Hibernate

Eslami, Elizabeth

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Eslami, Elizabeth.
Hibernate.
The Ohio State University Press, 2014.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/35395.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/35395
Everybody is supposed to be on the bus at 12:15.

This is everybody, most of them white. There are a lot of them, small and tall, fat and pale, but if you are looking down at them from the pueblo, they just look like golf tees lined up, brittle and wooden.

Kind of like this: I I I II I I III I I

The bus will take everybody up to the pueblo to see the Indians, who are already there now, holding sweaty McDonald’s drinks in their hands, staring out from behind screen doors. Waiting for everybody to come up.

Everybody meets outside the Visitor Center, by the stone wall, with access to some enterprising Indian vendors who have walked down from the pueblo to sell bowls, key chains, and miniature terra cotta animals. The vendors wear sunglasses and tee-shirts with basketball team names on them, and sometimes caps turned to the side. They sit at their tables, not talking. They pant a little, as if being around everybody is like being out too long in the sun.

Everybody touches the pots and the terra cotta animals, murmuring admiration. Some of them won’t buy anything at the asking price for fear of being deceived, duped by the cunning Indians. Every dollar subtracted from the price is a small victory for them, like planting tiny flags in the fat of their hearts.

A voice announces the imminent bus departure over an intercom. “Please be ready,” it asks, without sounding like it is asking.
Everybody has to go to the bathroom before they board the bus. They take their children, whose cheeks are pink and whose mouths twist down into fussy sneers, into the stalls, where sounds of protest echo against the sandstone. The children are then taken by their hands to the sink, where water runs down artfully into a slit from a New Age faucet.

“No! Don’t want to wash our hands,” the children say.

“The bus is leaving, come on,” the pink parents snap.

Outside, there are brown Indian children, or “Native Americans,” as the pink people call them. They run in the heat and laugh. They do not sweat. They do not wash their hands, nor are they made to wash their hands. They urinate in the outhouses on their own and without coercion, or they squat and defecate in the street, where their feces will later be eaten by dogs.

The Pueblo parents love their children, but they allow them run to the end of the cliffs, and they neither worry about nor keep track of their bowel movements. Occasionally, as a result, the children fall to their deaths, or their stomachs explode before they can be taken down to a doctor. Most of the time, though, they are happy, living with disparate things, long shorts and tennis shoes, poverty and worms that burrow into the soles of their feet. In a way, they resemble the pink children, but only superficially, with their buzzcuts and tee-shirts that read “Patriots” and “Dontcha Wish Your Girl Was Hot Like Me.”

The brown children run to the edge of the mesa and look down at the pink children below, about to be taken up by the bus. They laugh and throw rocks down. Their parents do not say a word.

It’s 12:15. Everybody gets on the bus.

They file in and plop down in their seats, ignoring the Indian driver and the Indian guide, both women in long shorts and sandals, with straight black hair that streams over their rounded shoulders. The guide’s name is Jennifer. The driver, Kathy.

“Everybody please sit down. This bus will take you to the top of the pueblo,” Jennifer says, her voice flat and trained.

“Here we go,” the parents say, putting their arms around their children. “Are you ready to see some real live Native Americans?”

As the bus pulls away, the adults turn and watch the Visitor Center disappear in the dust behind them.

Everybody is shocked when they first see the Visitor Center, a massive structure constructed of the finest pale pink sandstone, according
to the most refined architectural principles, with special museum wings jutting off to the side like spider legs. Some are unable to fathom that the building represents the Indians they think they know, the ones with drinking problems who live in the gutted hulls of dead cars. There is a fountain spouting precious water in a never-ending vomitous flow from the mouth of a bird. No wooden cigar store Indian chiefs. Music is piped outside, something with flutes and chanting. Everybody enters cautiously, meeting with the brightness of marble and the exhilaration of air conditioning.

On the bus, everybody misses the air conditioning.

