

Three ruminations on no place

I) It's so easy to think we know a place. To speak of it off-hand as this or that: 'this place is always so busy or boring or loud'. When in fact places are always changing. Weather moves over the earth, casting its shadows. And the earth itself, with its hot liquid outer core, never stops spinning. Considered in terms of geologic time, our feet hardly touch the ground.

Before 6500 BC, a strip of dry land connected Great Britain to the mainland of Europe. Hunters followed mammoth and reindeer across the mudflats and saltmarshes, and the Seine and the Rhine flowed together to become one big river heading out to sea. Eventually the weather warmed and the water flooded the land. Today it is still coming, lapping away at the shorefronts and eroding the beaches as the island becomes ever more islanded.

II) Regardless of how it changes over time, at any given moment a place can mean different things to different people. A place may not really feel like it is anywhere in particular, yet it can become gravely important. How effortlessly a strip of land can be traversed by a lizard zigzagging over the sand or by those with the right accident of birth. For the rest, an invisible chasm spelling out life or death.

The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers. (Homi Bhabha, in an essay for Artforum in 1992).

When walls are built to enforce a place, they often divide sacred, ancestral land with catastrophic consequences to the lives of those who have lived there for centuries. They also dissect routes invisible to us but vital to animals. In the Sonoran desert, a herd of pronghorn sheep started to disappear at the US Mexico border because the fertile males were trapped on one side of the fence and the females on the other. Deer are caught and mangled by the razor wires separating Serbia and Croatia.

III) "If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere", says the current British Prime Minister. Sunshine, the ocean, and flocks of migrating birds all have this in common.

The sun shines through my windows with no difficulty as they are wide open. I try to touch the light but it disappears at that very moment; all I do is make shadows with my fingers. Then I think that the world is somewhere else, in Mexico, in India... Why should it always be in a named place? Why

should it, altogether, be? (the painter and poet Etel Adnan, writing in her book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*).

Our world resists boundaries and definitions, no matter how familiar it may seem. I form an 'O' with my arms and a place opens up - a pool of water, reflecting the sky. It's a perfect circle of nothing: no place. Squint sideways and a place can suddenly appear to be on fire and dripping a wax-like fruit. Or to contain all the mysteries of a desert night, wrapped neatly into a cardboard box.

Frances Loeffler, 2019

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