

**The Vanishing Point:  
The Dis-integration of Female Identity in Paul Bowles's  
*The Sheltering Sky***

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**Citation:** Martino, A. (2006). The Vanishing Point: The Dis-Integration of Female Identity in Paul Bowles's *Sheltering Sky*. *South Atlantic Review*, 71(2), 24-52.

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Consciousness seems to stream into us from outside in the form of *sense-perceptions*. We see, hear, taste, and smell the world, and so are conscious of the world.

Carl Jung, "The Structure of the Psyche"

It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here, in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears; nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came.

Paul Bowles, "The Baptism of Solitude"

A subject to which few intellectuals ever give a thought is the right to be a vagrant, the freedom to wander. Yet vagrancy is deliverance, and the life on the open road is the essence of freedom.

Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Oblivion Seekers*

The fundamental experience of what it means to become totally "other" constitutes a dwelling permanently and absolutely outside one's familiar space of

encounter. The necessity of relationships with others, as well as places, memories, tastes, and smells, provides a backdrop, a foundation if you will, for the space of encounter. The logic informing the conditions for the space of encounter is one of certainty. Within the space of encounter (as dictated by a decidedly western set of rules or codes of conduct) one is certain how to act, how to speak, and what to feel; the appropriate responses are familiar. Once one has crossed the threshold of his or her front door and travels beyond the familiarity of community our sense of certainty (and along with it our sense of security) begins to fall away. Outside the space of encounter, and thus free from any ties to what is familiar, one appears to others as a stranger and as an enigma. This ontological condition of otherness is one of errancy, both temporally and spatially, as well as linguistically. Thus, the logic informing this particular question of errancy and otherness is uncertainty. Interestingly, the issue of errancy and otherness, particularly in terms of gender, has gone relatively unnoticed in the work of American writer Paul Bowles.<sup>i</sup> This is not surprising since the majority of protagonists in the works of Bowles are male. Yet, the question of gender, indeed, that of the female protagonist as such, remains to be thought.

This essay offers a meditation on the dis-integration of female identity as depicted in the third and final section of Paul Bowles's 1949 novel, *The Sheltering Sky*. The final section of the novel, titled "The Sky," details Kit Moresby's disappearance into the Sahara after her husband Port has died from typhoid. Briefly, the novel depicts the travels of three Americans, Port and Kit Moresby (husband and wife) and their friend Tunner, through the Algerian Sahara. Landing in the port city of Oran just after the Second World War has ended, the threesome, led by Port, have decided to get as far away

from western civilization as possible. To complicate matters, Port and Kit are hoping that this trip will reunite them and renew a sense of intimacy to their stagnant marriage. The trip seems to be most difficult for Kit who, we are to surmise, agrees to accompany her husband somewhat reluctantly. Kit is doubly estranged from the space of encounter not only because of her gender, but also because she is a white American who does not speak the language of the natives she encounters. It is this duality in the experience of being other that casts her totally outside the space of encounter, yet, paradoxically, throws her into the world. She is unable to interact with those she encounters either linguistically or emotionally. As such, she fails to engage *any* ontological situation and suffers from a complete exclusion, or dis-integration. This dis-integration, I submit, begins with the state of her marriage to Port. What follows constitutes a concomitant reading of female dis-integration in this particular novel.

Being lost is a theme that remains dominant throughout the novel. What does it mean to be lost in an alien culture/world, and from the familiar on every level of ontology? The anxiety that drove the Moresby's to keep moving away from civilization and into a profound existence of "drifting" through the North African landscape was, from the very beginning a fear for Kit. Just what that fear was can be read or interpreted only once the reader has finished the novel. Kit's fear of the unknown came to fruition, but in stages. That is, from the very beginning she was plagued with a fear of not being able to "get back" to the *civilized* world of Europe and the United States. Unlike Kit, Port willingly throws himself into a culture and landscape which is totally alien solely for the sake of experiencing something new, something untouched by the destruction manifested by Europe and the United States during the Second World War. At no point

in the novel is Kit's true feelings regarding their journey throughout the Sahara made known. This suggests that she accompanies her husband and bends to his wishes. Furthermore, Kit is portrayed as someone who needs the boundaries of the west, as well as the security of her race in order to live. Kit's ontological horizon stretches to the boundaries of Europe. Beyond that boundary (her space of encounter) an uncanniness pervades the landscape like some beguiling fog. Once this fog is penetrated her sense of security is stripped from her consciousness, albeit by degrees, and she begins to unravel, to dis-integrate before our very eyes. The path into the unknown leads Port and Kit to two very different destinations. Their journey into the Sahara fails to reunite them, in fact it does just the opposite; it leads them further away from each other. "It made her sad to realize that in spite of their so often having the same reactions, the same feelings, they would never reach the same conclusions, because their respective aims in life were almost diametrically opposed" (99). What is at stake is more than just ideology here. While Port can be read as the embodiment of the restless soul, Kit is someone who needs civilization, needs boundaries in order to feel secure. Each one of them is in search of a renewed intimacy with one another, yet neither one is willing to make the first move toward that intimacy. Moreover, Port's path leads ultimately to his death, while Kit's leads to madness. In each case the security of what is familiar is irrecoverably left behind.

