

**HYBRID PLACE:
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LOCAL AND REMOTE**

by

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Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

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I. Thoughts on the Local and Remote

1. Phenomenological Beginnings

Discussions about place in geography often begin with the notion of *here*, and this one is no exception. *Here*, at the moment, is my desk on Clinton Street in Toronto. It is an unremarkable desk in a rented house on a street I moved to fifteen months ago, and whose nuances remain for the most part a mystery to me. I would be hard pressed to say that I am of this place, in any profound way. Its essential character is elusive.

And yet from where I sit, just off to my right, I can see a twisted pair of thick black wires stretching from the telephone pole across the street to the side of this house. One of the wires feeds 75 channels of television, the other carries both a phone line and a connection to the internet. The phone sits a few inches from my elbow, waiting to be summoned to ring. The internet connection leads to a slot in my computer beneath my left palm. Somewhere amid the piles of papers here is a cell phone about the size of a deck of cards. The four bars on its screen indicate that it is currently in good communication with the network. The same could be said for myself. This array of telecommunications may seem excessive but it is certainly not unusual, nor is the attention I pay to news from all over the world of relatives, friends, armies, athletes, disease, corruption, or movies—the whole range of human experiences absorbed through my particular consciousness, just like places.

And then there is the world outside. The top of the CN Tower is visible above the houses across the street, a blinking symbol of both Toronto and the radio networks that its antennae serve. On the sidewalk below, groups of Korean teenagers walk by singing soccer fight songs and an old man on a porch across the street argues with his wife in

Italian about their garden. Overhead, jetliners make their final turn before landing at Pearson. Down the block, the nearest corner of Bloor Street is occupied by a diner, a Korean restaurant, a Salvadoran taco restaurant, and a live music bar—this week there’s a band playing called “Dharma Blues.”

My immediate surroundings—the “here” of my day-to-day existence—is full of elements of faraway places. I may be eager to understand this place, but this place is not explicitly or even primarily about here. Instead, it is a “hybrid place”, best characterized by the presence of other places. Its organic spirit, its *genius loci*, does not so much bubble up from the earth over time as arrive nearly instantaneously on a wing or a wire. And yet that makes it no less meaningful to me, no less rich an experience. It is neither “placeless” nor a “non-place”; the appearance of the remote or the faraway is not a “virtual reality” nor a “media-space” (although perhaps it has elements of both); and for all this confusion, this place is not entirely lacking in what could be called intrinsic character (although often what character there is seems incongruous to me). What results is, if not a paradox, then an incongruity in our understanding of the concept of place. These places are not purely local, but a hybrid of the local and the remote.

2. The Need for a New Model of Place

This paper attempts a conceptualization of “hybrid place” as a type of experience of place. To get there I rely heavily on the ongoing work to conceptualize “place” and “sense of place” in a way that is both coherent and respectful of the existential complexities that place entails—most notably the work of Ed Casey and Ted Relph. As Casey is fond of quoting Archytas, “To be is to be in place”; and as Relph has put it,

“Sense of place is first of all an innate faculty, possessed in some degree by everyone, that connects us to the world.” (Casey, 1993; Relph, 1997, p.208) There is an essential duality to places: they are both individually experienced and collectively held, and they consist of both figments of our imagination and the material world around us. Place is within and without; or, as Martin Heidegger writes, “it is neither an external object nor an inner experience.” (1971, p.156) The enormity of all these statements illustrates the difficulty of grasping place in the abstract.

But even more grounded discussions about place are often laden with a particular set of images. As Relph has written, “Somewhere behind most discussions about place lies an image of quiet simple landscapes where there are no great cities, no suburban tracts, no ugly factories, no money-based economies, and no authoritarian political systems.” (1993, p.25) As a geographical and philosophical concept place is often constituted as a sense of the local blind to the manifestations of a remarkably global, telemediated, world. For the most part our notion of place remains deeply rooted in traditional models of settlement and societies. It is often unashamedly anti-modern, in the association of place with local customs and characters, with a sense of continuous history, and with identity. In his book *Non-Places*, Marc Augé uses the term “anthropological place,” which he defines with the slightly tongue-in-cheek equation “land = society = nation = culture = religion.” (1995, p.116) Augé’s definition is deliberately overstated in opposition to the characteristics of “non-places,” but the point remains the same: this is no longer the dominant structure of the world. Perhaps in aboriginal outposts one can find four out of those five, but here on Clinton Street the only synchronicity I would count on is that of land and nation. And even then, at the Toronto

airport, where the U.S. customs inspectors work on ostensibly Canadian soil, that too falls by the wayside. The traditional models of what defines places are no longer dominant, if they apply at all.

3. Glad To the Brink of Fear

But there exists the temptation to throw out the baby with the bath-water, to dismiss the idea of place altogether when faced with the absence of its more romantic characteristics. As Relph speculates,

Indeed, in a world of multi-national corporations, universal planning practices and instantaneous global communications, we have to take seriously the argument that sense of place is just another form of nostalgia and that places are obsolete. (1993, p.25)

And yet there is nothing in the definition of place—save certain particularities of their very emplacement in the world—that makes places obsolete when they no longer ascribe to the traditional characteristics of local distinctiveness. This is not to say that pre-modern places are no longer powerful (although that very power often makes them tourist attractions, with a whole other set of issues), but I seriously question the notion that modern landscapes do not have the same potential for meaning as pre-modern ones—in other words, that place is obsolete. On the contrary: in a complex modern world, complicated modern places can be meaningful.

I have a particular example in mind: crossing the athletic field bordered by University College, Harbord Street, and Hart House in the early evening after class. In some ways, it is the closest thing the University of Toronto has to a pastoral landscape. The athletic field smells like a field—earthy, damp, perhaps slightly rank with the spring

mud. The tower at Hart House rises from the green, recalling archetypal images of Oxford spires rising from the meadows. And my mood after class might be called monastic, especially in those moments when the academic project feels timeless, thoughtful, and deeply existential. In this near-landscape, I might as well be Jude the Obscure, consumed by contemplation, appropriately cloistered in the cloister. But I would be ignoring a few things: the skyscrapers rising above the academic buildings with their illuminated signs advertising multi-national hotels and banks, the traffic helicopters thumping overhead, the sounds of police sirens at rush hour, the posters protesting tuition hikes—all the bits of evidence showing that this place is more complex than the near landscape reveals. While crossing the field I might make a cell phone call, to fine-tune plans for dinner, or to chat with my sister at her desk in Washington. “Where are you?,” she’ll likely ask, and while I’ll say “at school,” the range of associations in my head will be far more nuanced. The connection does not take me out of this place, so much as make me self-conscious of my presence in it. Sure enough, the pastoral is swept away by the contemporary world of multi-national corporations, universal planning practices and instantaneous global communications, and yet the place retains a particular meaning, an existential significance rooted in my own sense of modernity. It remains an environment for contemplation, but possibly contemplation of a different kind. I am reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s line in “Nature,”

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. (Whicher, 1957, p.24)

The “bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky” is an unremarkable landscape, albeit a specific one. It may as well be a parking lot. Yet for

Emerson it was particularly meaningful, if something short of transcendent. “Glad to the brink of fear” indicates an exceptionally acute stance towards the world, and a sense of awe at his connection to it. Crossing the field in the city, even talking on a cell phone, I may feel a strong sense of belonging, but I am struck by the fact that that sense of belonging derives not from the consistency of the place but from its contemporary complexities and contradictions—from what could be called the hybridity of its local and remote elements. In the end the feeling is the same: in this hybrid place, just as in a more traditional place (if we can find one), I am profoundly aware of my being in the world. And yet the characteristics that inspired that feeling diverge from what we have come to associate with the idea of place.

4. Places Need Not Exist In Locations

High among these associations is the requirement that places exist in locations.

