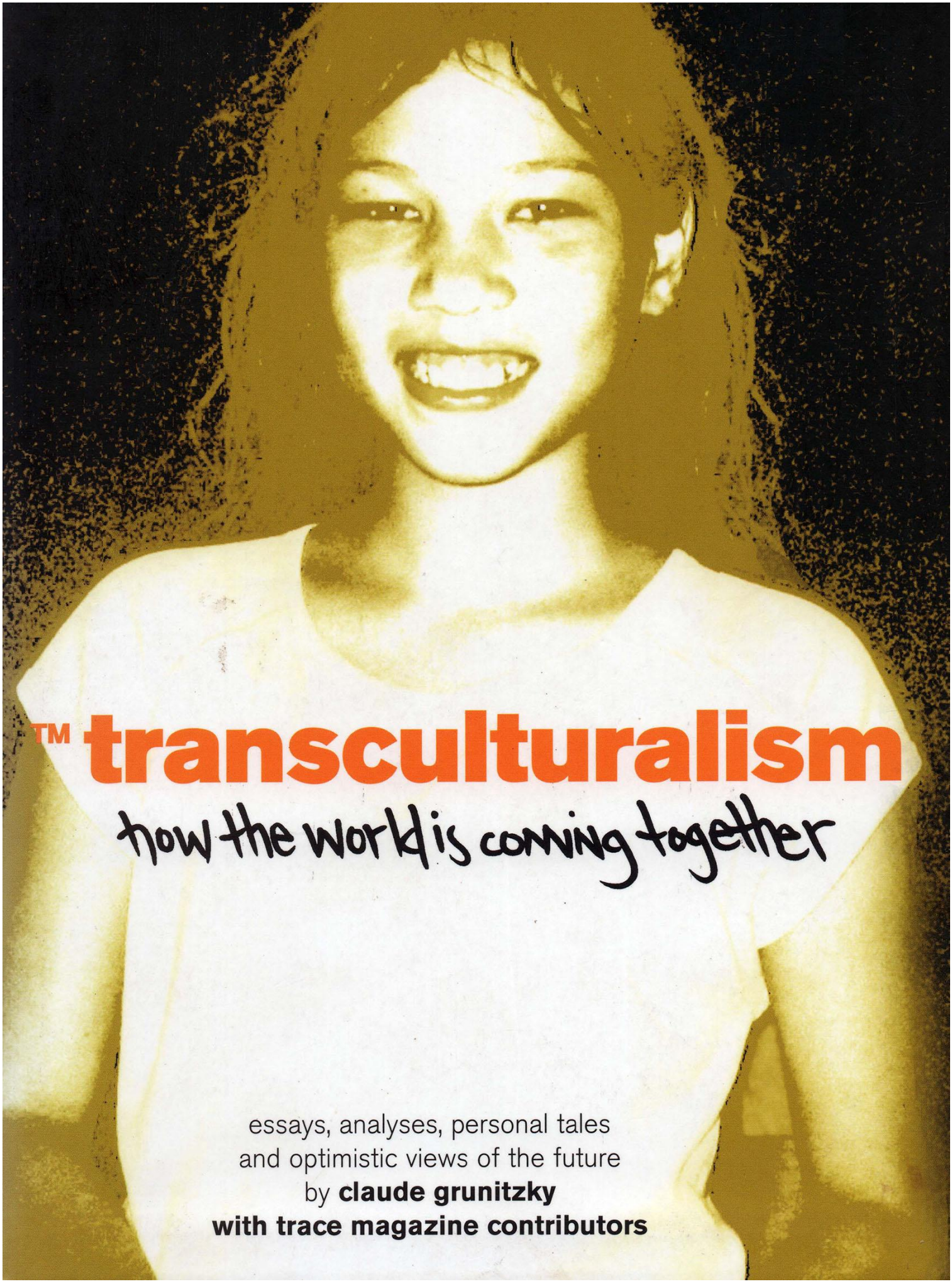

™ transculturalism

how the world is coming together

essays, analyses, personal tales
and optimistic views of the future
by **claude grunitzky**
with trace magazine contributors

"WELL, WHY DO YOU MOVE AROUND SO MUCH?"

As a child, I was always drawn to people who were different. Not always racially or ethnically different but people with some other way of affecting their voices, or preparing chicken, or expressing themselves. I liked the way the French girl in fifth grade barely moved her mouth when she talked, and thought it was so cool that one Thai girl always had pomegranate in her lunch instead of a banana or an apple. Then there was the teacher assistant's son with the caramel-colored face who smelled like curry, or the chubby half-Tunisian half-American girl who just showed up one first day of school, fresh from Tunis. I just remember her seeming like such a bad ass. She taught me about harissa and Cheb Mami, Fa products and couscous. Her mother bleached her moustache and waxed her legs with sugar, lemon and water. I loved going to her house.