When read this way we may consider that Bowles is attempting to open up an investigation into what it means to be thrown into a world in which any concept of the familiar is completely lost or displaced. Moreover, I read this concept of thrownness as complementary with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. But, what exactly does

Heidegger mean by “thrownness?” If we are to approach any kind of understanding of the theme of lostness in *The Sheltering Sky* we may begin by acknowledging the Heideggerian connection of thrownness at work in the novel. Therefore, by way of orientation I would first like to outline a Heideggerian method as one way to engage this novel. In *Being and Time* Heidegger defines thrownness as:

The expression thrownness is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over*. The “that it is and has to be” disclosed in the attunement of Da-sein is not the “that” which expresses ontologically and categorically the factuality belonging to objective presence; The latter is accessible only when we ascertain it by looking at it. Rather, the that disclosed in attunement must be understood as an existential attribute of *that being* which is in the mode of being-in-the-world. *Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something objectively present, but is a characteristic of the being of Da-sein taken on existence, although initially thrust aside*. The that of facticity is never to be found by looking. (127)

The Americans deliver themselves “over to” the totally alien culture/world of the North African Sahara consciously and willingly, and most importantly, without a plan. That is to say, compulsively. A plan would suggest that the threesome (Port, Kit, and Tunner) had a clear destination in mind from the very beginning. However, early in the novel Bowles makes a clear and fundamental distinction between the tourist and the traveler. “He [Port] did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveler. The difference is partly one of time, he would explain. Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over a period of years, from one part of the earth to another” (6). The traveler throws himself or herself into a situation that is not bound by time. However, this thrownness should not be read as something that is only negative or destructive. Thrownness (as I read it in Heidegger) also opens up vast possibilities. These possibilities, or freedoms, reside within Heidegger’s concept of attunement’s

disclosure of those possibilities. By confronting the facticity of thrownness, possibilities open themselves up before the Dasein. To put it differently, allowing anxiety to approach is a revealing of the possibility of being-in-the-world, untethered to any notion of race, nationality and affiliation. One's freedom resides with an encounter with being as such. One's affiliation to race, nationhood, or religion constitutes a closed system of boundaries. Freedom, in this sense, is a *confrontation* with being-in-the-world. Moreover, just as our senses allow us to experience existence in ways that are quite unique, anxiety allows us to lay aside the chains of affiliation which, quite often, make it impossible to acknowledge the primal condition of thrownness. The concept of anxiety is a fundamental attribute of attunement. Anxiety is a mood which we should be receptive toward rather than resistant against. Yet, an attunement to anxiety can never fully appear on account of the metaphysical logic which always already turns that anxiety into a fear. Arguing that attunement transcends the physical, Heidegger states:

*Mood has always already disclosed being-in-the-world as a whole and first makes possible directing oneself toward something. Being attuned is not initially related to something physical, it is itself not an inner condition which then in some mysterious way reaches out and leaves its mark on things and persons. This is the second essential characteristic of attunement. It is a fundamental existential mode of being of the equiprimordial disclosedness of world, being-there-with, and existence because this disclosure itself is essentially being-in-the-world. (129)*

One must work through the murky waters of Heidegger's rhetoric here. Metaphysics constitutes a direction, a teleological receptivity toward being-in-the-world. As such, humans must search for meaning via a construction of meaning, or truth. The logic of metaphysics (philosophy for Heidegger) is grounded upon the logic that meaning can in fact be projected or located. Anxiety completely dismantles this notion of a teleological construction of meaning, thus ushering forward a dis-integration of identity that is

fundamentally moored to belonging, or community. In regards to *The Sheltering Sky*, whiteness becomes a construction that is continually called into question once it (whiteness) is divorced from its “native habitat.” That whiteness should be “read” as a determining force of “reality” cannot hold once that white persona disembarks upon the soil of the dark continent. As white gods and goddesses we know nothing, and wish to know nothing of that which does not in some profound way contribute to our overall meaning (position of supremacy) in the world. Therefore, anxiety will always be rationalized as a fear of the something, and once this rationalization takes place that fear can always be conquered.

*The Sheltering Sky* demonstrates a Heideggerian mode of attunement to fear in a very remarkable way. In *Being and Time*, one of the most basic distinctions Heidegger makes is between fear and anxiety. Heidegger argues that anxiety has no-thing as its object, yet a fear is *always* a fear of *something*. The elements of fear (the term *terror* can be used interchangeably here) that appear in the fiction of Bowles, indeed, in one way or another in all of his writing, is not a fear of an alien culture as the Westerner confronts it, but rather the fear is almost always a fear of the loss of the self, and as a result, that self assumes the condition of the stranger.<sup>ii</sup> *The Sheltering Sky* is a narrative mapping the loss of the self as those (Port, Kit, and Tunner) wander farther and farther into the Sahara. The loss of the self is precisely what happens to Kit and the end of the second book, and for the remainder of the novel. As Book Two ends, Port is dying and Kit wanders off into the night, leaving Tunner waiting for her. She has become enveloped within a madness as dark and silent as the desert sky itself. She throws herself into a world that is totally and absolutely detached from the familiar in order to repress Port’s horrific death.



While Port was alive he functioned as her husband (a relationship which has been under considerable stress and estrangement from a marriage based on compassion for some time) and as her ground to the familiar, just as she was for him. Although their relationship had been under considerable strain, it still functioned as a ground to what was familiar to them both; in other words, it was home. Their relationship, strained though it was, provided a sense of security for them both. Unbeknown to the couple, the fatal departure for the Sahara would pull the rug of security out from under them. In the first two parts of the novel Port makes all of the decisions and Kit decides to follow Port to North Africa (early in the novel the reader is told that Kit would have preferred to go to Europe) and thus away from Western civilization. Throughout the first two parts of the novel Kit is represented completely from the point of view of her husband; she is under his gaze, so to speak. Once Port is dead—a death which comes slowly—Kit is forced to confront a life without Port as a ground to the familiar. It is at this point that Kit gives into the madness which has been lurking in the back of her mind since their arrival on the continent, and she vanishes from the world. As a reaction to Port's death she finally decides to abandon what is left of her life (Tunner, serving as a metaphor for the degeneracy of Western Civilization) and wander off into the Sahara alone:

The alley grew wide, its wall receding to follow the line of vegetation. She had reached the oued, at this point a flat open valley dotted with small dunes. Here and there a weeping tamarisk tree lay like a mass of gray smoke along the sand. Without hesitating she made for the nearest tree and set her bag down. The feathery branches swept the sand on all sides of the trunk—it was like a tent. She put on her coat, crawled in, and pulled the valise in after her. In no time at all she was asleep. (259)

The swallowing up of Kit by the Sahara is the first moment in her life where she actually becomes the nomad she and Port represented in the novel up to this point. Once

she loses her husband, the only thing that meant home and security to her (at no time is there a suggestion that the couple would return to the United States anytime soon), she is, in a profound way, doomed to wander on the periphery of being. That is, she no longer belongs to the West, yet she can never be fully accepted into the culture of the nomadic tribes of the Sahara either; she must always be an outsider. In this way we may read the third part of the book as an “opening up” of the desert from the dirty alleyways of civilization. The scene of Port’s death and Kit’s subsequent flight into the desert takes place in a French garrison fort. Therefore, it is only after she wanders off into the desert at night that she ultimately leaves the light of a European-controlled dwelling place.