They need not. As Relph quotes Susanne Langer,

“...A ship constantly changing its location is nonetheless a self-contained place, and so is a gypsy camp, an Indian camp, or a circus camp, however often it shifts its geodetic bearings.” (1976, p.29)

As Relph then explains,

These are, of course, somewhat exceptional examples—most places are indeed located—but they do indicate that location or position is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of place, even if it is a very common condition. (1976, p.29)

This remains, not surprisingly, one of the more controversial and confusing elements of place, especially in geography. We are always, of course, *somewhere*. It is difficult to imagine a place that does not have some fundamental location, some “geodetic bearings,” as Langer puts it. And yet today that fundamental location is increasingly divorced from

the meanings of places in our day-to-day experience. Instead, that meaning is often derived not only from our immediate location but from other remote locations. Even when standing still, even at home, our location is not necessarily our place—we are very possibly engrossed in somewhere else, either reading the newspaper, watching television, or writing email.

In his impressive essay, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time,” Ed Casey reflects on the relationship of perception to location in place:

There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception—as Kant dogmatically assumed—but is ingredient to perception itself... Local knowledge is at one with lived experience if it is indeed true that this knowledge is of the localities in which the knowing subject lives. To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in.” (1996, p.18)

In one way this is certainly true: all perception is local perception. But at the same time it ignores the aspects of our experience of the world that quite explicitly come from somewhere else, often from faraway. As a result, we might often find ourselves living locally in a place that is not local at all. It is here and now, but only in our perception of it. In all other ways, it is from there, and even then—transmitted by any number of communications devices, shipped, carried with us as things or thoughts. We effortlessly incorporate into our lives technology that enhances our means of perception, allowing us to hear and see things faraway. This does not mean we experience places remotely; as Casey writes, “There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place.” But we do incorporate the remote into our experience of place. We do it constantly, nearly unthinkingly: every time we talk on the phone, turn on the television, eat an

imported strawberry, or even acknowledge our individual places of origin, themselves likely complicated. Place is not exclusively local, and location is not necessary to place.

5. Imaginative Coherence

While these thoughts on hybrid place have arisen out of my experience of the world, I feel as if I may be straining at the limits of phenomenology in equating the images on the television with things actually seen, or the voice on the other end of the phone as a real presence, or the peach eaten in Toronto as an honest taste of California. No doubt these are not places themselves, yet they certainly gather together in my experience of this place as a hybrid place. What else, for example, is the market if not a whiff of the exotic? But faced with such a constant barrage of sensations from all over the globe, how do we go about understanding them as any sort of coherent place? If we are not only where we are, but elsewhere—or rather, if where we are *is* elsewhere—how do we understand it?

As Casey writes, “In a phenomenological account, the crux in matters of place is the role of perception.” (1996, p.17) “But,” Casey continues, “their pointillistic character ill equips them for supplying anything like the sense of *being in a place*.” Instead, I would argue that that sense of being in a place is achieved by bringing to our perceptions an act of imaginative coherence, a sort of temporary patch for the discontinuities of the world. When our perceptions are increasingly mediated through a variety of technologies, we rely more heavily on our imaginations to make them coherent, and even to learn new ways of understanding those perceptions. Without these leaps, the world

can be a jumbled mix of incongruous stimuli in which nothing matches up, nothing seems consistent to the time and place.

To take two examples, from the crest of the current wave of technologies: Literally walking (much less driving) while talking on a cell phone is an acquired skill; we must learn to hear the nuances necessary for conversation when they are utterly incongruous with the surroundings, especially when we must simultaneously react to those surroundings. It is not so simple as hearing the voice on the other end. In a similar way, it used to be that web sites were places, too, and accessing them from a thousand miles away felt like travel. We have since learned that their locations are inconsequential—indeed they often exist in multiple locations at the same time—and so for the most part we have ceased to imagine that journey. We incorporate them into our experience without understanding their origins, as if they really did come from some alternate dimension. In this way, we constantly bring to our perceptions an acquired understanding of their sources—with cell phones the ability to incorporate those perceptions into everything else going on in the immediate environment, and with web sites a sort of suspended disbelief that the information on the screen has actually “traveled,” that it is not inherently here.

In some ways, there is no difference. When it comes to our experience of the remote, there may not be a “there there,” but there is certainly a here here, some sort of stimuli that our senses react to. Even sitting at my desk, I am responding to several stimuli—the computer, the weather outside, the planes overhead, perhaps the telephone or the day’s newspaper laying disheveled at my feet—attempting to organize them into some coherent sense of this place. These perceptions are tricky, variable—”pointillistic”

indeed. It seems increasingly unreasonable to preclude from our experience the extended reach that technology provides. Television (or phone, or fruit) may not be reality, but then again what is? Even if perception is not necessarily exclusively local, it remains the starting point for our being in place.

6. Unselfconscious Intentionality

But if perception is the starting point, what is the ending point? How, in Casey's words, do we find ourselves "in the midst of an entire teeming place-world rather than in a confusing kaleidoscope of free-floating sensory data"? (1996, p.17) Especially when that sensory data is disembodied, incongruous, inauthentic or artificial? The easy answer might be because we want to—because we bring to objects of our experience what Relph describes as an "unselfconscious intentionality":

The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial and mundane experiences—though these are all common and perhaps necessary aspects of places. The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence." (1976, p.43)

While place may depend on an infinite variety of characteristics and associations, ultimately it is what you make of it. And more and more, the places we inhabit are organized around and defined by a complicated mix of the local and the remote. There can still be bad places, of course, primarily the places that do not inspire any substantive human attention. But I maintain that in our contemporary experience dense with images, signals, people and things from everywhere, there remains the potential for meaningful places, which are often hybrid places.

For example, I am continually in awe of the ways in which the increased mobility of communications technology allows for people to more fluidly construct their own places, to feel more at home anywhere. “Home” can be a quiet café with a good cell phone signal—and the café itself may likely be standardized, surreally familiar, and mimicking the material vocabulary of home. Granted, this idea of “home” may lack the profundity of the ancestral village, or the house you were raised in, but these are exactly the types of place-characteristics that have begun to sink through the quicksand of post-modernity into obsolescence—just as *unself*-consciousness frequently gives way to a distinct postmodern *self*-consciousness. If “home” itself is a construct, it seems difficult to discern the authentic from the inauthentic, the empty sign from the thing itself. And yet we still live our lives in place, we still engage in an “unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence.” It is just that those centers need not be fixed in locations, and the elements of which they consist may be increasingly complex, and sometimes superficial.

7. A World Spinning Around Us at the Speed of Light

And although I repeatedly say “increasingly” and “more and more” I want to emphasize that I do not think this understanding of place as hybrid place is dependent on any particular narrative of technological development, nor is there a need to assert that it is something ostensibly new. Without a doubt, the remote has in some form been present in the local for as long as geography itself—why, after all, would we need to pay attention to our place if we did not know, or had not at least heard of, other places? But I would argue that the seamlessness with which we incorporate elements of the local and

the remote is characteristic of our era, whether you call it post-modernity, or late capitalism, or define it by the near-ubiquity of telecommunications. The writer and critic Pico Iyer put it well in his 2001 Hart House lecture, “Imagining Canada: An Outsider’s Hope for a Global Future,” when he described the “present moment” as one in which “the world is spinning around us at the speed of light.” (2001, p.27) It is certainly the dominant experience of my life: jet travel, cheap long-distance phone calls and CNN were all parts of my childhood; the novelty of email had worn off before I left for college; and the internet and cell phones went from unusual tools to daily appliances by the time I had graduated. One result is that I and my peers acknowledge a greater fluidity in our connections to place. Especially this time of year, people unfix themselves from any particular location and become instead a cell phone number and an email address, in touch (if not at home) everywhere. It is easy to read the same newspapers, to drink the same drinks, or to access the same books. Where you are and why you are there then becomes a question of greater nuance—for the breeze, for a girlfriend, for some characteristics of the place that are, in fact, intrinsic. The local and the remote do a *pas de deux*, separating and combining as we alternately interact with the particularly here and the veritably anywhere. The cumulative result, I find, is an experience of place that is not wholly about where you are, but rather draws its meaning from a personal combination of your immediate surroundings and the elements of the faraway with which you are somehow in touch.