“Could you please open another window? It’s pretty hot back here,” a middle-aged white woman immediately asks. They have only been on the bus for sixteen seconds, but they have already determined their maximum level of discomfort. They are not afraid to speak out when they want something, and what they want is comfort and air conditioning and possibly some pretzels. But they should not be judged for this, for the Indians have a level of comfort as well, even if their bodies function like sand or water or stone, taking millennia to adjust.

Jennifer and Kathy ignore the passengers.

Some of the more sensitive people do their best to win them over. There is admiration for the female Native Americans, with their grave faces and horse-tail thick hair, but everybody is afraid to show too much of this admiration for fear of patronizing them.

“What a lovely visitor center that was,” a sensitive man finally says on the bus, patronizing the Indians, because he cannot help it, because it has welled up inside him and he truly was impressed by the tremendous wood door that opens like a secret passage on an immensely expensive hydraulic system.

“Thank you,” Kathy answers, in a low tone, not because she has to, but because, in a way, she is proud of it, they are all proud of it, and of the casino money that built it. They enjoy the publicity the Visitor Center has been given by the US government, in tour booklets and on maps, even if the guilt behind the publicity smells oily and leaves a slick residue.

“Come experience the Indian Pueblo. Step back into the past,” the government says in their advertising packet.

The Indians understand image. They spend their money on the slit sink and the magic door, but not on electricity or running water up at the pueblo.

The Indians also understand this slippery guilt. This is how they successfully manage to scare everybody into behaving, to keep them from wandering off, to make them pay ten dollars to take a photograph. They
affix small ID cards to everybody’s cameras like toe tags and threaten to take the cameras away and destroy them in an Indian ceremony with public jeering if unauthorized pictures are taken. This has only happened twice, but both times, the Indians enjoyed themselves and ate hot dogs and beer.

At the Visitor Center, everybody lowers their heads and hands over the ten dollars. The Indians take the money and reserve their energy, hoarding it beneath their cheek bones.

Pink husbands say to their wives, “Ten bucks! This is outrageous. I could just snap a picture with my cell, and they wouldn’t even know.” The wives shush their husbands, imagining their bodies lying out in the sun, arrow-ridden.

They are on tribal lands, after all. Tribal lands with their own laws, a small, roving group of tribal law officers with as much power as children playing dress-up.

Everybody knows this. They don’t say it, and they try not to think it, because the guilt is still there, rushing over them like soapy water, but they know it. When they think the Indians are not watching, they stand up straight, shedding all traces of mansuetude. They imagine the Indians’ bodies in a blood-stained, bullet-ridden heap, documented by their digital cameras.

The bus, bearing the weight of everybody, plus Jennifer and Kathy, crawls up to the pueblo.

Jennifer and Kathy look like sisters. Kathy is a little younger and seems a little happier, though neither of them ever really smiles. Kathy moves quickly, responding to the road with light, quick adjustments, and occasionally flipping her dark hair. Jennifer is thick in the middle, her nipples and stomach meeting roundly, her steps heavy, as if she is wading though something. Kathy and Jennifer do not have names of birds, or seasons, or words separated by hyphens, and this is mildly disappointing to everybody, who resembles golf tees and chubby aliens.

But everybody can also be broken down into further sub-groups:

There is the multi-culti couple, the hip Asian husband and his white-as-paint wife, who both wear shorts and hats and tank-tops. This is a childless couple, as evidenced by their taut bodies and their continuous flirtation, the way the husband’s eyes pause at his wife’s neckline, embellished with a dirty French word, and the closeness that allows her to keep
her hand on the curve of his waist. After this trip to the pueblo, they will
go home and look at their digital photographs, and he will tell her how
good she looks in her French tank-top, and she will pull it off so he can
play with her youthful, smallish breasts.

This couple is the counterpoint to another couple, a German arche-
ologist and an American anthropologist who have not made love in four
years, but who have each published several books with glossy photo-
graphs and seventeen pages of footnotes in University presses. They are
passionate, but not about each other. They talk of their work like they
would of a lover or a rapturous meal, and though they struggle not to
show it, they both become sexually aroused at the thought of meeting
a real Pueblo Indian. They come armed with questions about NAGPRA
and Spanish colonization, such that their pre-conceived thoughts poke
through their skin like barbs.