I made friends with the Tunisian when I sidled up to her and told her that I had just come back from Tunis. She thought I was lying for about a week, but I had actually just gotten back from my first trip outside of the US at age six. My father's friend was the head of the Peace Corps in Tunisia and invited us for two weeks. My most crisp memories are of blue and white tile, the oasis, the way the city came to a halt seven times a day for prayer, and, my friend.

She was the daughter of a Tunisian Peace Corps colleague and was around my age. She came over the first night with her parents and other siblings, and we all ate fat, roasted green peppers stuffed with spicy meat. Even though we didn't speak the same language, I think we took to each other instantly. She had big round eyes, and short, thick, curly hair cut like a boy. We played and pantomimed our way through the language barrier, and became fast friends during our visit. The day I had to leave, I cried so hard that I think my mother was worried. I was losing this perfect new friend. My father's friend told me that I didn't have to worry because I would carry a part of her with me everywhere, and that anyway, the world was small and we'd see each other again. Traveling, for me, became defined by that friendship, and that beautiful hazy country. So I kind of have Tunisia and a beautiful Tunisian girl to thank for all of this.

I first started really traveling after high school. I went with three girlfriends through six European countries in 30 days. My three traveling companions had summered in Italy since forever and their parents thought nothing of turning them loose on Europe at 18. My mother, even though she spent a year in Paris in college, thought it was ludicrous. My friends and I caucused and plotted, phone calls were made and then a dinner was arranged. Three bourgeois white women had to convince my mother to let me go. Now I

can't believe I never considered how hard it must have been for her to go to the dinner. All I remember is driving home afterwards. My mother was so upset. She parked and she just started crying and she asked me to consider that she had a completely different life than me, let alone my friends' mothers. She reminded me that she grew up in the '50s, in the projects, in Boston. She said, "you have an upper-middle-class reality, Sala," but I do not.

My mother and father let me go in the end, but after that I always felt three things: that I was blessed to be doing something my parents and grandparents could never have done at that age; and that first in wanting to go and then being able to go I was taking advantage of a freedom to explore that they had planned and worked for me to have. Maybe that made me travel to Europe with an added sense of purpose. I wanted to come away with the smells and memories of places in my head. I wanted to exchange. One night on a train, in something like country #6, I wound up separated from my three girlfriends. Walking through the jerky trains, I saw a French guy we had met in the previous station. We started talking, in French, and he invited me to hang out with him and these two guys he'd just met. He then turned to the first guy, and said in Spanish, "I just met her earlier," (I think). Spanish guy introduced himself to me in hesitant English. The last guy was Italian and so he understood Spanish. So we all had, more or less, at least one language in common. We start talking, literally across each other in different languages, and then someone told a joke. We all wanted to know so he translated the joke to someone who then translated it to me and the laughter crescendoed as we got it, one by one. It made me fall in love with languages on the spot. I wanted to learn as many as possible so I could be like that with all kinds of people–and in their language, not mine.

After I graduated from college, I worked with this Morehouse grad who told me that he had just gotten back from Japan. I had never thought much about Japan, much less living there. But to hear about it from a young black man, who had clearly been touched by his experience, made Japan seem relevant to me. What if that were true of other far-flung places as well? Until then, the global map in my mind's eye was limited to America, Francophone Africa and Europe. Suddenly, I was thinking about other parts of the world. An enormous, panoramic view of the possible spread out before me.

So I decided to go to Japan. I got all kinds of resistance from people around me: "You know they hate black people over there", and "You know they hate women". All from people who had never been anywhere near Japan, mind you. Well, I decided to go anyway. My parents encouraged me as they always do, and that security gave me all the blessing I needed to go without hesitation. It was like when you stay up on a bicycle for the first time: you feel the high of speeding along by yourself, but you keep glancing back at your parents. They are still there cheering, and that gives you the courage to push down on the pedals again. That is what it's like when I live in a foreign country. I feel a sense of freedom from, and at the same time, dependence upon where I have come from. I need to know home is there in order to go away from it.

In Japan, the teaching program I was on placed me in Nishi Aizu, a small town in the mountains near the northeast coast. Behind God's back, one friend used to say. There were 10,000 people–mostly farmers, hundreds of geometric rice paddies and no stop lights. Time had stopped about a hundred years ago in Aizu and nobody was interested in resetting the clock. (I remember once being rung up on a register in a small shop and the woman checking the math on her abacus.) Although at times frustrating, I found so much dignity in the preservation of tradition. Suddenly, so many things that I did without thinking, like making friends or food shopping, took massive amounts of attention: to detail, to custom, to the thousands of tiny symbols on the label to make sure it's baking powder and not baking soda. At first, all I could think

about were immigrants to big cities in the US. How overwhelming it all must be.