Kit’s disappearance into the Sahara causes many problems for the French colonialists in North Africa. In one particularly illuminating scene at the end of Book II, Lieutenant d’Armagnant, a French supervisor in Bou Noura, just north of Sba, where Port died and Kit was last seen, ponders on her disappearance:

It was true that things were going well only in his own little cosmos; he pitied Captain Broussard down in Sba and thought with an inward shudder that but for the grace of God all that trouble would have fallen upon him. He had even urged the travelers to stay on in Bou Noura; at least he was able to feel blameless on that score. He had not known the American was ill, so that it was not his fault the man had gone and died in Broussard’s territory. *But of course death from typhoid was one thing and the disappearance of a white woman into the desert was another* (emphasis mine); it was the latter which was making all the trouble. (260-261)

The condition of lostness affects Kit, as well as those who are “responsible” for her while she is in the desert. Therefore, the question surrounding the ability for a white female to *completely* abandon the space of encounter is continuously raised. Lieutenant d’Armagnant’s concern for Kit coincides with the ideology of the female body and mind as property, as something owned by the male. Once she disappears she is no longer under the dominant gaze of the male, and this places those responsible in a perilous

situation. However, Kit's disappearance, her lostness, is still accommodated under the gaze of the western metaphysical tradition. That is, once she is discovered to be lost, she must be "found." The recovery of her body and mind becomes a priority, a mission, to be accomplished by the French colonizers. Yet, as we shall see, once her mind is unable to recover from an experience with the Sahara, she can no longer "fit" into the mechanism of western discourse.

The actions of Port are motivated by a selfish desire to get as far away from civilization as possible, to keep moving. The actions of Kit are motivated by madness, which is also fundamentally selfish.<sup>iii</sup> Instead of tending to her husband's body, she decides to try to get as far away from him as possible. This shocks the French colonial authorities perhaps more than her disappearance. "Only an American could do anything so unheard of as to lock her sick husband into a room and run off into the desert, leaving him behind to die alone. It was inexcusable, of course, but he could not really be horrified at the idea, as it seemed Broussard was" (261). What is missing from Kit's character is the "gesture of Antigone," the caring for the body of the male by the woman. This is a fundamental moment in the novel. Kit not only abandons Port, she abandons her "duty" to care for him in life and in death. Once this occurs she is subsequently relegated to become a vagrant, a wanderer, but in a totally different way than Port. Port is the quintessential "lost soul" doomed to wander the world searching for a meaning to life. Yet, in Bowles there very often turns out to be no meaning. This is exactly what Kit is attempting to escape from; the meaning of Port's death and her newfound solitary predicament. As we shall see, this existential predicament comes through most tellingly in the *whiteness* of Kit's identity. However, what consistently links the two is the desire

to “get back” to a certain conscious sensibility. Yet it is ironic that both Kit and Port bend under the weight of pain. Their familiar world, their home is now based on the fact that neither one will make the first move toward a renewed intimacy. Thus, the pain of estrangement becomes the familiar they call home. Yet, a familiarity steeped in pain is better than no familiarity at all.

The representation of conscious reality in *The Sheltering Sky* is steeped in pain. This theme runs all throughout the work of Bowles. It also links the concept of existentialism to his work. In the middle of the novel, Port tells Kit that there is nothing behind the sky. This vast emptiness can be read as a threatening force from which the sky offers as the only means of protection from oblivion. However, for Kit, what lies behind the “sheltering sky” is mass chaos, the unthinkable. Kit’s conscious desire to flee into the Sahara is a “giving over to” the madness of anxiety. She has become an embodiment of the omens that once merely dictated her actions: “Instead of feeling the omens, she now would make them, *be* them herself” (281). In fact, Kit’s choice to wander off into the Sahara is the first time she makes a decision for herself in the novel and actually follows through on that decision. Even when she sleeps with Tunner in Book I, she can only do so under the influence of alcohol. Kit’s descent into the Sahara is a flight from the pain of the reality of Port’s death and the collapse of the familiar. She is unable to face this fear (of being all alone in a world—and for whatever reason Tunner never “fits” into her life after Port’s death—without a “guide,” without a husband) and decides to flee from that reality.

At this point in the novel two main themes emerge; Kit’s “marriage” to Belqassim (an Arab merchant in charge of a caravan) and her estrangement from language. These

two themes are not mutually exclusive but actually merge in and out of the narrative as the book moves toward its conclusion.

Book III (“The Sky”) begins in very much the same way as Book I began. Kit awakens in the desert. However, unlike Port’s awakening in Book I, Kit is sure of her surroundings. The opening paragraph of “The Sky” is worth citing in its entirety:

When she opened her eyes she knew immediately where she was. The moon was low in the sky. She pulled her coat around her legs and shivered slightly, *thinking of nothing* (italics mine). There was a part of her mind that ached, that needed rest. It was good merely to lie there, to exist and to ask no questions. She was sure that if she wanted to, she could begin remembering all that had happened. It required only a small effort. But she was comfortable there as she was, with that opaque curtain falling between. She would not be the one to lift it, to gaze down into the abyss of yesterday and suffer again its grief and remorse. At present, what had gone before was indistinct, unidentifiable. Resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it. Like an insect spinning its cocoon thicker and more resistant, her mind would go on strengthening the thin partition, the danger spot of her being. (279)

Kit’s attempt is to reject a self-consciousness, to lose all sense of herself as a woman with a past or a future. For her, from this point on, there would only be a present to contend with, and would be both ineluctable and strange. “The danger spot of her being” is the recollection of what it is to exist as a white (that is, privileged) woman in the world.

