cairn on-site near our residence in Chichen Itza. It involves the requested participation of all symposium pilgrims and begins at home with the selection of a stone symbolizing a personal contribution to the effort. (Letters will be sent by US postage describing the nonce ritual and request for participation.) This is the first individual action and requires participants to consider a place that is meaningful. The stone represents personal memory and commitment.

Every day of Salon will have a directed activity. *Preparation: Salon del Mar* presents an immediate, second opportunity for individual action. Participants will be asked to locate a second stone for their collection, one that is local and focused on their current preoccupation. (This task may extend to Days 3 or 4 of the trip, which includes visits to the ruins, though it is stressed that no stone may be taken from the ruins themselves.) The search will make participants more aware of the natural or altered context they find themselves in. There will be an unconscious tendency to

seek similarities with their “home” stone for a symmetrical match. There will be an equal unconscious tendency to seek a contrast to prove a distinction in culture.

The two group activities require dedicated time. The first of these occurs in *Pilgrimage: Salon de Viaje*. This day describes a journey - travel from Isla Mujeres to the port of Cancun to Chichen Itza. Each stop provides a time to search and reflect. The collective activity will be scheduled during a social time before dinner, perhaps accompanied by cocoa drink with cinnamon or a traditional *pozol* to quench our thirst. Participants will gather to discuss their thoughts on the topic of ritual and how it specifically applies to this journey’s events, or more broadly how they find ritual affecting their contemporary lives. As their minds focus and discussion takes form, their hands will stay occupied by the task of painting, marking their personal stones with familiar images or new ones they transcribe - a fragment from a mural, a patterned tattoo, or an unfamiliar word.

Experience: Salon de las Ruinas will address both the individual and the collective. During the six hours of solitary contemplation, participants will be encouraged to carry their stones in satchels on their backs. The weight will not be great, but it will be noticeable. As they climb the steps of the Mayan monument, set stone under hand and foot, they will nurture an anticipation for the ritual event. Back at the residences, we will discuss how the cairn may be assembled based on our reactions to site and mood. Quietly, participants will take their turn in an unrehearsed choreography of placement. The product emerging will be a mix of cultures, represented in stone, focused on the sacred Mayan context.

[Salon de las Ruins] *Beautiful day! I feel energized and have nearly forgotten the weight on my back. Now that we are together again I am more acutely aware. With the waxing moon cutting through dusk’s haze, I take down my bag and we collectively discuss the form our cairn will take. In execution it differs slightly. The majority of indigenous stones sets a supporting frame for our individual contributions. These latter stones have come from all over the world and reflect our different personalities. It is an experiential collage with which we mark our journey.*

*A group invocation... or a whisper...
In silence we make our retreat.*

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