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HETEROTOPICS: SPACE, TIME, IDENTITY

Abstract: *As Marc Augé argues in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, “if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” This paper sets out to provide a tentative cartography of late-postmodern, global-era spatiality as a domain of placelessness with particular reference to writers like Don DeLillo. I would like to suggest that this cartography is more than a “neutral,” dispassionate survey of the spaces characteristically emerging worldwide in the wake of space-time compression (David Harvey). In fact, what these and other writers in a number of national and transnational traditions seem to be working toward is a counter-topology of sorts polemically recentered around the self’s relationship with an other and the emotionality necessarily (and ethically) undergirding it.*

Time and again, these authors point to the paradoxical waning of relatedness, of connections, ties, and bonds between self and other in a world supposedly “shrinking” under the rule of triumphant “interconnectedness” and the communication/media technologies prompting it. The fading of “actually existing relations” among self and other, these writers show, risks giving rise to an “apathetic” geography organized around non-committal venues, impersonal sites, and a-social structures, which displace the traditional places of colorful conviviality, neighborly dealings, cultural-political deliberation, and commerce. Built into the latter category was a still robust sense of history and historical identity—of histories and identities, rather, constituting themselves relationally, through daily interactions, traffickings, and exchanges. Cut off from one another and, together, from the common history of their civitas, deprived of its hitherto civilizing spatial arrangements, distributions, and distances, self and other find themselves less and less experiencing life as neighborly event and identity as interplay, nexus, give-and-take. To de-socialize them, recent “urban planning” is variously de-spatializing them, disengaging, pulling them apart and spacing them out disproportionately by uprooting and relocating them in post-relational places from nondescript projects to airport lounges to malls to convention centers.

*What DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, for instance, allegorizes (and implicitly critiques) is how urban spatiality both bodies forth and fosters an egotistical, excessively self-centered structure of selfhood. If, in a fundamental (Spinozian) sense, we owe our feelings, what and how we “feel,” how we see the world and who we are ultimately, to others, what happens, I ask, when, broken up, reshuffled, and dilated, late postmodern spatiality is no longer socially and culturally tolerant of others around “us”? To be sure, the role played by distance is not to be dismissed either, as Edward Soja comments on Martin Buber’s 1957 essay “Distance and Relation.” However, “to be human,” Soja adds, “is not only to create distances but to attempt to cross them, to transform primal distance through intentionality, emotion, involvement, attachment.” These are some of the “counter-geography” parameters that I pursue here by drawing from DeLillo’s work.*