8. The World Cup

This is not to say that hybrid places cannot be collectively shared. In fact, it is surprising how often they are collective, how often the spinning world arranges itself in an intense and communally visible tension between the local and the remote. There seems no denser an example of this than this year's World Cup. For the month of June, huge swaths of people around the world stood geography on its head, and insisted that they were somewhere else, even as they acted out specific rituals of homeland and nation, in specific localities. My introduction to it, appropriately enough, came through phone and email conversations with a high-school friend now living in Boston. I suppose it is worth mentioning that his parents are Chinese-Indonesian, he grew up sleeping in New Jersey but spending his days in New York, and he now teaches biology in a predominantly African-American high school in Boston—he is, in other words, a living example of the obsolescence of the old place equation. But his present interest in the World Cup is a function of his roommates, college friends, both half-American, the other halves English and Swiss. With the games played in South Korea and Japan, the three of them, like many people in this hemisphere, were planning on shifting their sleep schedule, sleeping in the evenings and waking up in the middle of the night to watch the games. The games might be held in Japan and Korea, but they, at the very least, would be following along at home in Boston. They had also arranged it so that if American television ran commercials at key moments, the half-English roommate's father would call from London to fill in the gaps. And so as a starting point I had in my head the image of their little World Cup outpost in a living room on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, in sync with the daily rhythms of the flip side of the world.

What took me a few more days to realize was that a similar, if much larger and more public, outpost would sprout here, down the block on Bloor Street. I discovered this heading out for a jog early one morning, which always seems to me the time of day that places, perhaps in their particular rituals of awakening, are most distinct. A vague roar periodically came over the houses, absolutely incongruous and difficult to identify—like thunder or a broken-down bus. Two blocks away at the corner of Bloor and Euclid streets a crowd of perhaps 200 had gathered in front of a television installed on the sidewalk outside of a bar, to watch Korea play the United States live, in Teagu, South Korea. Dressed in red, banging large drums, the crowd progressed through a series of chants, often in time with the chanting in the stadium in Taegu. Their energy charged the air; it was absolutely palpable, contagious. Several people—the neighborhood filmmakers, the quality of their equipment led me to believe—moved through the crowd with video cameras; many more held cell phones to their ears, or plugged away at “instant messages” with their thumbs, to who and to where I can only guess. But the glorious thing about the moment was its intense locality—a locality marked by the presence, ironically enough, of the television truck parked in front of the Korean Central Market. I knew that at that moment this was the center of Korean life in Toronto because of its antenna telescoped up, pointing towards downtown, ready to send images of this corner of the world celebrating the events of another corner of the world. And it was not inconsequential to me that this also happened to be my corner, my place.

At home a few minutes later, the periodic roar from the crowd on Bloor still audible, I habitually checked the *New York Times* web site, and found an article by George Vecsey headlined “The Day of the Big Game.” Written as a catalog of

impressions, he describes his trip from Seoul to the stadium in Taegu, the source of the cheers I was hearing now, first on the train through rice paddies and apartment blocks, then navigating through the crowd outside the stadium. Here was a firsthand account of the scene in Taegu, written only a few hours before on a laptop in the press center of the stadium, transferred to New York, and then posted on the web site for me to access from Toronto—within earshot of the crowds on Bloor, before the game had even ended. Reading it at my desk, with the CN Tower barely visible through the thick June clouds, I was profoundly aware of where I was, even as I was alert to the complex provenance of this place's elements. My understanding of this place consisted of layers of overlapping perceptions, some local, some decidedly remote. It was a moment that the world “spinning around us at the speed of light” acquired a distinctive form. The network from which I was drawing this experience of place was oddly legible, made present by the cheering crowd, but also by the words on the computer screen, the voice of my friend, the rainy weather. There was at that moment more than one answer to the question, “what kind of place is this?”—and yet all those answers together had form. Remote places and events had imposed themselves upon the local, making places—hybrid places—that were not wholly about either, and yet characteristic of both.

9. Hybrid Place Is A Continuum

And yet hybrid places are not without their drawbacks, their dangers, and their consequences. If I have appeared immune to them so far, it is only because I have attempted to arrive at some understanding of things as I see them, before turning to judgement. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes of his house: “with this more

substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling in the world.” (1992, p.81) But in hybrid places, whatever progress we make towards settling in the world does not depend on shelter; it is not so much “substantial” as immaterial, not a *point d’appui*, but a world spinning around me at the speed of light. Hybrid places are often confusing and choppy. Hybrid places may be meaningful, but those meanings may not always be rich, sustainable, or just.

Instead, hybrid place (like regular-old place) is best understood as a continuum, a variable scale along which elements of the remote and local manifest themselves at varying intensities, and with varying results. On the “bare common” behind Hart House, the local is predominant, even as the remote peeks in over the tops of buildings, or penetrates in the form of radio signals, or the spirit of Oxbridge. Walking down the street talking on a cell phone, you are of two places, your attention balanced between the immediate surroundings and the voice on the phone, which could just as easily be coming from down the block as around the world. Here on Clinton Street, I am aware of the physical and psychic presence of these walls I call home, but also of the images, signals, and things that enter into them from afar.

In all these examples, places as profound centers of human existence are constituted not only of local characteristics, but rather of a hybrid of the local and remote. In calling them hybrid places my hope has been to more accurately describe both their character, and the character of the experience they provoke, and that provokes them.

II. Airworld and the Cosmology of Nowhere

1. Everywhere at Once

It barely needs noting that places are becoming increasingly similar. We are persistently reminded that we live in a “McWorld,” a “Geography of Nowhere,” “a world of multi-national corporations, universal planning practices and instantaneous global communications.” (Relph, 1993, p.25) In defining hybrid place I have sought to provide an approach to this world that allows for a way to construct places out of the incongruities presented by technology and the cultural logic of capitalism, with its byproduct of standardization. In other words, an approach that allows places to persist as meaningful aspects of human experience.

But in the extremes of hybrid place this becomes difficult. In “Airworld”—a term I borrow from the novelist Walter Kirn—the remote dominates, nothing is intrinsically local, and everything (it seems) comes from faraway, often at the command of corporate headquarters. At heart, Airworld means airports and their attendant spaces, such as chain hotels, convention centers, Starbucks, and sports stadiums. But I also include in it more abstract and pervasive spaces, like international cell phone networks, FedEx delivery zones, and the more general unified media-scape that defines popular culture. Airworld is not only dominated by the remote, but standardized.

Taken all together, these spaces provoke an odd transcendence of place: an insistence on the possibility of being at home everywhere, if only because everywhere is like everywhere else. As Ryan Bingham, the protagonist of Kirn’s 2001 novel *Up In the Air* puts it, “Don’t tell me this isn’t an age of miracles. Don’t tell me we can’t be everywhere at once.” (2001, p.141) Intense places (good or bad) have always inspired

intense desires to escape, to abandon the bedrock of values that define quotidian life. Exchanging the boundaries of place and its drudgery for the limitless possibility of the wide world—and then wanting those boundaries back—is a tension that lies deep in the mythology of travel, with its narrative of personal growth, of loneliness, and eventually of homecoming. But *Airworld* raises the possibility of a shift in this narrative. If everyplace is the same, if there is nowhere different to escape to, then the only option left is escaping to the totality—attempting to make yourself at home everywhere, and therefore nowhere. This is to insist that place doesn't matter anymore because every place presents the same possibilities. People in *Airworld* approach places with little regard for local specificity, characteristics, or location. They use technology and the centralizing and standardizing forces of capitalism to find meaning wherever they are—and often that meaning is empty, the places they construct houses of cards devoid of any psychic foundation. As the world becomes increasingly homogenized, it logically follows that the dissatisfied would seek out the unique—the special places. But in a strange paradox, it also follows that the unique and the different become increasingly visible and transferable—and consequently not so unique, and not so different.