The remaining people are a hodgepodge: retired grandparents with
thick mid-sections and perms who are vacationing with their grand-
children, teenage boys who walk with their limbs turned inward, every
movement signaling their physical shame, and the fussy pink children
with hair parted to the side, like news anchors. There is a middle-aged
black couple, a tall man and a short wife, both of whom are aware of
being the only black people present. They will think fleetingly that they
should feel some sort of kinship to the Indians, because they are people of
color, but they will not feel anything but the general strangeness of being
around a people who live without electricity.

Finally, there is the sensitive man with an unplaceable accent who
has read up on the Indians, who keeps calling them “Native Americans,”
unaware that this particular group of Indians prefers the term “First
Americans” and finds his term wholly offensive. He will ask thought-
ful questions and take artful pictures, despite the fact that his ancestors
once cut off chunks of the Indians’ feet as punishment for practicing their
religion. But really he cannot be blamed for this, for he was only born,
and has since tried to make up for it.

Jennifer, the guide, who is fifty and does not wear a bra, ignores the
white woman when she asks again for the air conditioning to be turned
on. She understands how to mute their voices in her head. She knows she
has to, or else she will snap at them in a way they aren’t used to, and she
will lose her job. She turns to Kathy.

“Did you see The Bachelor last night?”
“Jack and I drove down to get pizza. What’d I miss?”
“It was the finale. Want to know who he picked?”
Kathy nods and turns down the static on her walkie-talkie.
“He picked that blond bimbo. You believe that?”
“Which bimbo? Nancy?”
“No. Kimberly, the dental assistant.”
“You’re joking,” Kathy says, steering the bus up the road to the mesa.
“Nuh-uh,” Jennifer says. She tries to imagine herself on such a show, what she would say to the cameras if some white guy put a rose in her hand. Kathy is shacked up with a white truck driver from Comanche, but Jack has lived so long on the pueblo that everyone thinks of him like their own. Jennifer laughs.
“What else happened?” asks Kathy.
“Nothing,” Jennifer says. “That was pretty much it.”

The ride to the top takes less than seven minutes. The bus lurches with the weight of everybody. Turns out golf tees are heavier than they look. Seven minutes. Long enough for several Indians walking up to their houses to pass the bus on foot.
“You comin’ over later?” Kathy asks Jennifer.
“Maybe,” she says. “I’ve got at least two more of these.” Then Jennifer looks with something dangerously close to disgust, but more obviously boredom, towards everybody. “We’re here. Watch your step getting off.”

Jennifer waves goodbye to Kathy, who turns back the volume of her walkie-talkie. There is another freight of people waiting for her below, but she must time their pick-up perfectly, or else the two groups will see each other, and the illusion of aloneness and a simpler time will be destroyed.

Everybody gets off with effort, ignoring Kathy. They will not remember her.

The pink children go first, eager to see something, point at it, and announce to everyone what it is. After a few hours on the pueblo, they will whine and turn orange in the sun. They want things: dessert, toys, to push the button on educational placards. They watch a black puppy eating Indian feces and point to it with a skirl.

Jennifer glances at the screaming children out of the corner of her slit-eyes. She does not say anything, but her look conveys the certainty that these children will grow up to be white assholes who make a lot of money. It also communicates to the pink parents that they are solely responsible for their children’s welfare up on the pueblo. It says, I will
continue with my educational tour even when your children wander too close to the edge. You will watch me chat with Kathy over the radio after your unsupervised toddler gets bit by a rattlesnake.

She puts on her space-age sunglasses, so there is less of her visible to them.