Existence is, in this respect, a laying bare of all the wounds that one receives throughout a lifetime. Existence is, as Bowles so often reminds us, suffering.<sup>iv</sup> What makes us human is our suffering. The “danger spot” that Bowles is writing about is fundamentally tied to human memory, but I will come back to this. The opening paragraphs of Books I and III are comparative mediations on what it means to exist somewhere and what it means to exist nowhere. In *The Sheltering Sky* consciousness comes to represent the somewhere and the unconscious represents nowhere. I submit that this distinction is key in understanding not only the novel but existentialism as well. In the first book Port is

slowly awakening into consciousness; he is coming back from a nowhere—a place as solitary as sleep—to a somewhere: “In the next room he could hear his wife stepping about in her mules on the smooth tile floor, and this sound now comforted him, since he had reached another level of consciousness where the mere certitude of being alive was not sufficient” (4). It is the sound of his wife’s footsteps in the next room that brings him back to the familiar; to a concept of “being at home.” However, with Port dead, there is nothing familiar that can function as a rope with which Kit can pull herself back from the nothingness which is imminent. For the characters in this novel, travelers with little or no regard for time, the familiar is the only “home” they have. For nomads, the geographical dwelling place is always changing. The only sense of home they can cling to, construct out of a nothingness, is the familiarity of the present. A nomad’s existence is one without roots, without a past or a future. Likewise, the concept of security (from a western point of view) is ephemeral.

When Kit spies a caravan traveling through the Sahara, she quickly expresses her desire to join them. Soon an amorous situation builds between Kit and Belqassim, the leader of the caravan. Important to point out in the relationship between the two is that, one, Kit refuses to learn his language: “She had not yet learned his language; indeed, she did not consider making the effort” (296); and two, Belqassim has her stripped of her clothes and placed in the same clothes as those belonging to the caravan, and then orders her “Western” clothes to be discarded. When it is discovered that a man in the caravan has confiscated her clothes (presumably to sell once they reach a city with a market), Belqassim orders them buried: “He was very angry, and wrenched them away from the man, bidding him dig a shallow hole and bury them then and there while he watched”

(291); and three, once the Caravan reaches its “home” destination,” Kit is forced to dress as a man and is smuggled into a small room in Belqassim’s labyrinthine house. All of this coincides with the loss of Kit’s identity and her physical predicament of being lost in the Sahara. Yet, it is not just her clothes that are buried, but her gender as well as her race. To be a white female in the Sahara is problematic to say the least. The white race (the Westerner) has an existence that is bound to time and place. Continually in the first several chapters of the novel Port consults timetables and maps, he is consumed with time and space while pretending to be free of their constraints. To not belong to any one place in particular, to be nomadic, constitutes a dis-integration from the historically familiar. Kit’s dis-integration begins once she steps upon African soil. It is a dis-integration that leads her perpetually from the known to the unknown, from civilization to barbarism, from sanity to madness. These sets of binary oppositions are continually at odds with each other. Whiteness and blackness continually vie for intellectual supremacy. Yet, the white traveler (as Bowles may be suggesting) can never fully leave the mentality, the “reality,” of the tourist behind. Kit’s decision to attach herself to Belqassim’s caravan not only represents her need to belong, but it also brings out her romanticizing of the other by sexing that other. The use and abuse of the female body is inextricably tied to madness in this novel. Her sexual relations with North African men is her attempt at an integration into a culture—a giving of herself.

Kit’s loss of identity is sealed once she is dressed in a man’s clothes. Her femininity, her whiteness, is consumed by the nomadic force which prior to this had only lurked somewhere on the periphery of her consciousness. Although Belqassim may be doing this for her own safety (he has several wives waiting for him at home), Kit’s

subservience in the act temporarily fills the void left when Port died. That is, the relationship is not of man and wife but of master and slave. When his other wives discover that Kit is really a woman, and a white woman at that, they take advantage of Belqassim's absence from the house and break into the room where Kit is being kept. A violent confrontation ensues, and Kit is whipped by one of the wives. "Suddenly the old woman brought the whip down across her face with a quick, light gesture. The lithe greased leather wrapped itself around her head for the fraction of a second, stinging the skin of her cheek. She sat still" (300/01). The brutality of the scene is especially Bowlesian. Since Belqassim has several wives already, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the addition of another is a threat itself. Rather, the reader should be highly sensitive to Kit's whiteness here. Her whiteness constitutes a resonant threat to the other wives for several reasons. Perhaps chief among these is the metaphoric that surround her whiteness. In this sense whiteness comes to represent civilization, authority, and above all, mobility. Being white gave Kit the "right" to travel in ways that the other wives are unable to. For all intents and purposes, the wives are prisoners. They are kept by Belqassim and brought out only for display, sex, and domestic chores. Kit's condition as a white woman further alienates her—she is remote beyond imagining here. She has wandered off (erred) beyond any occidental marker. Her dis-integration has reached the very final degrees of what constitutes being human. If she cannot think ("resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it" (279) ) then she cannot suffer. Yet, it is human nature to suffer.

The spectacle of the world (the Algerian Sahara) is reversed in this scene and Kit becomes the spectacle, the commodity, *the animal* that must be whipped into submission.



Her whiteness (which we may read as a metaphor for the untamed, something wild and elusive, just as Moby-Dick was for Ahab<sup>v</sup>, just as the red rose is for Hawthorne's Prison House) must be tamed, and by implication, that "domestication" will also strip her of her right to mobility. In this sense Kit is violently robbed of her identity (as a white westerner and as Belqassim's concubine) in ways that far outweigh her lack of independent identity as Port's wife. Belqassim returns early to discover Kit being whipped and beaten by the other wives. In a fury, Belqassim orders them out of the room. Later that same evening he gathers all the wives around to witness a marriage between himself and Kit. It is not the marriage that so angers the other wives, but rather Belqassim's stripping them of their jewelry and placing it on Kit. The "wedding" feast serves only to harden the other wives' resentment toward Kit. Yet, the reader cannot ignore this new "privileged" status bestowed upon Kit. She has gone from being the privileged white suburban housewife to the "African queen." In each case she is owned by the men in her life.

