

Of place and places: Perspectives, positions, and propositions



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1 People define places, and places define people. The loss of place signifies a loss of identity, and vice versa. Place is inscribed in history, and history is ingrained in place. Place—like space and time—is socially constructed. Place names a space and renders time visible.

2 To speak of place is to speak of the topical, the toponymical, and the topographical. That is to say, places can be specified and rendered relevant or redundant; places can be named; and places can have distinctive and variable content, contours, coordinates, features, functions, forms. Cartographers, topographers, draughtsmen, geologists, geographers, geometers, astronomers, town planners, urban sociologists, social physicists, spatial engineers, civil engineers, linguists, interior designers, stage managers, architects, military strategists, guerilla warriors, ecologists, theologians, cosmologists, surveyors, and storytellers are all—their apparently different paths notwithstanding—concerned with places, either real or imaginary, either material or metaphorical, or both.

3 There are more places in so-called world literature than there are in the world.

4 Be it the epic of *Gilgamesh* or the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* or *The Tale of the Heike*—reckoned as the finest Japanese military epic—or be they epics such as Madhusudan Datta's *Meghnadbadh Kavya* and Mazisi Kunene's Zulu epic titled *Emperor Shaka the Great*, each is at least partly about places, and about their creation and occupation and destruction. Epic places—fictional or real or historical—come to define an epic hero. Or to put it this way: an epic hero is known by the place(s) he inhabits or occupies or usurps or loses. Obviously, this place is gendered. Place may constitute a contested site of struggles involving the questions of gender, class, race, sexuality, and the like.

5 Places variously inform, inflect, involve, vector, valence, prompt, and produce fables, jokes, anecdotes,

didactic tales, parables, fairy tales, and legends. Let us recall *The Arabian Nights*. Recall those tales and fables and legends that constitute *The Arabian Nights*. Mark that the nights in question are not merely temporal but are also—let's say—"patial." They are Arabian. And the Arabian itself draws on tales not only Arabic but also Persian and Indian. Each tale has a place and moves between places, while selecting and organising and even sporadically delinking them. The awe-inspiring character Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights* is not only a storyteller, but is also a place-teller.

6 One of the baseline architectonic principles—if not the only architectonic principle—of what has come to be known as the novel is place. While offering some theoretical considerations on place, the Marxist geographer and political economist of place David Harvey maintains, "The concrete whole of the novel (analogous to place) is shaped by a fusion of spatial and temporal indicators so that 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' while 'spaces become charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.' This is the way that places are constructed in human historical geography."

7 To the extent that cities are places—what is a city, after all, but a massive and mobile ensemble of places themselves, linked or discontinuous?—and to the extent that those places are what stories traverse, organise, select, allude to, or even render spectral, and invent, one would do well to look at James Joyce's Dublin in *Ulysses* or Akhtaruzzaman Elias's Dhaka in *Chilekothar Sipai*. Joyce's Dublin and Elias's Dhaka—in their different ways—are fictional, historical, real, and re-created, but they are also the sites that produce and are produced by interlinked constellations and configurations of signs, scenes, and subjects themselves. One can then catch all kinds of devils in the details of Dublin and Dhaka. But if there is no Dublin in Joyce, or no Dhaka in Elias, or, say, no Bombay in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, their

novels will completely lose their major characters. Also, places themselves, at least occasionally, play their roles as characters in those novels. Places speak characters, and characters in turn speak places in Joyce, Elias, and Rushdie, their different novelistic itineraries notwithstanding.

8 Place is language. Places are metaphors, and metaphors are places,

one hand, the *differentia specifica* of Banalata Sen herself, and on the other, the need for home as a place of peace in the world. Indeed, Jibanananda in his entire oeuvre makes use of place in all sorts of ways, particularly in ways in which the metaphorical and the geographical and the cartographic come to nuance and inflect one another, offering a range of stimulating resonances

to stand for a particular imaginary whole, and that sometimes it serves as a tragic "non-place" for those who have placed themselves in the town in question. Macondo as a place has many meanings to manufacture and many tales to tell.

10 Place is semantically slippery—notoriously slippery in fact. Place comes to mean a particular area

short street, square, and so on, as in Langham Place. In mathematics, in arithmetic in particular, "place" means the position of a figure after a decimal point, as in "calculated/correct to 5 decimal places/5 places of decimals," e.g., 6.57132. And then, you have the case of "going places," which means a case of becoming increasingly successful. Moreover, there are those problems of being "out of place" and thus being in exile—recall Edward Said's autobiography *Out of Place*—or the problems of appearing unsuitable or even improper. Places themselves are all over the place.

11 Places of all conceivable kinds constitute the targets of capital. For instance, capital ranges beyond the whole surface of the globe and beyond lived human places and spaces to colonise—and thus to destroy—those ones yet to be lived! Although *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels calls attention to capital's characteristic macrophysics of movement across "the whole surface of the globe," the *Manifesto* also makes the related place-implicating point that capital "must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere." This is not just a figure of speech. The movement of exchange-value and therefore capital—which is value in motion, as Marx famously puts it—is not only centripetal and centrifugal in horizontal terms, but remains also vertical such that it breaks down all possible place barriers and spatial barriers. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, "Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier." And the Belgian political economist Ernest Mandel echoes Marx in *Late Capitalism*, "Capital by its very nature tolerates no geographical limits to its expansion."

