
Of Borders, Infidels, and the Ethic of Love

by Kim Dana Kupperman

One March evening in 1987 I crossed the border that separates Morocco and Algeria. Borders involve an unreal step through a vertical sheet of particles, an atomic space that belongs to no one. These arbitrary lines in soil engender the demarcation of culture and politics, a place where identity shifts because of two connected points and where one crisis after another emerges over several inches of map space. At a border you must readjust your logic, shift gears, pay attention. Profound lessons that can change your life occur here. When I crossed that line in northern Africa — and the event was neither extraordinary nor isolated — I was sexually assaulted by an armed border guard. By sundown of the next day I sat at a table eating with a man and his family who I had met several hours before. In the course of 24 hours — one revolution of the earth around the sun — I was victim then honored guest, roles imposed upon me by the cartography of history. These dramas of crossing taught me, once time had corroded their sharp edges enough for me to contemplate their greater meaning, that the survival of humanity depends on its members' ability to love the stranger passing through their land.

It is not a lesson I learned immediately; at the time I was as unprepared to define love as I was to cross that border. "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within," wrote the American author James Baldwin, words I would read several years after my personal drama in Algeria. Love is a state of grace, he elaborates, and it is in this climate that individuals can pursue their quest for growth. This ethic of love envisions stripping off all masks and being comfortable in this nakedness. Only then can human beings afford to save one another from the assumptions that are nourished, negotiated, and exacerbated by borders, whose very existence indicates that someone will be on the other side, an outsider who must be monitored and ultimately controlled.

It is between neighbors — who are for the most part also cousins — where the divisions are at once the most profound and the least culturally distinct and where love is most absent and necessary. Follow the borders that divide the 34th parallel, give or take a

degree, and you will find the same kinds of dramas enacted over and over again with varying frequency and intensity. Only the names and costumes are different. Walk west of Maghnia, where I stood that March night. Zigzag north and south, here in the 33rd there in the 35th parallels, and you will walk through the pockets of the coat of history. You will encounter borders whose names are both familiar — Lebanon/Syria, Iran/Iraq — and places whose names you might not know like Marjayoun, where Lebanon, Syria, and Israel converge. Further along this parallel you can travel through the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan, into Kashmir, over the northern tip of India, across Tibet into China, and above the Yellow Sea brushing through South Korea. Finally, just slightly north of the 34th parallel, you will hover over Hiroshima.

Part of what I learned as I stepped from one side to the other in that parallel's quadrant had to do with facts and assumptions about myself that I carried to Maghnia. In the customs house there Algeria's president gazed down upon me with disapproval, his eyes behind dusty glass. The border guard examined me with a similar expression on his face, his eyes carefully fitted with the dual optics of politics and religion. He saw me passing for a European, in particular, for an unmarried French woman traveling with two men in two cars. These facts and the border guard's training and culturalization provided the evidence for the reputation he accorded me. It was a reputation created from assumptions about nationality and sexuality and it preceded me. With the eyes of Islamic fundamentalism he perceived me as unveiled and unmarried — a prostitute. Upon scrutiny of my passport, he discovered that I was also American, a nationality which imparts not only a chaotic, unleashed sexuality but a discomfiting imperialism, especially to those peoples who have revolted against their colonizers. American is also a nationality that Algerians, along with the majority of the world's Muslim peoples, link to the existence of Israel, whose borders embrace, ironically, both Islam and Judaism. Quite possibly, and even more dangerous from the border guard's point of view, I was a Jew

myself. Then there were the cars — packed to the brim with possible contraband and possessed by an American and two Frenchmen — this could mean drugs. Being an unveiled unmarried American who spoke fluent French layered me with a more political meaning, just as my declaration of being a student endowed me — for both the French and Algerian official embodied in the border guard — with the persona of a troublemaker. In any of these cases I was a trespasser, a peripheral creature now headed toward the Sahara desert, Allah's garden, where the border guard was a gatekeeper in more ways than Allah himself had ever imagined.

He observed me for close to two hours and I am sure that he saw a person who embodied all the evils that his culture, fueled by the intertwined principles of Islam and socialism, warned him to reject. Not to mention the possibility of our being cousins; unexpected gatherings of the clan, especially when the family is so dysfunctional, lead to conflict. It is clear from what he did that he was not practicing one of the Koran's most fundamental calls, to resolve this family conflict. Nor did he heed the command to shelter the stranger. It is also clear that once he began to view me as an available sexual object, I perceived all the errors I had committed upon my arrival here. This was not about being a provocateur in my own victimization; rather it was about that terrifying revelation that my education, specifically, what I knew about history, the real story of real people with whom I was trafficking in a variety of commodities, was entirely wrong. This false history can be both deadly and tragic. This realization of course did not allow me to go back and end the scene differently. But it did teach me that I cannot love someone I know nothing about.

