

A FOREIGNER IN HER OWN LAND MARIA CRISTINA AGUIRRE

While thinking about writing this lines, following the invitation from Marie-Helene Brousse, the words of the Argentinian singer and composer Facundo Cabral resonated in me: Ni soy de aqui, ni soy de alla (I'm not from here, I'm not from there).

Where does this feeling of stranger, foreign, alien comes? I can trace it of course to my history but also to language and to being a woman.

Born in the USA and more specifically in New York City, at an early age my family moved to Ecuador where I grew up. When I was 4 years old we came for an extended period of time to the US and when I returned to Ecuador I had forgotten completely how to speak Spanish. I recognized my cousins who were my playmates and immediately began speaking to them, but unbeknownst to me, I was speaking in English. So they didn't understand me, and I didn't know why. I was terrified. Since then, they nicknamed me "la gringa", term used by Latinos and Hispanics to denominate those who come from the States or/and Europe, the foreigners. So language made me a foreigner among my peers.

Later on when I was studying in France, I spoke French with was gently called "a charming accent", marking again the fact that I was not from "there". The other common point these two places had was that I was not able to vote as I was not a citizen.

When I decided to move to New York City, my native city, I had the illusion that finally I would be home, where I was born and where I could vote. But again, the real of language installed that invisible barrier that marked my difference: I had an accent in English too, which leads constantly to the same question "Where are you from?". I don't have a quick answer to this as the "truthful" one "I'm from here" leaves the other unsatisfied and suspicious. So I'm constantly forced to find creative, witty answers without having to go through my life story, with strangers in an elevator or other chance encounters. I even thought to take accent reducing classes, until someone told me that everybody has an accent, especially in English and that it was charming. So I have accepted the trait of "gringa", foreigner, represented by the accent but I think it goes beyond that. I think it is the particularly form that being a woman, the mark of the difference, being other to oneself, takes for me. And yes, I do enjoy the equivocal that the three languages provide.