And so in *Airworld*, the belief that places are entirely fluid is often accompanied by the belief that all values are fluid. It is a distinctly postmodern stance, devoid of all absolutes, subscribing to a cosmology whose foundation lies in the cultural logic of global capitalism. As the marks of difference are illuminated against the bright and not always sympathetic light of sameness, they are also made ready for exclusion or appropriation.

2. The New Geography

This tension between specificity and transferability characterizes the speculations on the fate of place in a postmodern world. The mutually interactive phenomena of standardization and time-space compression demand a reconsideration of our expectations for the distinctiveness of places. As David Harvey theorizes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*,

The less important the spatial barriers, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the incentives for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital. (1990, p.296)

This is not the end of geography, but what Joel Kotkin calls “the New Geography.” In his jingoistic book of the same name, he celebrates the effects that an economy independent of spatial constraints will have on places:

In truth, the importance of geography is not dwindling to nothing in the digital era; in fact, quite the opposite. In reality, place—geography—matters now more than ever before. If people, companies, or industries can truly live anywhere, or at least choose from a multiplicity of places, the question of where to locate becomes increasingly contingent on the peculiar attributes of any given location. (2000, p.6)

For Kotkin this raises exciting possibilities for a new attention to place, one in which unique markets will arise in places of intrinsic character, drawing a vibrant professional class.

Yet it nearly goes without saying that not everyone “can truly live anywhere.” As much of the recent geographic literature on Los Angeles makes clear (most notably that of Mike Davis and Edward Soja), this type of growth leads to increasing class stratification and a pattern of place-distinctiveness dominated by injustice. As Michael Sorkin warns in his introduction to *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*,

The new city has the power simply not only to bypass the traditional scenes of urbanity but to co-opt them, to relegate them to mere intersections on a global grid for which time and space are indeed obsolete. (1992, p.xv)

There is the possibility that standardized places will form the backdrop for a new skyline of distinctiveness, with the equivalents of Guggenheim-Bilbao's rising in every city. But, as Sorkin argues, it is more likely that that distinctiveness will only be skin deep, and the new landmarks of locality will be funded by the same global forces, and cater to a fully commodified standard of regional difference. The complicated and subtle specifics of meaningful places do not translate as easily as they travel.

And the onus of local distinctiveness need not fall entirely on multi-national corporations. As Frederic Jameson tells in his essay "Cognitive Mapping," ambitious local activists sometimes face the same challenges, as the League of Black Revolutionary Workers did in Detroit in the 1960's. "What happened," Jameson writes, "was that the jet-setting militants of the League had become media stars; not only were they becoming alienated from their local constituencies, but, worse than that, nobody stayed home to mind the store." (1988, p.352) Their attempt to apply a distinctly local model to a broader spatial base eroded the local model itself. It is a complicated set of paradoxes: the very fact of our mobility makes distinctive places more accessible, but consequently less distinct. And the increasing similarity of places means that where we are matters less, but also more.

3. Glory To Be in Going

My own attempts at exploring these paradoxes have always, in some measure, failed—I would like to think because I am fortunate enough to spend time in distinctive

places, and consequently take a giddy pleasure in the generic. Driving across the U.S. the winter before last I played at these standardized landscapes, staying in the same chain of budget hotels frequently enough to recognize the fixed position of the coat-rack, self-consciously stopping in Starbucks wherever they arose, and watching the Today show in the morning—a weird change from walking by its street-level broadcast studio on my way to work in New York each day, the place of origin from which it is beamed across the country. We were travelling in search of new places, but I was also looking for the similarities Airworld manifests—not least of which is the nationwide cell-phone network—and searching for a state of mind that allowed home to be a moving place. If only to ease the monotony of the miles, I wanted the travel to be the point and not just the stuff between places; I wanted my glory to be in going, not in being, to paraphrase John Ruskin. Our mobility may have meant that where we were simultaneously mattered less and more, but I found that a difficult concept to actualize. Wherever we were our being in the world remained oriented to fixed points, either to home or to the places we had set out to see. I tried to give in to the totality of Texaco, McDonalds, and WalMart, but I was too constantly aware of Texas, Memphis, or the Hoover Dam.

But perhaps this is a privilege of the settled, the tourist. What of the hobo, the itinerant, the homeless? In the 2001 preface to his 1981 book *Rolling Nowhere*, the writer Ted Conover reflects on the decline of the railroad hobo:

The hobo's death, of course, has long been foretold... A different term, "homeless," was gaining currency around the time I wrote *Rolling Nowhere*; if hoboes weren't going to die out on their own, it seemed, they were going to be subsumed into this new concept, which was purely about a social problem, with none of the romance of the railroad world. The wondrous thing about hoboes, who were spawned by the Great Depression, has always been the way we created something romantic out of the inevitable. Freedom of choice—the idea, real or

not, that “I’d live this way even if I didn’t have to”—is an essential part of the notion, the reason I wanted to live that life myself. (2001, p.xvi)

The railroad hobo might be an ideal past its prime, but the tension Conover recognizes in his “homelessness”—a tension between freedom and desperation, choice and inevitability—remains at the center of a new mythology of romanticized homelessness. Even after my own failed experiment, I remained intrigued by the possibility of living in the totality, of being everywhere in the geography of nowhere. In the extremes, I wondered, how do the paradoxes of place similarity play out?

4. Starbucks Everywhere

I have found two test subjects, one fictional (Ryan Bingham, from *Up In the Air*, about whom I will say more later on), and one real: John Winter Smith, a 30-year-old computer programmer on a mission to visit every Starbucks in the world. I am a bit embarrassed to admit that his idea has passed through my head: amid the intensely regulated similarities of Starbucks, I hypothesized, wouldn’t it be easier to recognize the more substantial differences between places? Might that very similarity offer a means of dispensing with the bastardized iconic and the marketed cliché, and illuminate some underlying truth? Upon reflection it seems an oddly cynical approach, in its assumption that place specificity has been lost to the flattening power of marketing, and the more modulated differences between places can only be found by looking at their similarities. I assumed this must lie somewhere in Winter’s motivations—why else travel all over North America (and eventually the world) to drink coffee that is, as advertised, the same everywhere?

When I met Winter as he passed through Toronto early in August, he was three weeks into his current tour, a counter-clockwise circuit around the periphery of the continent from Texas to Florida, Maine, Manitoba, Seattle, Los Angeles and back. In the five years since he started this project, he has visited over 3,000 Starbucks, taking a photograph for his web site (www.starbuckseverywhere.net) and drinking a cup of coffee at each. On this trip he is mainly hitting the ones that have opened since his last time around the continent, which was 212 by the time he arrived in Toronto. He gets asked why he is doing this a dozen times a day, but his motivations are obscure. When he announces himself at a given Starbucks counter, or during any of his increasingly frequent radio interviews, his usual answer is “to be different.” Over four hours of driving around Toronto from Starbucks to Starbucks, he explained to me that this was his “niche,” that “everybody doesn’t need to have a shtick, some people are perfectly happy to go unnoticed all their lives. But that’s not good enough for me.” And then later, over Thai food on Bloor Street,

There’s complicated reasons that I can’t even describe. I don’t know, honestly I don’t know, I don’t know why the idea popped into my head, I don’t know why I decided to pursue it. But later on I started realizing different things: I enjoy the travel, but that’s not the only reason. I enjoy the photography, but that’s not the only reason. I enjoy the challenge of finding the Starbucks, and the feeling when I get to a Starbucks and it looks different, and it’s going to make for a cool photograph. Now I enjoy the publicity, but that’s not how it started. I’m fascinated by analyzing the publicity, by analyzing why it is that people care so much.