Of course neither the border guard or I had the time to consider things from this vantage point. Our mutual failure to do so led to the event in which I became a victim of his need to express his assumptions as instruments of a more powerful truth. We both came to the meeting at that border wearing selves we did not like or want to see in the other. Because I was the one making the crossing, it was my responsibility to step over with sensitivity to what lay on the other side. Instead, I came unveiled and unmarried. The expression of such honesty sometimes has to happen in small

doses. But even if I had lied and said I was married, the border guard had already been molded by a centrifugal power which no longer possessed the responsibility of a conscience. He thrived on the emotional reactions — in particular, fear — of others. Such a person is a puppet in malicious hands and can make you disappear. Such a man derives great pleasure from making you barter for your immediate survival. Such a man actually prefers that you are not destroyed so that you may live with the scar and its resulting congestion — forever.

So far, I have painted a very general and one-dimensional portrait of the border guard, with cursory remarks as to why he exists in the first place. But when I look at the man for a moment — at his dark hair and sepia colored skin, into his black eyes — I see a carefully cultivated hatred, a disease whose origins are history itself. The only medicine he ever had to battle this disease was his conscience, which had been appropriated by an intrigue of forces, all with one common design, to make him as efficient as possible at keeping the outsider out. Ironically — and dangerously since this meant he knew how the other operates — he grew into this position by being an outsider himself, by being hated for what the color of his body insinuated about him. When he paid the price of his conscience he knew that in exchange he would be given coffee and good cigarettes and once in a while, a bottle of whiskey — in other words, coveted goods in a place where shortages are the standard. Most importantly, he was granted the status which allowed him to confront another person's life, with the power to alter or extinguish that life.

To fully understand this man, first I had to look at his willingness to pay the price and why he might desire this status. What circumstances led him to the proverbial bargain in which he surrendered his soul? If I looked a little closer at the landscape behind this man, about 160 years back there is a colonial scrim being lowered — here, specifically, the French are in charge. The soil of this colonial scene will nourish the birth and shape the existence of this Algerian border guard. There are the colonizers on the veranda, grape vines in the distance, solar experiments in the desert, the languid excitement of the exotic native extinguished, yield-

ing boredom. In this vacuum the virus of hate is nascent. Before they know it the French are fully infected. A plethora of repercussions will be felt, scattered across time, from the Algerian not being able to vote in French elections to the Berber woman raped by the landowner to the deliberate displacement of entire populations of Algerians, along with the poor and all other dark-skinned foreigners, to the periphery of France's great cities. The relationship between French and Algerian becomes more and more defined by have and have-not. Each side follows suit by erecting complicated mental borders. In this virus-invaded body politic, revolution fomented and then occurs. In 1962 independence is granted as though it were something to be taken away at will and restored by the benevolent missionaries of civilized Christian culture. Revolution, in spite of its current romanticization by popular culture, is a great expense to everyone involved. It lingers in the shadows in those sunfilled vineyards where the motherless children of the French conquest live and hide. It creates dislocated *pieds noirs* who are perhaps more *métis* than their French compatriots can tolerate. It hatches the hatred needed to round up and execute Algerians in a Parisian stadium. It poisons the north African earth. Somehow though it is an acceptable price to pay for freedom.

Before their expulsion from the dark continent the French leave an indelible legacy behind. That birthright is bureaucracy, which is deftly woven, thread by thread, into the tapestry of colonial life. Raise the next backdrop, one-hundred years later, to the 1930s. Here is the world of the now modern civil servant, the pride of the western world's heritage, civilization's great middle man, who has been nurtured and groomed to stamp everyday life with an official seal. The rise of this civil servant occurs at the precise moment humanity emerges from the stasis of a worldwide economic disaster. War, despair, the re-drawing of borders follow, fertilizing the ground for pure hatred. This is the historical fabric of the border guard's birth.

It is also the same cloth used to swaddle the infant who becomes the man who shelters me. Like the border guard he has been rocked in the same cultural cradle. Unlike the border guard he is willing to take off some of his masks, just as he consciously welcomes

me at his table where we break bread. This man, a father of two daughters, hopes that the baby his wife is carrying will also be a girl. He does not know how to raise a son, he says. Not in the world in which he presently lives, one in which service in the army is mandatory for all male children. Also, he confides, he does not know how to raise a boy to become a man in a place where hate has become holy. This is what makes him nervous he says, hands shaking as he pours tea. This is tea, he adds, that he has been saving for a special occasion.