People in Nishi Aizu had never seen anything like me in person. They had seen a few foreigners, but I stood taller than every full-grown man, I had seven ear piercings, I did step aerobics in my apartment, I wore makeup (well, mascara) and I was black. They had never seen most of these things, much less in one person. My students loved me and asked me about how I did my hair, and they all wanted to come to see my house. One high school student told me proudly that she turned my color in the summertime. The old folks just looked up at me on the street and smiled, probably thinking, "The aliens have landed." But then what must it be like to live your entire life and never see anyone who has different color eyes and hair and skin and is almost twice your size?

I fell in love with Japanese culture, and I really tried to navigate respectfully through the dizzying amount of custom and tradition. America never seemed so characterless and virgin to me before. I learned to sit on my knees, understand the meaning of a tea ceremony, perform the long bathing ritual before entering the public baths, and to sing–with a smile–Carpenters' songs on the karaoke box for colleagues at office parties. I hid my cigarette smoking from everyone because young teachers don't do things like that, but drew the line at things like not drinking a glass of wine in public. I tested the limits of the situation and myself, and discovered that they are not nearly as narrow as I had thought.

My grandfather died in Boston on my birthday, two months after my arrival in Japan. I went into work the next day and told my boss at the Board of Education, and then went out to teach at my schools. I came back in the afternoon and he handed me an envelope and said, "For Sala-san to go home." I opened the envelope and in it were other tiny colored envelopes with the names of each of my three schools and some teachers with whom I had just started to work. Each had given me money to pay for my ticket home for the funeral. I had never seen such a graceful extension of support and goodness. It was as if the community felt it their duty to communicate and support my filial responsibility to go home and say goodbye to my grandfather.

But, at times, I felt like an outsider and that was painful. Surrounded by people, as I constantly was, I felt so alone knowing that I was layers away from fading undetected into Japanese society. It wasn't because I was black, or American, even. It was just that I wasn't Japanese and that fact gave me limited access, an objectified existence. I could only get so close to even my closest friends. It was a completely new experience for me. To move from New York, where I was surrounded by friends, to living on my own in Japan I had to rely on myself for the first time. That meant teaching myself about myself. I wrote a lot and reread what I wrote frequently. It was the next best thing to conversation. Japan would make me grow and, after living there, I felt that I could manage anywhere in the world.

On my way back home, I spent one month traveling in Thailand, China and Vietnam. China overwhelmed me (the Great Wall left me speechless), Thailand fascinated and Vietnam felt–go figure–like home. When I got home, I discovered that I had an offer to participate in an experimental English teaching and curriculum development program in Benin for an American-based NGO. I had been waitlisted for the program the year before and my application had been accepted at the last minute for that Fall. I accepted the job, unpacked from Japan and repacked for Benin in one month. I got seven shots, started anti-malarial drugs and arrived tired but excited in Cotonou, the dusty, surreal village/capital city. Lots of French expatriates, American NGOS and Lebanese businessmen.

Poorly planned, our education program failed miserably but I had a marvelous time in the classroom. I have never had a group of students so eager to learn. In one school I had 40 plus kids. The school was in a field of sand in five small wooden buildings with poured concrete floors. The teacher, who was paid $40 a month and hadn't received a

check in three months, somehow made every child feel special and capable. You could see it in the way they spoke to him. He encouraged me to push them and make them concentrate. Those kids learned like their lives depended on it. And for many of them, their families did depend on it. Parents often had to choose one child to send to school, to buy books, pencils, notebooks and a uniform for. They usually sent the child with the most promise, and while she or he went to school their siblings worked. Most of my students spoke at least three of the following: French, Fon, Gon or Yoruba. So their minds were ripe for language acquisition. I rarely had to teach anything twice. I used to leave an hour lesson dripping with sweat, exhausted. To give that much and get that much more from children was wonderful.

I passed almost all of my free time with a crazy middle-aged Italian/Eritrean engineer. We met in our hotel lobby my first week in Cotonou. Tall and thick, he came bounding in on crutches screaming, in Italianized English, "I want a room right now. And I want a room with the bathroom inside the room." We both liked to dance but as a woman I couldn't go by myself. The only women in Beninois clubs were hookers. So we would go to dinner and then dancing at a club called New York New York. By last call, the dance floor used to be littered with strips of hair weave and lost extensions. I met Beninois friends for drinks at night at buvettes, bars that become informal clubs at night. The tiny dance floor was always packed with men dancing with one another hunched over, hands on hips popping up and down to the zoukous. I had never seen men dance together like that showing off, sparring in rhythm, smiling and sweating. One night, I was walking home from a buvette with two other Americans and two Beninois. We were tired, and no one was speaking, so we heard it all together. It sounded like faint sleigh bells or rattles marking out a steady beat. We stopped as the sound got closer, and from around the corner, dead ahead of us, came a procession of men chanting and carrying idols, drums and wearing masks. There was one man way in front, whose job it must have been to clear the way, because he ran straight up to the Beninois and told them to get out of there. Benin is the birthplace of Voodoo and its practice thrives there today. There was a religious ceremony in progress and outsiders could not witness it. I was in awe of the power that the group of men generated, but I knew that I had no business trying to watch.