The marriage of Port and Kit Moresby functioned more as a stand against loneliness rather than one grounded in love and mutual respect. Indeed, no sense of intimacy between Kit and Port is portrayed in the novel. Certainly the two never consummate the marriage at any time in the novel. This lack of physical touch is telling. It shows the reader just how estranged the couple really is.<sup>vi</sup> Consequently, Kit's union to Belqassim is one based upon commodification. Kit has gone from being the obedient sidekick and traveling companion of Port to a commodity belonging to Belqassim: "Now that he owned her completely, there was a new savageness, a kind of angry abandon in his manner" (394). In each of her marriages, Kit never fully, consciously, asserts her

own identity. In fact, her identity is always contingent upon her male counter-part. She was married to Port, and followed him to the Sahara. Along the way she has an affair with Tunner, one is lead to assume, in order to prove to herself that she can still feel desire. Directly after Kit discovers that Port is too close to death to recover she deliberately leaves him unattended and makes off into the desert where she is picked up by Belqassim's caravan. Each time she places herself into the hands of the male, and consequently falls under his gaze. The reader would do well to recall that Kit fails to fulfill that traditional wifely (and female) domesticated role; she does not prepare Port's body for burial. Thus, not only is she a failure at her marriage (the renewed intimacy is never achieved), but she fails the most ancient of female duties—the preparation of the body for burial.

According to Carl Jung in his essay, "Marriage As a Psychological Relationship," a psychological relationship, the union of two people in marriage, is a fundamental part of the identity-building process. However, I find it interesting that Jung argues that in marriage we choose partners whose psychological makeup is similar to our own. In that essay Jung declares:

Unconsciousness results in non-differentiation, or unconscious identity. The practical consequence of this is that one person presupposes in the other a psychological structure similar to his own. Normal sex life, as a shared experience with apparently similar aims, further strengthens the feeling of unity and identity. This state is described as one of complete harmony, and is extolled as a great happiness ("one heart and one soul")—not without good reason, since the return of that original condition of unconscious oneness is like a return to childhood. Hence the childish gestures of lovers. (167)

Such a "gesture" is completely lacking on Kit and Port's part. Indeed, if she does display the "childish gesture of a lover" it is toward Belqassim. The sexual act, the primal need for that kind of intimacy must be made in order for her (specifically) to remain human.

Without it her existence in the world slips toward the animal-like nature of the unhomed. Kit's marriages manifest subservience on her part. In each relationship she is the dominated partner whose identity is completely contingent upon the identity of the male. As readers we can only speculate as to why Kit gravitated toward Port and eventually married him because she saw something in his personality that was similar to her own. Perhaps it was a need to continue moving away from the "civilization" of the West, with its omens and its devastating wars. What is certain (based entirely upon the text) is that Kit allowed Port to make all of the decisions in their lives and actually preferred that he take on the role of decision maker. In other words, Port comes to represent an authority and father figure for Kit.

Interestingly, a few lines later in Jung's essay he gives us an even more interesting way of applying a reading to the relationship of Kit and the men in her life. The roles of husband and wife take on the connotations of father and mother. Jung notes:

Even more is it a return to the mother's womb, into the teeming depths of an as yet unconscious creativity. It is, in truth, a genuine and incontestable experience of the Divine, whose transcendent force obliterates and consumes everything individual; a real communion with life and the impersonal power of fate. The individual will for self-possession is broken: the woman becomes the mother, the man the father, and thus both are robbed of their freedom and made instruments of the life urge. (167)

The "life urge" Jung refers to is reproduction. In both of Kit's marriages, no offspring is produced. Therefore, we see that in each case (with the exception of her affair with Tunner, which is completely sexual) the union between Kit and Port and then Kit and Belqassim (from Kit's perspective) is a union based upon a psychological need similar to the parent-child relationship. Moreover, the uncanniness of her marriages ties in with what Freud has to say about the importance of something familiar being indissolubly

linked to the *unheimlich*. As Freud states in his essay on the uncanny, “for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, *but something which is familiar* (emphasis mine) and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (217).

The reunion both Kit and Port are both waiting and hoping for in the novel never occurs because each is waiting for the other to make the first move. Kit is unsure of how to go about undertaking such a reunion, as well as feeling guilty on account of her infidelity to Port with Tunner. Port is of the mind that eventually, if he let things take their course, it will happen. Both are unwilling to work toward the reunion in any consciously viable way. As a result, the reunion is never reached. Kit’s relationship with Belqassim is one based upon a kind of play acting from the very beginning. His decision to dress Kit as a boy further robs her of her true identity. Once Belqassim has her clothes buried in the Sahara, there is no turning back. Kit is unable or unwilling to return to her sense of self.

When Kit finally manages to escape Belqassim’s house, she stumbles into the chaos of a completely unfamiliar world. Chapter 28 begins with a dream in which Kit feels “suspended between sky and sea.” When she awakes Kit struggles with the fact that she is not yet dead. Death for Kit would mean an end to the pain of existing in the world. Although unsaid, the reader senses her disappointment when she realizes that she was only sleeping and not dead:

The pure sky, the bushes beside her, the pebbles at her feet, all had been drawn up from the well of absolute night. And in the same fashion the strange languor in the center of her consciousness, those vaporous ideas which kept appearing as though independently of her will, were mere tentative fragments of her own presence, looming against the nothingness of a sleep not yet cold—a sleep still powerful enough to return and take her in her in its arms. But she remained

awake, the nascent light invading her eyes, and still no corresponding aliveness awoke within her; she had no feeling of being anywhere, of being anyone. (315)

She's completely lost to herself and to the outside world. Earlier, when she was planning her escape from Belqassim's house (not because she felt the need to return to something familiar, but because she discovered that the other wives were slowly poisoning her) she thinks to herself, "I must send a telegram, she thought. It's the quickest way of reaching them. There must be a telegraph office here" (309). The desire to send a "signal" to the outside world is a desire completely founded in her need to remain alive. This is a decidedly problematic occurrence in the novel. Symbolically she is dead to the world, lost in the Sahara, and *linguistically* she is lost to herself. Either way, it is only when a danger is posed to her that she feels the need to "escape." However, Kit is confronted with the openness, the inadequacies of language here. She is unable to break through the barriers of a foreign tongue and make herself understood. Linguistic meaning is thrown into a tailspin and she has no choice but to revert to an infantile state that is analogous to something *prior* to language. Her condition of thrownness is complete here.