When the French say real hospitality can only be experienced at an Arab table, they are not discussing a mystical cultural trait with which they are intimate. Nor are they talking about love. In French, as in English, there is a limited vocabulary to describe the state of being a guest. The word *hôte* was employed to denote both the host and the guest until the word *invité* was commonly used. The concept of being welcomed is similarly limited by language, which suggests that when the French talk about Arab hospitality, they are revealing the relationship they would like to have with the Algerian. At this table the French colonialist does not want to share a simple meal with another human being. At this table the French colonialist wishes to be absolved — without any kind of self-examination — of all crimes committed against the Algerian. This real hospitality that the French reputedly find at the Arab table is there not because it is a moral behavior mandated by the Koran but because the French expect to find it there. This expectation creates schism when it is not fulfilled, borders to be negotiated, complications to resolve, masks to wear. While I would like to believe otherwise, a residue of this expectation was part of my encounter with the man who sheltered me. This man, whose immediate and extended family relied on him for hard-to-procure commodities like daily food and housing, made my well-being a priority. This placed me in a precarious position. His wife, eight months pregnant, refused all offers of assistance. To stay for any length of time was to burden her; to leave too soon was to insult my host.

While I was being fed and sheltered by this family, I was advised by my traveling companions that the removal of masks is a procedure that requires great equi-

librium. Furthermore, they said, it would be unwise for me to relate the story of the border crossing as it would be unwise for me to reveal that I am a Jew. For the sake of equilibrium between the three of us I concurred, locking up these facts about myself so my hosts would not perceive them. One more thing about identity though: because I was an American, and to a degree, a European woman, a strange thing occurred. Although their idea was to treat me like a sister, the men in this family accorded me a servile respect which was once demanded of them by French women. Before being female, therefore, a rank which would have afforded me congress with the women of this family, I was considered French. This mask, the one of the colonial relationship, like my Jewish one, could not be removed, in spite of the effort to unveil our other selves.

As I sat at the Algerian man's table, upon which was heaped a hospitality without limits, I sensed how difficult it was for all of us to maneuver in this new territory, one defined by the risk-taking that ultimately results in love. I still wonder how much of the hospitality was the fulfillment of that colonial expectation or if the endless food was sincerely offered to facilitate a passage into the alien land of common understanding. Once we arrived in this place we needed a new language and since we had not yet invented it, we used the old vocabulary for this new adventure. Old language means the baggage of associations, cumbersome luggage on a quest for a new vision of love. And while we drew no lines in the soil around that table, the fact of the table still meant a boundary was present.

Eventually the hospitality suffocated me. This may sound like the height of ingratitude but it is only a response to what became a series of failed attempts to move beyond that table and navigate in another terrain, a place not found in atlases. The original invitation, not the elaborate succession of platters and decanters that followed, was all that was necessary to begin. After sitting at my host's table the first night, perhaps we all should have moved to an open space where the divisions of a house could not intrude. Wandering in this symbolic wilderness may have brought us to a real wild land, a place that could accord us the physical space necessary to abolish the mental borders. What would it matter then, in a place removed from neigh-

bors, bureaucracy, the cultural status quo, if I told my host I was a Jew? In a true wilderness it is more relevant for him to know that together we have a greater chance of surviving.

To have removed these masks in a borderless wilderness would have been revolutionary and the revolution was not planned to happen in March of 1987 in a remote corner of Algeria. Already we were transcending aspects of culture, class, and race; if we had bridged the gap between Muslim and Jew, we could have gone on beyond being defined as such, beyond the boundaries of the original family that produced us. No longer wearing a label, we would have been free of the details that made us different for so long. My traveling companions pointed out that it was easier to lie: just say you're married, don't mention your family too much, don't talk about politics, and this is what we did instead of facing the challenge of love. My cousins in Algeria will never know that I am not their metaphorical sister, or that I am really related to them. That they cannot know this means we all failed to learn the true meaning of our coming together.

This is not the first nor will it be the last failure of this kind. What is astounding is the number of times this cycle has turned, cruelly folding and crushing human lives in its grasp. Over and over again neighbors transgress borders and over and over again moral standards are invented and reinvented in response to infractions that humans incur amongst themselves. The witnesses — the prophets, the writers, the philosophers, the artists, and the poets — have constructed their messages about humanity's failure to love in an infinite variety of ways. That is the ultimate tragedy, our inability to decode the repetitive message of history, to know the difference between right and wrong and not apply this knowledge. We lack this skill because we are not taught where the real lessons in history occur, in our own lives. This forces us to keep those assumptions about one another intact and operative. The failure to love evolves from the failure to reconcile the private and public response to those who are marginal and dispossessed, those on the other side of all those borders, those in whom we recognize part or all of ourselves.