“Welcome to our pueblo,” Jennifer says, starting before everybody is completely out of the bus. “Please do not lag behind, because I will walk fast and talk fast, and I will not repeat myself. But I will repeat the rules that you heard down below, that you will only take a photograph when I tell you it is appropriate to take a photograph, and if you do so when it is not the right time, I will take and destroy your camera. Also, do not stray from the group, because you are not allowed to explore the pueblo by yourself. This is because you are on land that is sacred to us, and you are required to treat it with respect. Respect means you stay with me at all times.”

Everybody forms a group in front of Jennifer, a triangle with the black people and the sensitive man and the academics at the point, the rest fanning out behind.

They crane their necks to hear her, for she refuses to talk above a normal speaking volume.

Jennifer takes a deep breath, not because she is afraid, but because she has to build up her energy. Her instructions tumble out, one sentence after the other, layered without affect. She has said these things a thousand times, and sometimes she dreams them, or wakes up her husband saying them. “I will take and destroy your camera,” she says, rolling over on the thin mattress, and Cliff jabs her in the side with his elbow. He looks at her face, the eyes open but half-lidded, illuminated by moonlight through the open square window. “Wake up,” he says. “You’re not at work.” But in the morning, she will brush out her hair and slide her shorts up her thick legs, and she will step outside the door again to say these things for money.

Cliff is lucky. He works on cars, and parts of cars, and he can go the whole day without ever saying a word to anybody.

Jennifer walks briskly toward the church, the main draw. Everybody tries to keep up with her, but they find it cumbersome to move their bodies in the heat. Their tender, house-conditioned lungs are assaulted by the dust blowing everywhere, unanchored by tree roots or grass.

“This is the Mission of San Felipe,” Jennifer says. “That window you can see up in the corner is where the first missionary who came to convert our people was stoned to death. The children of the village called to him,
and when he leaned out to give his blessings, they began throwing rocks at him because they did not appreciate his presence here. One large rock struck him in the center of his forehead, and he died, and then the children dragged his body through the street, where everybody celebrated with a parade and singing.”

Everybody listens to this story with a shudder, except for the academics who scribble it down in their notebooks, their mouths eagerly filling with saliva. For the black couple, there are disturbing historical echoes, mutilated bodies out on display. They lower their heads solemnly, imagining a brotherhood with this dead priest that they haven’t yet felt with the Indians.

The pink husbands’ faces tighten. *Animals*, they think, their hearts leaping to patriotic action, pumping out an extra burst of blood, even though the priest was Spanish. What kind of children throw rocks at priests? The wives nervously eye the wild Indian children occasionally running by behind the outhouses. They clutch their arms close to their bodies like dinosaurs.

The multi-culti couple smirks. They are enlightened. They are down with diversity and up for the legalization of marijuana. Good for you, they think. Score one for the Indians.

“Of course,” Jennifer says, “Once the Spanish heard about this, they sent a thousand soldiers and subdued our people. They re-established the church as Catholic, punished our people for their religious practice, raped our women, enslaved our men, and forced us to carry trees from that mountain”—Jennifer points to a tiny dot in the distance—“to build their houses and military forts.”

“How well has this been documented?” the academics wonder, licking the tips of their pens.

“It’s been documented,” Jennifer says, evasively. She continues her tour, gesturing to the graveyard in front of the church, with its layers of graves, one built on top of the next, bodies mixed into the foundation of bones, until, Jennifer says, they could no longer build up this wall of the dead.

“Where do you bury people now?” the black woman asks.

“Now we bury most people in a cemetery down below, just at the edge of our land,” she says. She does not mention the many Indians who leave this place completely, who get shit jobs out in the world, but better shit jobs, jobs good enough to keep them from coming back. They stay out in the world of electricity and football, running water and reality shows,
and when they die they get scattered in white cemeteries with soft green grass and stone angels, in their own hole, where they don’t have to share.

Jennifer takes off her sunglasses and opens the tremendous door of the church.