When Kit wanders into a crowded city street she is confronted by a man who asks her what language she speaks. Mistaking her for French, the crowd that takes notice of her is amused because she is dressed in Arab clothing:

Approaching her, he tapped her on the arm and said something to her in Arabic; she did not understand. Then he said: "*Toi parles francais?*" She did not move; she did not know what to do. "*Oui,*" she replied at length.

"*Toi pas Arabe,*" he pronounced, scrutinizing her. He turned triumphantly to the crowd and announced that the lady was French. They all backed away a few steps, leaving him and Kit in the center. Then the woman renewed her demands for money. Still Kit remained motionless, the thousand-franc note in her hand.

The man drew some coins from his pocket and tossed them to the expostulating woman, who counted them and walked off slowly. The other

people seemed disinclined to move; *the sight of a French lady dressed in Arab clothes delighted them* (emphasis mine). (316-317)

Kit is not just mistaken for any woman, she is mistaken for a French woman. She is mistaken for a colonialist. The crowd recognizes the fact that she is a white woman wandering around the town. Sensing the danger the man, whose name is Amar, leads Kit through the crowded streets to a hotel of an acquaintance of his. The woman who owns the hotel immediately mistakes Kit for a prostitute and scolds Amar. Amar tells the hotel proprietor that the woman he is with is French. However, Kit hysterically cries, “*Non, non, non! Je ne veux pas!*” (318, italics original). Amar leads Kit out of the hotel and once again through the crowded streets to a dark and gloomy room in the back of a café owned by another acquaintance. In this scene Bowles is contrasting the stillness and darkly lit rooms of the hotel and the café with the crowded, noisy, and very bright world outside. Interchanging moments of mass chaos in the streets with that of the almost silent indoors, Bowles is, I would suggest, creating for his readers a sense of the confusion that Kit is experiencing in the novel. We must keep in mind while reading this passage that Kit is dressed as an Arab woman who does not speak Arabic, but French and English. At no time is her identity “unearthed.” She is constantly mistaken for what she is not. Moreover, the reader must pay as much attention to the rhythm of this scene as to its content. The juxtaposition of light and dark, noise and silence, create an unbalanced and chaotic momentum that leads up to a climatic event. Furthermore, the fact that Bowles was a composer as well as a writer lends a resonant musicality to the scene.

While Amar and Kit are drinking coffee, Kit suddenly remembers that she must send a telegram to the outside world. This will be her last real attempt to make contact with the world she left behind after Port’s death. However, Kit has so completely cut

herself off from the world that she has forgotten the language in which she must send the telegram. In an act of desperation, Kit pleads with Amar to help her send a telegram:

The man looked at the paper and then at her. "Where do you want to send it?" he repeated. She shook her head dumbly. He handed her the paper and she saw, written on it in her own hand, the words: "CANNOT GET BACK." The man was staring at her. "That's not right!" she cried, in French. "I want to add something." But the man went on staring at her—not angrily, but expectantly. He had a small mustache and blue eyes. "*Le destinataire, s'il vous plait,*" he said again. She thrust the paper at him because she could not think of the words she needed to add and she wanted the message to leave immediately. But already she saw that he was not going to send it. (320)

Kit's estrangement from language is clearly illustrated in this scene. Kit's ultimate estrangement from the world is reinforced when she cannot think of the words to add to her cryptic message, "CANNOT GET BACK." But what is it that she cannot get back to? Certainly on the surface the reader is meant to think of Tunner, waiting for her in the north. However, I suggest that Kit is attempting to return to the "reality of the external world," to use Heidegger's phrase. Doubtless her words are a direct reflection of Port's last few words to her, when he states that he has been "trying to get back to her" from the typhoid-induced fever he had suffered. Regardless of their estrangement from each other, Kit and Port are fundamentally linked to the fact that they are both "missing from the external world;" Port in the physical sense, and Kit in the linguistic sense. More important is the facticity of the couple falling prey to thrownness, but a particular thrownness grounded in the uncanny. Port is Kit's last defense against an ever encroaching anxiety concerning the nothing and the nowhere. For her, the Sahara is quite literally the middle of nowhere. To exist nowhere, and in the face of the nothing discloses her ontological condition. Moreover, without Port she becomes "just another white woman lost in the Sahara." Her ties to Port are what determines her existence.

“But uncanniness means at the same time not-being-at-home,” (176) states Heidegger. The couple fall prey to an experience with what is uncanny. This uncanny terrain is geographical (the Sahara) as well as psychological. The uncanniness of the Sahara physically destroys Port, while it destroys Kit psychologically. In terms of gender these differences in destruction are extremely telling. The white male travels for the sake of experience, while the white female, his mate, accompanies him purely for the sake of his own ego. Either way Kit’s identity is consumed by Port’s need to “keep moving.” Both are “unhomed” completely.