There are so many reasons it’s hard to give one answer. I find it fascinating that I get asked the same question over and over again and I can give so many different answers, and none of them are, like, false.

On one level, what he is doing seems totally reasonable: driving around the country, partly just to drive and see what there is to see, partly with a list of specific places (in his case, highly specific) to visit. But in the comprehensiveness of his plan, the coffee-fueled

intensity with which he pursues it, and the publicity it generates, there lies a desperate individualism that seems to me to reveal a terrifying glimpse of our relationship to standardized places. These places seem to provoke—perhaps in their endless insistence that their inhabitants are consumers—an attitude of absolute relativity, an abandonment of all fixed value in everything except the corporations themselves that construct them.

5. An Unsettling Prophet of Postmodernity

Winter is not naïve about this, nor is he overtly ironic. His web site is charming, fascinating, and yet the hours I spent with him were profoundly disturbing, not because he was unpleasant or dangerous, but because he endeavors to live his life with no regard for conventions—especially the conventions of the way we live in places—even as he maintains this hobby devoted to the obsessive study of the ultimately conventional places of Airworld. His mother lives in Houston, and he says he is fully welcome there, but he is otherwise homeless. His telephone number is a cell phone and he does all his banking on the internet. During his most recent computer programming contract, in Dallas, he slept in the back of his car, as he does when he is on the road—although that seems a weak distinction, since he is always, in some sense, on the road. As he explained to me,

Everybody assumes you have to have a home, but I've been to so many different places and find familiarity in so many places, that I miss different places. So if I'm away from Dallas for awhile I miss Dallas, I miss Houston, I miss Atlanta, I miss Seattle, and so on and so forth. That's one of the things about Starbucks: you get a sense of familiarity no matter where you are.

In some ways this is proof of the paradox: our mobility makes us more attune to the differences among places, even as standardization makes those differences matter less.

But I have gotten something wrong in that formulation: it is not that Winter “finds a home” anywhere, but rather he is at home nowhere. As he put it,

The whole concept of home doesn't apply to everyone. I definitely see myself, even when I take a job, sometime in the future, just driving around from city to city, living there for a while, and then moving on. If you need material possessions then you need a home to store them. But if you don't need material possessions—once I'm done with my comic book collection I essentially have nothing to tie me down anywhere.

His Starbucks project, while a collection of sorts, is an immaterial one: “I'm collecting pictures of Starbucks, and visits to Starbucks, but it's more or less that I'm collecting Starbucks,” he said. His photographs, which he posts to his web site from stops along the road, are digital—although he does keep the “originals” on CD-ROMs. It seems easy to find a place for them somewhere in the genre of post-Pop-Art, along the continuum from Andy Warhol to Andreas Gursky. Perhaps if he (and his mode of self-promotion) were not so earnest, his photographs would make a fine avant-garde gallery show—a witty commentary, and that would be that. His attempts at asceticism are similarly unremarkable, in some ways no different than if he were trekking the Himalayas in search of enlightenment. And even the mechanics of his trip are familiar from two generations of wanderers in Volkswagen buses. At moments his project seems mundane. But in the extremes to which he takes his cosmology—with Starbucks unquestionably at its center—I find him to be an unsettling prophet of postmodernity.

For Winter, nothing is fixed, “all that is solid melts into air,” and “all that is holy is profaned,” to quote Marx, by way of Marshall Berman. (Berman, 1982, p.21) His attitude towards home is not particularly unusual; his is not the first, nor the most serious, case of wanderlust. But in all other things as well he rejects the notion of authority or fixed value—with the gross exception of Starbucks itself. When I tried to point out this

contradiction between the value he places in Starbucks and his rejection of all other perceived values, he seized on my analogy:

There are expectations about what the coffee will taste like, but that's more or less arbitrary. That's an arbitrary thing that Starbucks has designated, and within their sphere they're free to set those rules. It's like if Starbucks is god within their Starbucks universe, then they control things, they have that ability. But now when you're talking about how one lives his life, well, if you don't believe in a god, and you don't believe in authority, then nobody can tell me how I should live my life. There's a big difference. The universe at large is a place where I'm trying to discover the rules, as opposed to taking the rules that everybody else assumes to be true, whereas in the Starbucks universe, they make the rules, they decide how the drink is supposed to taste. And I don't feel that there's anything wrong with that, because you're always free to go someplace else and have a cup of coffee that tastes different.

Struck by his analogy between Starbucks and god, I asked him if he believed in god, to which he responded: "I neither believe nor disbelieve in god. There might be a god and there might not be." Or perhaps more to the point, chatting later on about his fellow Texan George W. Bush, he said, "The whole good versus evil portrayal bugs me, because I have specific philosophical thoughts about good and evil. But that has nothing to do with Starbucks." While it is tempting to dismiss his comments as ten-cent philosophizing (or perhaps the result of a severe case of caffeine addiction), I think the correspondence he demonstrates between nihilism and standardized places makes a powerful point. His professed relativism about everything except Starbucks itself indicates a tendency towards reading standardized places as dominant, and the local as the aberration. For Winter, Starbucks is the fixture and everything else is moving. And as he pointed out, Starbucks is an unprecedented corporate success story; never before has a company expanded so fast while retaining total control—and the coffee is good to boot. So why not place all value in Starbucks?

It raises the possibility that the corporate reality of Airworld is now our chief reality, and we should consider ourselves lucky when we encounter anything else. By this argument, it is not that everywhere is the same, but that the similarities are somehow more satisfying than the differences: the coffee is better, the service more professional, the atmosphere reassuring. Airworld might be preferable to the real world. For Winter, at least, Starbucks is “a profound center of human existence”; he has found meaning in it, and yet in the process meaning has abandoned all else.

6. The Notion of Seeking Shelter in the Whole Mess Strikes Me as a Joke

Ryan Bingham, the protagonist of *Up In the Air*, exhibits a strikingly similar worldview. A thirty-five year old “career transition counselor” (he fires people for a living), Ryan has a quixotic mission of his own: to accumulate one million frequent flyer miles. In the novel we accompany him as he travels around the American West on the last week of his journey to a million—which he calls with typical geographic acuity both a “horizon” and a “boundary.” (2001, pp.10, 11) The company he works for is headquartered in Denver, but Ryan lives, as he describes it, “in the margins of his itinerary,” in “Airworld.” “Planes and airports are where I feel at home,” he says. (2001, p.5) “Everything fellows like you dislike about them—the dry, recycled air alive with viruses; the salty food that seems drizzled with warm mineral oil; the aura-sapping artificial lighting—has grown dear to me over the years, familiar, sweet.” As he explains:

I call it Airworld; the scene, the place, the style. My hometown papers are *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The big-screen Panasonics in the club rooms broadcast all the news I need, with an emphasis on the market and the weather. My literature—yours, too, I see—is the bestseller or the near-bestseller, heavy on themes of espionage, high finance, and the goodness of common people

in small towns. In Airworld, I've found, the passions and enthusiasms of the outlying society are concentrated and whisked to a stiff froth. When a new celebrity is minted in the movie theaters or ballparks, this is where the story breaks—on the vast magazine racks that form a sort of trading floor for public reputations and pretty faces. I find it possible here, as nowhere else, to think of myself as part of the collective that prices the long bond and governs necktie widths. Airworld is a nation within a nation, with its own language, architecture, mood, and even its own currency—the token economy of airline bonus miles that I've come to value more than dollars. (2001, p.7)