My favorite thing to do in Cotonou was go to the Sunday market. I did the weekly food shopping for the house where I lived with two other black American women. I used to spend all morning there. I'd get up early and walk past women sweeping the dirt clean in front of their home, and across the train tracks to our local market. I went to certain women for certain things. One for the eggs and condensed milk. Another for tomatoes and onions and so on. I had to win over their confidence, pay a little bit more the first few visits, and learn how to haggle with a smile. But there was a sense of familiarity, some women would keep me for a quick chat or make a big show of throwing an extra tomato in my bag. Almost everyone is a woman or a child. That's why I liked to go. You never saw women out socializing apart from church. So it was the one place where I could be around women and watch them mingle. Geleés bobbing around under umbrellas, teeth sucking, unrolling and rerolling the lapas as a nervous habit. Laughing. Many of them, I found out were doctors or lawyers, but there was no work for highly educated professionals. Others were elderly women who'd always worked the market. Many, I gathered had come from upland with their children and grandchildren. They haggled the best through a school-aged grandchild who would translate prices from an indigenous language to French for the expatriates.

Dating under globe-trotting circumstances has proved a delightful experiment. Paris, junior year abroad, was the beginning. At one point, I was seeing a Yugoslavian who sold Levi's and hashish, a German/Turkish male

model and a German homeopathic doctor/drummer–concurrently–in Paris. Each relationship had something comically absurd about it: the model's hodgepodge accent, the Yugoslavian's odd hours, the doctor/drummer's blonde dreadlocks. But it was the first time I really dated without restraint, getting guys' phone numbers, meeting them for drinks or walks. No one was around to tell me what they thought of this one, or to give me advice, so I just bluffed my way through it all and tried not to get caught dating all three.

But I really fell in love for the first time with an Italian, while I was on vacation in Thailand after my year in Japan. During my time in Benin he and I did the long distance thing, and then six months after I arrived in Benin, I decided to move to Rome and live with him indefinitely. I hadn't liked Rome the first time I went after high school. But I went for him, and of course, it came to be my favorite city in the world. Whatever may have been the case in the past, Italy doesn't really advance today as much as it just coasts along. People are too busy enjoying. Everything still shuts down at noon and people rarely talk about work. It somehow always feels like you are on vacation. That space of the day between the end of work and bedtime feels longer in Italy than anywhere else. The evening gets stretched out over huge meals, bottles of wine and talk, and so you feel like you have come down before you have to wake up and go again. Rome was a wonderful place to make friends because the culture encourages people to commune. You never planned to see people weeks in advance. Like magic, everyone wound up in one of a few places, night after night. I learned that running into a friend, even at 11 AM, was a good enough excuse to have a glass of wine. That you ate because it is one of the greatest pleasures. I remember my boyfriend offering me a piece of something and I said, "No thanks, I'm not hungry." He gave me this look like, "silly woman" and said, "You don't eat because you are hungry, you eat because it's enjoyable." So I broke with my eating obsessions and stopped counting grams of fat, ordered the whole milk latte and learned to work through a wedge of cheese on my own. I had no idea what I was missing.

I saw all of Sicily, which is more a piece of Arab North Africa floating in the Mediterranean than Italy. My boyfriend and I criss-crossed the island on the back of a motorbike and strolled through Greek temples that were so old that they make you tremble. I saw Naples in 48 hours with a strawberry-blonde American woman and two Napolitano club crawlers we met. They walked us up into the hilly city lecturing on Napolitano traffic laws, mafia enclaves and Naples' underground scene until 6 AM. Italy was the first place I ever felt sorry to leave.

I am just back from almost a year living in northeast Brazil. That means that since I graduated from college seven years ago, I have lived on five continents. Rented an apartment, held down a job, started friendships, made nice with the new neighbors, five different times. People at home are always asking me "Well, why do you move around so much?" And I think what they are really asking me is, "how have you had a relationship with life and the world–economically, emotionally, logistically–that lets you pick up and go live in country after country after country?" One answer is that I am open to it. There is a short list of things I don't do well without: friends, work, restaurants, books and music. But I'd go anywhere in the world where I can find these things.

The other answer is that traveling and living abroad has become my journey into me. All kinds of people and places have left me with pieces of what, I discovered, I need in order to be me. I hope that I reciprocate. I need to experience that connection both with people at home and with people all around the globe. Both to have a more holistic view of the world and myself, but also because the variety of ways people eat, work, worship, suffer and love, inspire and fascinate me.