Directly after she has seen the written telegram, Kit realizes that she has betrayed her position to the world. That position is the silence she has retreated into after Port’s death. That silence is indissolubly related to a certain type of nothingness—a nothingness so profound that once one enters into it, one is unable to return. The metaphors of this scene are incredibly important. While Port’s retreat into nothingness was accomplished by his death (his physical retreat from the world of the living), Kit’s retreat is more metaphorical. Tunner (Port and Kit’s link to the past as well as the outside world) is aware that Port has died, and has wired Port’s family back home in the United States. However, Kit is not dead, just missing. Her disappearance from the world is an altogether different kind of silence. The Sahara has swallowed her up. That disappearance, unlike Port’s death, is voluntary. The “reality” of existence, which is the realization that existence is painful, is too much for her. Therefore, she allows the Sahara to consume her. Yet something deep within her being attempts to make contact with the outside world. When she realizes what she has done, she panics:

Now that she had betrayed herself, established contact with the other side, every minute counted. They would spare no effort in seeking her out, they would pry



open the wall she had built and force her to look at what she had buried there. She knew by the blue-eyed man's expression that she had set in motion the mechanism which would destroy her. And now it was too late to stop it. "*Vite! Vite!*" she panted to Amar, perspiring and protesting beside her. They were in an open space by the road that led down to the river. A few nearly naked beggars squatted here and there, each one murmuring his own short sacred formula for them as they rushed by. No one else was in sight. (320)

When Amar finally calms Kit down, he takes her to the café where they had coffee earlier. It was in that café, owned by Amar's friend Atallah, that Kit left her bag. Up to this point her bag has been the only thing she carried which kept her linked to the past and the outside world. Within it are some of her clothes and money, along with her passport. Once at Atallah's, Kit begins slowly kissing Amar: "You must save me, she said between kisses" (322). But save her from what? The reader is never quite sure, but it is most likely a request to save her from being found. Kit and Amar make love and she declares that she loves him and begins to cry. Amar tries to comfort her by telling her not to think of the past. As she lays with her head on Amar's chest she begins to drift off to sleep:

Still she was convinced that this was the end, that it would not be long before they found her. They would stand her up before a great mirror, saying to her: "Look!" And she would be obliged to look, and then it would be all over. The dark dream would be shattered; the light of terror would be constant; a merciless beam would be turned upon her; the pain would be unendurable and endless. She lay close against him, shuddering. Shifting his body toward her, he took her tightly in his arms. When next she opened her eyes the room was in darkness. (323-324)

The chapter ends on a particularly sinister note; Amar and Atallah are robbing Kit of her money and her valise. Her whiteness is in stark contrast to the blackness of these two male figures. Kit's whiteness is (at this point) indissolubly related to her helplessness. The only thing they do not take is her passport. Here we encounter the dark, stereotypical side of colonialism. The "black natives" are doing exactly what it is in their "nature" to

do; they are stealing from a white woman. However, their decision (conscious or not) to leave her passport behind is extremely telling. Her passport is the only tangible proof of her identity—of her existence. The entire time Kit roams the desert she never loses her passport. Unlike Port, whose passport is stolen from him by Eric Lyle, Kit is able to hold on to some evidence of her existence. Here we encounter the connection between passport and identity; without the passport one ceases to exist. When Eric Lyle stole Port's passport, it coincided with his contracting typhoid and ultimately dying. It is fundamental that Kit never loses her passport. As long as she has possession of it her identity will keep surfacing. Therefore, it is impossible for her to completely subtract herself from the outside world.

The last two chapters of the novel details Kit's being found in the Sahara. However, that "discovery" is problematic. Kit undergoes a transformation in which she does indeed leave a great deal of herself in the desert, but her body, her physical presence in the world, is brought back to "civilization." She emerges (or rather, is rescued) from the Sudan a broken and fragmented human being. She has left everything except her physical body in the Sahara. She leaves everything in order to be covered by the sands and erased from memory and the painfulness of consciousness. The life she has lead is utterly forgotten by her, and becomes a part of the desert landscape.

The novel ends with a streetcar climbing a small hill and reaching its final destination; "the end of the line," as Bowles writes. Kit is portrayed as an empty shell of a woman. She has been lost in the Sahara, and someone who has been lost there never really returns. Kit loses the man she loves and ultimately loses herself. Her past has become "lost baggage" from which there is no hope of recovery:

“*Merci*,” she said again to the man, pointedly, she hoped, and then to the woman: “What about your luggage? Are you all clear with customs?”  
 “I have no luggage,” said Mrs. Moresby, looking at her.  
 “You *haven’t*?” She did not know what else to say.  
 “*Everything’s lost*,” (emphasis mine) said Mrs. Moresby in a low voice. They had reached the door. The mechanic opened it, let go of her arm, and stepped aside for them to go through. (322)

The “everything’s lost” dialogue functions as a statement declaring that she indeed has lost herself in the Sahara. This loss of the self coincides with a loss of her sanity. The cord that has connected her with sanity (as determined by the West with all of its familiarities, beginning and ending with Port) has been completely and forever severed. The fundamental point of her lost wanderings in the Sahara is that she will never really emerge from there. Although her physical body is rescued and finds its way back to Oran (the city in which the novel begins), her mind, her sanity, has been completely scattered throughout the Sahara.

Bowles ends his novel with the image of a crowded streetcar making its way through the city of Oran. At this point Tunner runs out to meet her, only to find that she has once again disappeared. However, her disappearance is contingent upon the people who crowd the streetcar. That is, she has vanished without a trace from a story that comes to a decisive ending, both figuratively and metaphorically. Bowles ends the novel with this image, and he also (brilliantly) ends the novel with the phrase, “the end of the line.” The line in this case can be interpreted as an extension of a language working within the dialectic of *thrownness*. Kit has vanished into the language of the desert; there is nothing left for Bowles to say. The ending of the novel represents an ending to the narrative and a finitude in the language of representation. Kit is no longer able to exist

within the representative language of Western civilization—a white language that always strives to speak on behalf of the black other:

At that moment a crowded streetcar was passing by, filled largely with native dock workers in blue overalls. Inside it the dim lights flickered, the standees swayed. Rounding the corner and clanging its bell, it started up the hill past the Café d'Eckmuhl-Noiseux where the awnings flapped in the evening breeze, past the Bar Metropole with its radio that roared, past the Café de France, shining with its mirrors and brass. Noisily it pushed along, cleaving a passage through the crowd that filled the street, it scraped around another corner, and began a slow ascent of the Avenue Gallieni. Below, the harbor lights came into view and were distorted in the gently moving water. Then the shabbier buildings loomed, the streets were dimmer. At the edge of the Arab quarter the car, still loaded with people, made a wide U-turn and stopped; it was the end of the line. (335)