Inside, everybody looks up at the architecture. She explains the circus carnival mix of Catholic saints and wooden crucifixes with the Indian rainbows painted on their walls, their rain clouds swelling against St. Felipe. “Over the years,” she tells them, “our people got tired of fighting against the Spanish, and the Spanish got tired of telling us no. They started letting us bring in some of our religion, and we kept on baptizing our children and praying to Jesus Christ. That’s how everything gets mixed together at the pueblo.”

“What do you do now?” the academics ask. “Whom do you worship? Could you describe a typical service?” They lean forward as if they might fall down upon Jennifer like a lover.

The pink children, bored by these questions, roam the church, staring up at the haunted, elongated faces of saints. They trace the rainbows with their chubby fingers. They clamber to the front of the church, in front of the altar, and plop down at Jennifer’s feet. She stares at them for a minute out of the ever thinner line of her eye, and imagines how much closer she will let them come before she kicks them with the rounded toe of her sandal.

“We just do whatever,” she answers. “We dance a little. We pray sometimes, like when we really need rain. Which is all the time. Or we just talk to each other, catch up.”

This is, of course, a terrible letdown for everybody, everybody who has come from Texas, South Carolina, and Florida to hear about Indians and religious fervor and goat sacrifice, not chitchat and hoedowns at the Church of San Felipe.

As they file out, the multi-culti couple in the rear notes the obnoxious children and smiles, re-affirming their vow never to procreate but to travel and screw as much as humanly possible while respecting and learning about Native peoples everywhere.

After the church, Jennifer pauses for a moment while the permed grandparents sample some fry bread from an Indian meth addict, but begins the tour before they are done eating it. “I told you, you have to keep up,”
she says, stalking off. She won’t talk to the meth addict. Fucking meth, she thinks to herself. Makes you crazy. Makes you move like a lizard.

While everybody browses the wares on little tables near the houses, Jennifer talks to a chatty, middle-aged Indian woman named Beth, who works part-time in the towns at a drugstore. Beth is beautiful, with her hair choppily cut and arranged zigzagged atop her head like raven feathers, and with her sexy black halter-top. Everybody looks at, handles, but doesn’t buy Beth’s pots. A teenage girl, Beth’s daughter, stares at everybody from behind a screen door, but doesn’t smile and doesn’t say anything. The sensitive man ignores a postcard-ready photo-op of the valley surrounding the mesa and instead suddenly takes an artful photograph of Beth’s daughter, who immediately disappears.

Jennifer swings around. “You do not do that,” she says to the sensitive man. “You do not take pictures of people like that.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his face flaming. “I thought you said, I thought we were in a spot where you said we could take photographs.”

“It doesn’t matter. This isn’t a zoo. You ask permission of people before you photograph them.”

There is stillness at the top of the pueblo now. The people handling Beth’s pots gently return them to the table. Dust whips around the one small tree on the mesa, planted as a joke to see if anything could grow here. In a declivity where just enough rain water collected during the wet season, it has managed to stay alive.

“I’m sorry,” the man says. “It won’t happen again.”

Everybody waits to see if Jennifer will take the camera. They shield themselves with their arms and fanny packs.

But nothing happens. Jennifer takes a breath and moves on. Talking, gesturing. At some point in the tour, an apple and a Twinkie have materialized in her hand. She holds on to them, even uses them to point at specific structures. “We build up, not out,” she says, the Twinkie sweating against its plastic wrapper. “This is why you see all our houses are two and three stories, with small rooms.”

Everybody knows that Jennifer is holding her lunch. Her distinctly un-Indian lunch. Everybody wonders if she is sending them a message. I’m done with you people, the message says. Just two more houses, and I dump you suckers with Kathy, and I’m on my lunch break. How rude, they think.

Jennifer doesn’t think of her lunch. She thinks of her mouth saying the meaningless words, and how each word stamps a second, bringing her closer to the end of another hour.
“Where do you live?” a pink woman asks. “Close to here?” At the same moment, she looks away at her teenage son, leaning over the edge of the mesa. “Mason, get away from there.” The boy ignores her, steps closer to the edge. “GIT. A-WAY. FROM. THEYERE.” The mother has forgotten all about Jennifer and her house.