It is, admittedly, totally at odds with what we expect from places. He craves homogeneity: “Unless a dish can be made to taste as good no matter where it's prepared, LA or Little Rock, it doesn't entice me,” he says. (2001, p.75) Ryan flies enough to wave hello to shoe-shine guys and security guards, and to know the people at the hotel bar in any city in the West—not the locals, but his fellow-residents of Airworld, who are similarly at home nowhere and everywhere. Not that Ryan ignores the downsides. “A steady relationship with a good dentist is tough to maintain in Airworld,” he acknowledges. (2001, p.21) And, “The cities don't stick in my head the way they used to.” (2001, p.150)

But, at least in the early stages of the novel, Ryan puts up a convincing façade of loving it, if only because the “real” world he sees at its margins—in the American West, at least—offers no more distinctiveness. Throughout the novel people keep trying to get him to settle down and buy a house, but it is a source of pride with him that he is, quite literally, homeless. As he says at the beginning of the novel, recalling a seatmate, “the kid has a soft spot for homeless immigrants, which pretty much describes all of us out West, though some are worse off than others. We're the lucky ones.” (2001, p.2) Ever since Ryan's ex-wife left him while he was on a twenty-night business trip (leaving on the doorstep “a heap of rolled-up newspapers dating back to the morning of my

departure.” [2001, p.27]), the idea of putting down roots in the real world means the disconcerting prospect of pulling up roots in Airworld. As he says,

Green grass is a losing battle in the West, which wants to go back to sage and prickly pear, and so is securing an outpost in the sprawl. I look down on Denver, at its malls and parking lots, its chains of blue suburban swimming pools and rows of puck-like oil tanks, its freeways, and the notion of seeking shelter in the whole mess strikes me as a joke. (2001, p.25)

In this world he’s avoiding he identifies a placelessness he successfully fends off in the world he lives in. Airworld is “familiar, sweet;” the sprawl down there is just as superficial, but foreign, the food inconsistent. In Airworld’s static antipode, the place Ryan would make for himself once he’d overcome what he calls “the necessary vigilance of nomadism” would be profoundly empty. As another character stresses to him over coffee in an airport lounge, pushing him to buy a house, “be aware of this, it *is* a community, not just a development.” (2001, p.161) In the context of this come-on, the notion of a brand new house providing “shelter”—at least the kind Ryan really needs—rings false, so fully is it submerged in the corporate marketing ideals that emanate from Airworld itself. Kim—who himself left New York City to write novels on a farm in Montana—captures the rhetoric of suburban development perfectly, and the corporate consistency with which new neighborhoods are summoned from the earth. For Ryan, “securing an outpost in the sprawl” is “a losing battle”—so fully does it embody a sense of home so oppressive that it only begs to be escaped, even to nowhere.

7. An Honest Fake

And yet over the course of the novel, Ryan begins to lose confidence in Airworld. One night in Reno, staying (as is his habit) at the “Homestead Suites,” he realizes the

usual rigorous consistency of their rooms is absent. “Their specifications are the same from Maine to Texas,” but “not in Reno,” Ryan says, “This room is different.” (2001, p.85) When the bathroom fixtures are different, and the bar of soap is the wrong brand, Ryan becomes “not so much angry as out of sorts, confused”—so acute is his sensitivity to his surroundings, and so thin is the ice on which he skates. Clicking on the TV, Ryan watches a financial guru he saw on the plane to Reno that afternoon doing his evening cable show in front of a New York skyline. The falseness of it offends him; Airworld, at least, is an honest fake, and undermining its character (however artificial it may be) erodes the trust he depends on. “It’s the little deceptions that no one catches that are going to dissolve it all someday,” he says. (2001, p.86) “We’ll look at clocks and won’t believe the hands. They’ll forecast sun but we’ll pack our slickers anyway.”

And no sooner has he “stabilized” himself by checking the running tally of his frequent flyer miles—his one true thing, his Starbucks—then his mother calls on his cell phone. It is perhaps the novel’s most poignant running gag: Ryan lies about where he is, taking advantage of the cell phone’s mobility, like his own, to avoid all fixed relationships to people and place—except the people and places of Airworld. “Where am I reaching you, Ryan?,” his mother asks him. (2001, p.86) “She feels this matters,” he says to us, adding, “my mother has a developed sense of place; her mental map of the country is zoned and shaded according to her ideas about each region’s moral tenor and general demographics.” But her not knowing where he is puts her, as she says, “at a disadvantage”—“for all I know, you’re in Japan and it’s tomorrow.” (2001, p.90) But as Ryan’s grasp on reality deteriorates, the joke takes on other meanings: not that he doesn’t know where he is or that he doesn’t care, but that being somewhere on the map of the real

world, his mother's world, demands that his *being* be more complete—that he place stock in something other than Airworld itself. In Airworld Ryan can, like Airworld itself, at least be an honest fake.

As things rush towards their conclusion—his quests for both a million miles and self-understanding—Airworld slowly cracks at the seams. Ryan becomes convinced he's being monitored as part of an elaborate marketing experiment conducted by the airline and vows to act spontaneously—ordering tea with milk in flight, for example, just to keep them on their toes. But, since he's the one telling this story, his delusion is not so obvious. Airworld is his own construction, its geography malleable to his mood. “America's airspace has its own geography,” Ryan points out (2001, p.213). “As long as you're aimed at a city with an airport, you can get anywhere from anywhere and there's no such thing as a wrong turn... This is how the country is structured now, in spokes, not lines. Just find a hub.” (2001, p.201) It seems so lucid, such a fair description of the most minimal air travel that one wonders who's crazier: Ryan or Airworld. It is typical of *Up In the Air* that faced with a world of increasing absurdity—and persistent reality—you are left constantly wondering if Ryan's affection for Airworld is an illusion of his wholeness or, in his imagining of it as a place, a fair match for the banality of sedentary America. If the sprawl is soulless, as Ryan sees it, why not place all value in frequent flyer miles? Or, if the ways of the universe are confusing, why not give in to the Starbucks universe?

8. The World Was Really One Place

Halfway through *Up In the Air* Ryan tells a story that helps to explain some of Airworld's paradoxes. Travelling from Ontario, California to his sister's house in Salt Lake, he slips into a memory of the town he grew up in, Polk Center, Minnesota. It is a comically idyllic vision of place. He remembers the cap he wore that said "Polk Center Gouda," and recalls the old traditions the town kept up—polka bands, blond Norwegians, and spinning cars on frozen lakes. It is this last one he remembers most vividly, especially the time his car broke through the ice and, unconscious, he was flown by helicopter to Minneapolis. Nearing the hospital, he woke up, looked out the window, and in a long and elegiac passage describes the world that opened up for him:

I could see the western horizon, where I'd come from, and a dogleg of snowy river crossed by bridges sparkling with late-night traffic. The landscape looked whole in a way it never had before; I could see how it fit together. My parents had lied. They'd taught me we lived in the best place in the world, but I could see now that the world was really one place and that comparing its parts did not make sense or gain our town any advantage over others.

Moments later, we landed. My stretcher jolted. As we waited for the helicopter's blades to slow, the medic said I would be home in a few days, not understanding that this was not the comfort it would have been had I never left the ground. He wheeled me out onto the roof under the moon, which had risen some since I'd seen it from the car. I lifted the oxygen mask so I could speak and asked how long we'd been flying. Just thirty minutes. To reach a city I'd thought of as remote, halfway across the state, a foreign capital. I told the man I was feeling lucky now.