The reader can assume that Kit has disappeared into the crowded streets of the city in which the novel began. The double mirroring that the novel's conclusion achieves (the disappearance of Kit into the Sahara with her disappearance into the crowded street, as well as the novel ending in the same city which it began) suggests a journey that is indeed conclusive, but conclusive in a sinister fashion. Bowles may be consciously trying to deconstruct the structure of the nineteenth century's novels of realism with its beginning, middle, and end structure, a structure that is inherently metaphysical. However, *The Sheltering Sky* ends with the characters (and indeed the reader) ironically "arriving" at a finitude of "lostness." Just as Kit has wandered off, the reader also finds himself or herself "lost in the crowd" of the city. The finitude of *The Sheltering Sky* is both a rhetorical strategy and a return to self-consciousness; a self-consciousness that Kit, and I would argue Bowles, ultimately rejects. As Lawrence D. Stewart writes in his book, *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*, "The forced return to Oran reminds Kit that what civilization calls salvation is involvement of intellect and the regaining of self-consciousness. Terrified, she responds instinctively: she climbs aboard a streetcar

line, that line by which civilization circumscribes life. In the desert which stretches beyond, in that nonterminating world without charts and the calibrations of civilization, there is for Kit not emptiness, but the fulfillment that is addictive” (72). Once she had found herself thrown into an experience with the Sahara, Kit could not re-orient herself to the “structured world of civilization.” Therefore, she has no choice but to reject the very thought of a “structured world.” She has erred too far from the path of civilization and its metaphysical orientation. Instead, she chooses the boundless and, for her, linguistically barren world of the Sahara—a world which is continually growing and threatening to consume *everything*, including, and most important, consciousness itself.

Reaching “the end of the line” also functions to remind the reader that he or she is caught up in the *act* of reading. The return to self-consciousness refers to Kit as well as the reader and the author. The reader emerges from the disorientation of the narrative to put down the book and “return” to his or her daily life. The uncanniness of submerging oneself into a text (of dwelling in the text) is brought to a conclusion. However, the actual conclusion, coming literally to the end of the book, does not contain an arrival as such. Kit has not arrived at a conclusive point but has disappeared into the crowded population of Oran. She “displaces herself” (to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy’s phrase<sup>vii</sup>) from the world. She has assumed the role once held by Port; that of the planner, the tour guide. From here it would be Kit who decided on where she would travel to. Indeed, her metamorphosis from tourist to traveler is accomplished. Likewise, the reader has not arrived at a conclusive ending, but has found himself or herself brushing off the uncanniness of the Sahara.

The space of encounter in the novel is the dark underside of consciousness. What Bowles (quite successfully) achieves is an opening up of experience to anxiety, or the nothing. He shows us a world that increasingly ceases to make sense. Although I would not say that Bowles is attempting to map the nothing in his fiction, and in *The Sheltering Sky* in particular, he does open up the space of encounter to the awesome power of anxiety when we find ourselves confronted with it. The space of encounter in *The Sheltering Sky*—indeed, in all of the fiction of Bowles—resides in the unconscious. Therefore, it is quite natural for Bowles to end *The Sheltering Sky* with a return to a self-consciousness (again, a self-consciousness that is ultimately rejected) precisely because at that point there is nothing more to tell. Language ultimately fails to provide a shelter from the nothingness lurking behind the screen of the sky precisely because it has not been thought. In this sense, a language cannot provide a home because it (language) fails to realize the full impact of anxiety upon the human psyche. Perhaps the sky, as a barrier that holds the nothing at bay, can be read as a metaphor for language. Language is the barrier that keeps anxiety at bay, at a safe distance. With language we are able to turn the nothing into a something; an anxiety into a fear. A fear can always be intellectualized, and therefore the possibility of a cure (in this case for homesickness) is always possible. Language is our defense against anxiety. Without it we fall prey to a nothingness, or meaninglessness that crushes the human spirit. This is what I see as happening to the Moresby's as they descend into the Sahara. Kit's inability to reconcile herself with the cacophony of languages and uncertainties she encounters following Port's death is proof that she will be unable to break through the barrier of the foreign tongue. As such, her dis-integration from the world follows her along the periphery of language and into a

milieu of uncertainty. It is impossible for the reader to follow her beyond the point where the light of language fails to pierce the darkness of the nothing.

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<sup>i</sup> Much, perhaps too much, has been made of the author's own state of exile from the United States. There seems to be an almost abnormal preoccupation with the author himself, which in turn displaces his fiction from center stage, where it ought to be. One Bowles scholar who does seem to "get it right" is Allen Hibbard. Hibbard examines Bowles the author from an interesting and personal perspective. In his book, *Paul Bowles: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Hibbard writes: "While some have found Bowles's preoccupation with the exotic and his extended residence in Morocco unsavory if not unpatriotic, it is precisely his adamant insistence on maintaining the outsider's stance that has yielded his unique vision" (132). Bowles is not writing about the "other" as an academic, but from the point of view of an outsider himself. This is significant in understanding his fiction.

<sup>ii</sup> For more on this subject see Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*.

<sup>iii</sup> In this context one wonders whether Port and Kit Moresby are the postwar embodiments of Fitzgerald's Tom and Daisy Buchanan.

<sup>iv</sup> In a conversation with Daniel Halpern in 1975, Bowles stated that, "If we suffer, it's because we haven't learned how not to. I have to remind myself of that." Bowles was commenting on the notion of individual existence as the "proper" way to "take life seriously." He has Port state something very similar to this in a scene where he is arguing that the world (civilization) no longer holds any meaning following the war: "'Humanity?' cried Port. 'What's that? Who is humanity? I'll tell you. Humanity is everyone but one's self. So of what interest can it possibly be to anybody?'" (93) Port's nihilistic attitude only strengthens as the threesome drift further into the Sahara.

<sup>v</sup> In several interviews Bowles claims never to have gotten through Melville's text.

<sup>vi</sup> One of the main objections Bowles had to Bernardo Bertolucci's film version of *The Sheltering Sky* was the physical contact Kit and Port share in one particular scene.

<sup>vii</sup> See Nancy's *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffery S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

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