She pictures her real house, with its cool, dark walls, and imagines lying down for a quick nap after lunch, before the next tour. She tries to guess if Cliff made the bed before he left for work.

Near the end of the tour, they stop and look at a kiva where the men hold their tribal meetings. A thick white ladder leans against it, pointing skyward.

“Men only,” Jennifer says, indicating the ladder the Indian men use to enter the building, and the small hole in the wall they use to communicate with the women outside. She thinks about the hole sometimes, and how much she hates talking to Cliff through it, the way it makes his voice sound nasal and distant. It seems dangerous to her somehow. As if their voices were being strained through the narrow passage. Diluted. Yet she also thinks how much easier it would be if she could communicate with these people through it. She could pretend she was talking to anybody. Brad Pitt. The guy from The Bachelor.

After explaining about the men in the kiva, Jennifer tells a mildly sexist joke she has been instructed to tell, but, without modulation and verbal cues, nobody laughs.

From below, Kathy’s bus starts up with a choke. In a few minutes, she will arrive with the next group of people and take this group back to their cars. She will have a Diet Dr. Pepper in her hand, and she will explain to this group their options.

They can: A) Tip Jennifer, watch her blow on her hands to ward off the evil money spirits, and ride back in the bus. B) Tip Jennifer, and then walk down the graveled road back to the Visitor Center, where they can purchase mementos of their visit and leave a tip for Kathy as well, who doesn’t feel the need to ward off spirits, but who is hoping to buy an iPad. Or C) Tip Jennifer, and climb down an ancient stone stairway once used by the Indians to haul up water, though nobody uses it anymore now that they have trucks and a road. Beth’s other little daughter,
Brittany, who is ten, will guide them, hold the women’s purses, tell them where to wedge their feet and hands. Brittany will bound down like an antelope, and watch while they cling to the sides of the cliffs in terror. Brittany, with bangs like sea kelp, will get help if they fall and break their spines. No one ever goes down this way.

Jennifer stands next to the kiva and wonders if any of these people will try the staircase. She hasn’t used it since she was a teenager, following Cliff on a dare. Maybe the professors will climb down, she thinks. For authenticity.

“We are almost done,” Jennifer says. “Just one more house.”

Next to the kiva, an old Indian couple is renovating their house, adding a mixture of mud and hay to the outer wall with the palms of their hands. They move like wind-up dolls, steadily reaching down into a wheelbarrow for the mud and smearing it clockwise into the wall. The husband barely glances up to acknowledge everybody. His wife pointedly says, “Afternoon, Jennifer,” as if Jennifer is alone.

As Jennifer explains what they are doing, how everything is made by hand, the mud ovens, the pots, the heaven-pointing ladders, all with elements from the pueblo, one pink lady angles herself closer to the Indian couple.

She pulls out her camera. With a proud smile on her face, as if to announce her respect, her ability to remember the rules and instructions, the lady looks at the couple and interrupts Jennifer’s narration.

“Excuse me. Can I take your picture?”

The old man looks a little embarrassed, and wipes the mud from his hands. His wife ignores the woman and keeps working.

“Sure. I guess,” he says. He widens his stance a bit, as if he is posing as a football player.

“Oh, you don’t have to stop what you’re doing. Just keep building your house,” the woman says. She adjusts her camera lens and crouches.

Nearby, the sensitive man watches, waiting for a reprimand from Jennifer that never comes.

As the woman clicks away, the man and his wife resume their methodical work, aware of being watched. They are used to the presence of observers on the pueblo; they have seen them many times, buying key chains, leaving crumbs of fry bread that ravens later eat in the branches of the tree. They ignore them as they add to their houses, maintaining them, the wives giving their husbands blue rags to hang in the highest windows, new rooms to sit awkwardly out to the side, to house more
children. “Paint the doors blue or red,” the women tell them, and the men do it.

The camera snaps and whirs.

“Could you try to smile?” the pink woman asks.