Tonight, in Salt Lake, I'm feeling lucky again, and not just because I escaped the swinging Pintors. Three hours and thirty-five minutes, door-to-door, across the Great Basin to my sister's mansion in the foothills along the Wasatch Front. I slept, I woke, I hailed a cab, I'm here. Don't tell me this isn't an age of miracles. Don't tell me we can't be everywhere at once. (2001, p.141)

It follows, in many ways, the familiar form of place epiphanies: "the landscape looked whole" to him, he is hyper-aware of both his body and the moon, it is "an age of miracles." But it is striking that the world opening up to him wasn't reassuring, because

it wasn't the world he had known. Suddenly aware of the compression of space and time possible with flight, the old sense of place seems outdated, a "lie." Seeing Minnesota laid out before him from up in the air, the landscape of his youth wasn't so much placed in context as removed from context—not one part of many, but one part entirely. "I could see now that the world was really one place," Ryan says. And then there is his declaration, "Don't tell me this isn't an age of miracles. Don't tell me we can't be everywhere at once." Ryan is defensive, but assertively so. He doesn't merely pronounce that this *is* an age of miracles, and that we *can* be everywhere at once, nor does he suggest that he *believes* it so. Instead, in his insistent "don't tell me" there lies a deeper assumption at work that rejects any and all imposition of values, any "meta-narrative" that portends Ryan's relationship to time and place. This seems a particularly, acutely, postmodern stance: one in which people "act as, and become what, they please." (Harvey, 1990, p.5) Ryan's statement neither invites nor makes judgement. If Ryan sees the world as whole, he can think of no grounds for anyone to disagree; and if he feels that wholeness is miraculous, so it is.

By this logic, the criteria by which we judge places has come unfixed and without it everywhere is as good as anywhere and anywhere is as good as nowhere. The paradox that where we are matters less but also more is resolved by the fact that nothing matters at all—or at least everything is debatable. "There might be a god, and there might not be," Winter says; "I can give you so many different answers and none of them are, like, false." It is akin to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's premise in *Learning from Las Vegas*: "The commercial strip challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view," they write. "Las Vegas's values are not questioned here. The morality of

commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not an issue.”
(in Anderson, 1998, p.21) No surprise then that Airworld, with Las Vegas as its capitol,
is the land of nowhere and everywhere, the land of the strip, and of the particular
relationship between capitalism and society that is best described as postmodernity.

9. You're There, We're Here

By the end of *Up In the Air*, Ryan Bingham has lost his grip on reality. He reaches his mark of a million frequent flyer miles, but he also reveals that he has been having seizures—ever since the car went into the frozen lake. It explains the forgetfulness he had been experiencing, when his itinerary blurs in his head and he loses track of what cities he has been in. As he describes it at one point, it's as if there's more than one Ryan running around, and sometimes he has problems getting them back together. Or, as he says about the seizures, “I'm not there when I have them, so really, what's to say?” (2001, p.302) The “there” echoes, because the distinction between “here” and “there” is unusually tendentious for a man who believes he can be everywhere, and tries to live that way. The novel's final page nags:

There's one last item and then this will feel complete. I slide my credit card through the airphone slot. I sense the account's being drained on several continents, but it brings up a dial tone, which is all I need. I punch in my own number and get my voice mail, then press more buttons to reach the little message I recorded...when? Three weeks ago? Or was it four? It was after I saw the specialist in Houston, the one I haven't mentioned, since no one's asked.

“You're there,” the message says, then tapes my answer.

“We're here,” I say. Just that. No more. “We're here.” (2001, p.302-3)

It is not easy to be at home in Airworld. In some ways Ryan has adapted, developing a sophisticated image of the networks all around him—“I sense the account's being drained

on several continents,” he says—and relying on voicemail messages to himself to bridge the gap between here and there. But this particular ritual seems ambiguous to me: Ryan’s messages do not seem to mark his passage through space as much as through time. The messages themselves are placeless—they exist nowhere, and they are summoned from anywhere. They do nothing to locate Ryan. Accordingly, Airworld and the electronic ether by which it subsists remains Ryan’s chief reality. “It brings up a dial tone, which is all I need,” he says. But of course, it is not all he needs. Ryan’s being-in-place—or at least his being-in-Airworld—is ultimately precarious.

It was strange then to have been mulling Ryan’s words on the day I met Winter to drive from Starbucks to Starbucks. Like Ryan, Winter has specific ideas about what he needs. As he explained to me, “If I had a point to make, one of the points would be that things that people think they need they don’t really need.” Winter told me he needs 2000 calories a day, gas money, and his cell phone—“communication is essential for getting things done,” he said. He doesn’t need a bed or a shower everyday.

So after buying him dinner, I left him at his car on a side street off of Bathurst. He had asked for a cup of water to-go before leaving the restaurant, to brush his teeth with. The back of his hatchback allowed him room to stretch out, and with the foam pad he had it looked comfortable enough, and safe. It was a reasonably cool night. And he even had plans: spend some time in the internet cafés on Bloor, then head downtown to a strip club he knew from other visits to Toronto, before waking up early to photograph the remaining Starbucks on his list. He wanted to be over the border by ten the next morning in time to do a radio interview on his cell phone without being charged for (of all things!) “roaming.”

But as I walked the last few blocks home through the dark familiar streets I was thoroughly confused. The world around me seemed so local, so comforting. The evening crowd of dog walkers patrolled the neighborhood, and the teenagers smoked in the playground. At home, the walls had more psychic weight than usual. As Gaston Bachelard writes of the house, this is “how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a ‘corner of the world.’” (1994, p.4) This, I realized, was certainly not Airworld; I wondered if it could be hybrid place at all.

It prompted doubts about the whole endeavor. Winter and Ryan expose a side of hybrid place fully immersed in modernity, in which nothing is fixed, not places, people, or values. Whatever meaning they find in Airworld therefore seemed ultimately precarious and ignoble. They seemed not part of some great project of modernization, but victims of it. As such, their anguish was palpable. They seemed consumed by what Frederic Jameson calls “the problems of figuration,”

conveyed by way of a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience. (1988, p.349)

They had given in to the totality, but they could not grasp it, nor themselves in it. Jameson identifies this as “the so-called death of the subject,” marked by its “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion”—fair words to describe Winter and Ryan, I thought. (1988, p.351) And so when it came to hybrid place I had developed a sort of schizophrenia of my own: Airworld disturbed me, and yet I kept looking for ways of living in it.

III. Visions of Hybrid Place

1. Toronto the Pastoral

Every once in a while I find myself looking longingly down a dark downtown Toronto alley, one of those deep canyons with condos for walls, and thinking that if I lived there, in an anonymous window—rather than up here amid the vegetable gardens—then maybe I would be more truly modern, more at home in the maelstrom. But for the most part Toronto seems pastoral, not in its resolution of the tensions of city and country, but in its resolution of the tensions between the technological and the human. And yet, as Hilde Heynen writes, “a pastoral view denies the contradictions, dissonances, and tensions that are specific to the modern, and sees modernity as a concerted struggle for progress, uniting workers, industrialists, and artists around a common goal.” (1999, p.13) In Toronto the contradictions become dissonances, softer and more obtuse.

No wonder I have come to the idea of hybrid place here. Toronto promises to resolve contradictions—between the local and the remote, the past and the future, the competitive and the humane. As Pico Iyer writes,

As I walked around what seemed to be a concrete, physical version of what *Wired* magazine, in honor of Marshall McLuhan, had called “mosaic thinking,” I felt I was seeing, in some respects, a liberated England and an elevated America that seemed ideal for an Indian who came at once from everywhere and nowhere. (2001, p.16)

It is difficult to say when I myself began to pick up on this, and seek a framework for place that embraced it. Perhaps it was in the stillness here after September 11th, or the decidedly mixed feelings that greeted the loss of Toronto’s Olympic bid, or the quiet but persistent rejection of American cultural politics (the only culture impermissible here, that rejection said, is a totalizing one). All indicated an eagerness to get along, for back-

rubbing rather than chest-thumping, achieved not through a vision of the past but by means of a steadily progressing future. This pastoral view of the modern, with its attempt at glossing the contradictions and complexities of the contemporary world, is itself a tradition here. As Iyer notes, “it was here that McLuhan dreamed of and drafted a new wired planetary universe, while his colleague [Northrop] Frye, leapt towards a globalism of the soul.” (2001, p.32)

2. Conflicting Visions

Yet the pastoral has its drawbacks. Even when it does not entirely deny “the contradictions, dissonances, and tensions that are specific to the modern,” as Heynen writes, it threatens to reduce them to the lyric. In chapter one, my sketches of the field beside Hart House, of the World Cup, and of a pleasant low-grade mobility neglected the full force of the tensions present. The posters protesting tuition hikes, the skyline of multinational headquarters, and the presence of the traffic helicopter overhead are not only signs of the existence of a complicated world beyond the immediate place world, but evidence of the social, economic, and environmental turmoil of that world. In sketching these images as I did, I sought some framework for a heightened and more meaningful awareness of place that incorporates and even embraces the modern, rather than exiling the notion of “place” (of which I am admittedly fond) to the historic or the natural, as it so often is. And yet by privileging the modern and the technological, I necessarily neglect their drawbacks, often profound.

