CHAPTER 4

LIFE AMONG THE RUINS

We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture

On October 14, 1968, I boarded a jet at Sea-Tac Airport and five hours later arrived in the modern, new TWA terminal at JFK airport in New York City, from which I would depart along with other volunteers the next morning on a chartered TWA flight bound for Tripoli, Libya, with a brief stopover to refuel in Madrid. Altogether it would be an 8 hour trip. I had arrived at JFK the evening before the flight, and I and other volunteers in a similar situation spent the night in the futuristic-looking TWA terminal. Here, it seemed to me, was a fitting point of departure from America, this building that was architecturally a bird in flight. Everything fluid and ultra-modern, designed to move people in transit but also in style, past stylish red couches and new electronic flight information boards, past the stewardesses on their way to flights in their min-skirts and polished black boots. The reigning motif was “pop” art and architecture, a playing with popular culture forms and images. Indeed, there was more than a passing resemblance between the “real” lounge of the TWA terminal at JFK and the fantasy lounge of the TWA terminal in 2001: A Space Odyssey, a film released that year.

At first, those of us who had arrived at the terminal the night before the flight decided we would spread out throughout the terminal and sleep on the floor or, if lucky, on one of the cushioned red couches interspersed throughout the terminal. But security officers kept rousing us and forcing us to sit up. We could legally sit, it seemed, but we must not stretch out or fall asleep—even at 3 a.m. in the morning with no one else around. This was one of the rules of public life in New York City that I had not yet learned, the prohibition against actually sleeping in train, bus, and plane terminals—and the security forces employed to make sure that people do not violate the code, not by arresting them or fining them, but by continuously rousing them from their near sleep. This seemed to me a very strange custom and unnecessary, but it was also clear that in New York City you did not talk back to security guards. You roused yourself until they wandered off, then nodded off again, only to be roused again when their round brought them by again. As if to further discourage those who might be encouraged to nod off during the long night, the terminal sound system kept recycling the Fifth Dimension’s “Up, up, and away,” which TWA had secured the rights to and had been using in all its advertising and promotion. The endless replaying of this song in the background, cut into occasionally with flight information, orchestrated my half-wake, half-dreaming last night in the U.S. After this long and night, volunteers who had been
unable to sleep found themselves in a heightened state of awareness, as if on an adrenaline high, when they boarded the Boeing 707 bound for Libya the next morning. There is a moment for the modern traveler when there is no turning back, no time for reservations, hesitations, or second thoughts. The decision had been made, the action taken, the trip begun with no possibility now of turning back. This was for me a great relief. In this sudden rush of exuberance that I had committed myself to a course of action that would profoundly change me, I felt perfectly at ease. There was nothing to be done now but set back and enjoy the ride.

The plane was packed with volunteers, two abreast on each side of a narrow isle, which after take off quickly became packed with people moving around and talking and partying. For some strange reason, the Peace Corps had a tradition of picking up the tab for alcohol on these chartered flights, and so most of the volunteers engaged in what is apparently a Peace Corps initiation ritual, partying all night on the flight over and arriving in the “host country” drunk. Unfortunately for the stewardesses, no one has adequately prepared them for what they faced, and they were getting frustrated and angry at having to deal with rowdy and obnoxious volunteers who would not return to their seats when asked to. Then there were the sexual innuendos directed at the stewardesses, who—like other TWA stewardesses in 1968—were all young and wore mini-skirts with Nancy Sinatra boots. These young women were probably more assertive than an earlier generation of stewardesses, but also more sexually objectified by TWA as part of their brand image, which meant that they were more likely to face sexual harassment, especially when men got drunk in flight. All of us were finally given a talking-down over the intercom by one of the stewardesses who said she was very disappointed in our behavior and that we would have to do what stewardesses told us to do or there would be no more alcohol. That was a threat that seemed to work, at least for awhile. Ultimately, though, the stewardesses were only able to re-establish control when the volunteers ran out of nervous energy and began drifting off into sleep. The ritualistic drunken party in flight was over. After the re-fueling stop in Madrid, I remember stirring to look out the window, then again to witness the sunrise over the Mediterranean, then the coast of Algeria was visible, and finally the pilot announced that Libya was below, albeit shrouded in a dust storm or gib’lee. As we descended into the airport, he announced, we’d go through the gib’lee as if through a cloud layer and lose most of our visibility for awhile, then suddenly the airport loomed out of the pinkish brown cloud, and we had landed.

At the airport we boarded chartered buses for the 45 minute trip into Tripoli, traveling on a road at first lined with palm and date trees, and with Libyans in traditional dress for the most part, then coming into the suburbs of rather drag cinderblock homes and shops with dusty streets, then into the city to our destination—an Arab hotel in a busy section of the city near the public market and bus station. This was not where Western tourists typically stayed, and that was deliberate, to begin the process of immersing us in Libyan culture. We would be staying in the hotel for a few days, we were told, while the Peace Corps staff got everything organized to transport us to our sites. This section of the city was a chaotic mixture of old and new, with shops of various sizes and shapes, most made