In chapter two I find myself on the opposite tack, sketching with Airworld a counterpastoral vision of the modern world characterized, in Heynen’s words, “by

irreconcilable fissures and insoluble contradictions, by divisions and fragmentation, [and] by the collapse of an integrated experience of life.” (1999, p.13) Unable to readily make sense of their place in Airworld, Winter and Ryan throw themselves ever deeper into it, each setting out on absurd quests that are themselves rooted deep in *postmodernity*, in the cultural logic of late capitalism—in coffee chains and frequent flier miles. For both of them, a sort of perpetual motion becomes the means of dealing with the increasing standardization and accessibility of places. As Winter said to me, “I think it might be interesting to drive with no particular goal in mind. Stop, sleep, wake up. Then it wouldn’t matter much where you are.” Where this attitude ceases to be romantic and becomes despairing is in the inherent contradiction between the value Ryan and Winter place in their quests and the fluidity of all other values. To me, it indicates an inability to reconcile (in Jameson’s terms) lived experience and structure. Instead, they erect trivial structures—stunts, really—to stand in for the fissures and contradictions. My portrait of them began as lyric: Winter and Ryan do indeed attempt to “dwell” in the extremes of hybrid place, and I remain impressed by their devotion to the modern. Yet in doing so they also invert the basic locality of our being-in-place, as they exchange the comforts of the familiar for the discomforts of the novel. For Ryan and Winter the local is the aberration; as they attempt to take root in the totality, their lives become a paradox of everywhere and nowhere. What is lost is the very humanness at the heart of place—that faculty that connects us to the world.

3. What Then of Hybrid Place?

Faced with these two visions, what then of hybrid place? How do we live in a world of the local and remote in a way that neither ignores nor is subsumed by its tensions and contradictions?

For Heynen, this is the very question that makes modernity so fascinating: “the relationship between all these divergent aspects, programmatic and transitory, pastoral and counterpastoral.” (1999, p.13) As she continues, “Marshall Berman argues that for the individual the experience of modernity is characterized by a combination of programmatic and transitory elements, by an oscillation between the struggle for personal development and the nostalgia for what is irretrievably lost.” This seems a good way of understanding hybrid place: we struggle to incorporate the experience of the remote into our lives, while we bemoan the loss of the local as our primary way of being in the world. At times our experience is heightened by the presence of the remote and the contradictions of modernity, and the effort is satisfying. But at other times the effort is overwhelming, and the fissures are deep, and deeply personal.

And yet in the indissolubility of this conflict we can find a strange comfort. As Marshall Berman writes,

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (1982, p.15; and Heynen, 1999, p.13)

The key here lies in Berman’s insistence that these forces run “at the same time.” There will be no resolution of the local and remote, the pastoral and counterpastoral, the human and the technological. Short of momentary transcendence, there will certainly be no resolution of the world outside and the world within—that basic duality of place. Mixed

feelings are inescapable; modernity will forever be a tense repose. “To be a modernist,” Berman writes, “is to make oneself at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.” (1982, p.345-6)

In defining hybrid place, my hope has not been to resolve these contradictions, but to illuminate them. In our experience of place, we must be open to the elements of place that are local, intrinsic and timeless, *as well as* elements that are remote, technological and modern. As Heynen puts it,

To repudiate modernity as a monolithic whole that deserves to be censured is a conservative and reactionary attitude; not only does it ignore the fact that we are “modern” whether we want to be or not; it also reneges on the promises of emancipation and liberation that are inherent in the modern. (1999, p.14)

And yet in the place-world, it is undoubtedly the modern that most frequently draws our disdain. That Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling”—the holy grail of place philosophy (sought, but rarely found)—is rooted in just such a repudiation indicates the depths of our struggle to incorporate the modern in our experience of place. And yet to ignore the modern is to be profoundly disconnected from the world in which we actually live. The prevalence of remote experiences and of standardized places may not be good—and undoubtedly there are ways, if we are so inclined, to fight them—but they are here, quite literally. Only by acknowledging the potential for hybrid places as meaningful sources of experience are we likely to achieve a satisfying and sustainable relationship to the world.

Acknowledgements

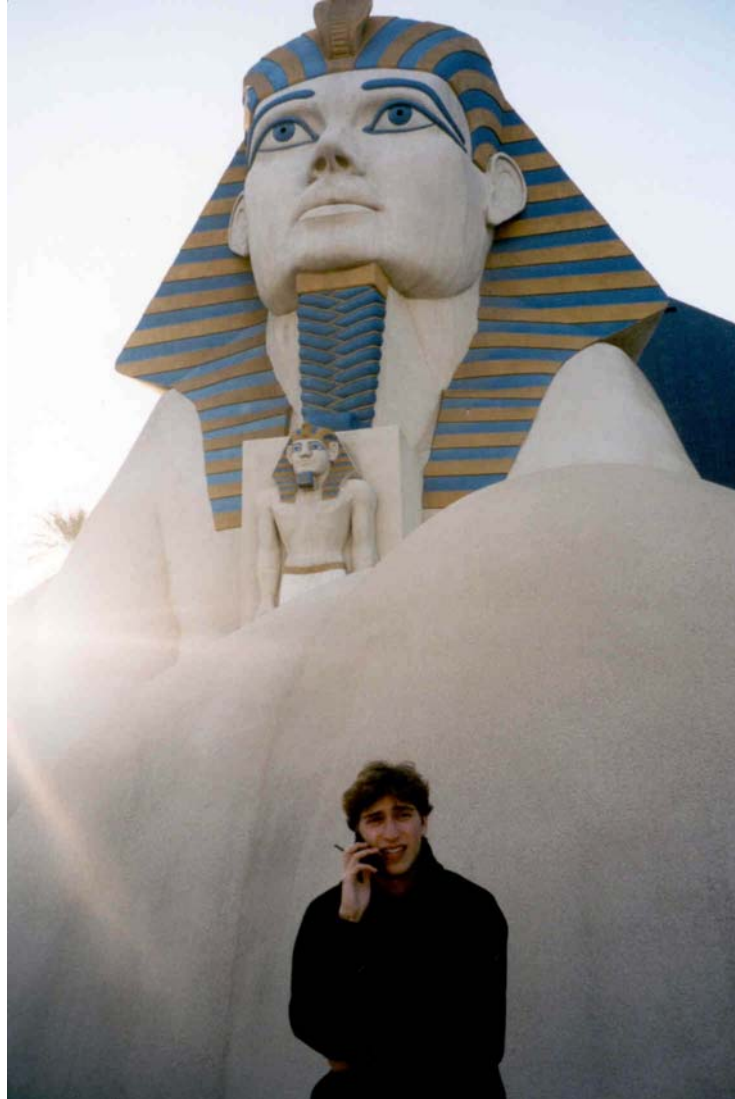
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In Las Vegas, *en route* to California, on the phone with New York.