12 Places are the sites of explosive class struggles. The history of capitalism—and imperialism, being a historically developed stage of capitalism itself—is a history of the uneven development of places across the world. Thus, centres and peripheries—central places and peripheral ones, cities and countries, towns and villages—are never just tropes but truths that remain evident, and that get produced and reproduced, in unequal production relations and power-relations which are also place-relations on global and local scales.

13 The emancipation of humanity is, among other things, the total emancipation of all possible places from the rule and regime of capitalism, imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and other forms and forces of oppression and domination.



Places variously inform, inflect, involve, vector, valence, prompt, and produce fables, jokes, anecdotes, didactic tales, parables, fairy tales, and legends.

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for some poets. Our Jibanananda Das is a compelling case in point. His poetry by and large orchestrates interplays and interchanges between metaphors and places—places within places. Take, for instance, his poem "Banalata Sen." Mark, then, Jibanananda's poetic cartography—mark these places, imaged and mapped as they are in the very first stanza of the poem: Sinhala; Malaya in the darkness of the night; Bimbisara and Asoka's greying spaces; the remote city of Vidarbha; and certainly Natore, a place to which Banalata Sen belongs. These places also serve variously as metaphors for a traveller's shifting moods, moments, momenta, and conjunctures that characterise a thousand-year-long journey. And, in the middle of the poem, Banalata Sen's own inquiry accentuates a place question, "Where had you been?" And, then, the metaphor of a "bird's nest," as Jibanananda mobilises it, serves visibly as a place where the signifier and the signified come to intersect, suggesting, on the

and registers, and finally attesting to our proposition that place itself is language.

9 Place is different parts of speech and different figures of speech. Place is not only a noun and a verb but is also an adjective and an adverb. Let's recall the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fictional town of Macondo in his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Macondo is what it is, but it morphs into what it was not; it conveys qualities, and it qualifies different degrees and variables of performances and practices; and it brings together different tales, playing the role of a conjunction, so to speak. Macondo is even prepositional, for it points to positions and actions taken before and after, simultaneously enabling and disabling its inhabitants to chart out conflictual and converging courses of action. Macondo, moreover, is not only metaphorical but is also synecdochic and ironic in that sometimes this place serves as a fragmented space

or a position in a space occupied by somebody or something, as in this interrogative enunciation, "Is this the place where it happened?" Or, for instance, when someone comments, "he loves to be seen in all the right places," then places come to mean "important events." Or, for instance, when someone screams this imperative—"know your damn place"—it comes to mean rank or position or role in society. Or, for instance, when someone lets you know rather lamentingly that "no English-medium school offers free places to poor children," places here simply mean opportunities. Or, again for instance, when someone observes, "your hair is all over the place," this place-bearing statement tells you that your hair is in an untidy state. And mark this statement, "It all begins to fall into place." The statement suggests that a given series of events or a set of facts begin to make sense in relationship to each other. Also, "Place" with a capital P may be used as part of name for a

How do you teach Gen Z?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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My day job involves teaching students at a university, dealing mostly with the 18-24 age group. These students fall under the Gen Z category, who are the first true digital native generation. They were born after the rise of the internet and cable television. They have no memory of life before smartphones, and most of them have overwhelming access to social media and streaming content.

Their ability to interact with each other via the internet is much more intricate than that of our generation (Gen X), who grew up in the 1970s. Our midlife crisis is evident in our vain efforts to copy the Millennials (Gen Y, born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s) as we join the bandwagons of social media. In our desperate attempts to be liked, we willingly ignore the fact that the internet can spy on us while posting very personal issues on social media. In contrast, the new generation is much more in control of their digital avatars. They use Snapchat or Whisper to keep their audiences limited or use protective measures to make messages disappear after viewing.

In order for my generation to teach

this new generation, i.e. to transfer knowledge, we need to first address this intergenerational elephant in the room: our students will be using technology to negotiate their learning materials. This realisation was confirmed during the pandemic. The policy-level intervention forced many teachers to adopt technology for the first time. We were forced to use online teaching platforms and get used to terms like hybrid, blended, and in-person teaching. After the pandemic, we continued to incorporate technology wherever possible, but with a grain of salt.

The digital pedagogy proved to be a proverbial enactment of Tom and Jerry. Teachers are busy "turning it in." Even the president of Harvard had to step down as she failed to give credit to some paraphrased lines. There is no way to hide digital footprints. Any bolt from the online cloud can strike if you misbehave. Prof Claudine Gay failed to stop the pro-Palestine crowd on her campus. Soon after, she was accused of plagiarism and removed. We, as professional scholars, are trained to avoid plagiarism by properly crediting the sources we

use in our critical communications. Our shortages or failures give our students a mixed signal.

Our students live a fast-paced life. Many of them are multitaskers who prefer shortcuts to success. The rise of generative AI has boosted them on a learning curve that is way beyond their teachers' resources. These tools appeal to the students, who are already deft in hiding their sources. The battle between the

heightened the defensive shield to ban AI altogether. Many Western universities have gone back to in-class invigilated exams, minimising assignments or take-home exams. The second group is installing protective measures to avoid AI. The third group is exploring new ways to embrace technology to aid students' knowledge and skill sets. In a Ted Talk, Dr Phillipa Hardman termed these three groups as Team Ban,

far-reaching but also collaborative. They don't simply consume information—they create their own learning groups and information networks.

These networks also act as influencers, determining which degrees are employable and useful. They discourage pursuing degrees solely out of passion. They don't see any point in paying for degrees that will simply satisfy their passion, as different online modules and free lectures can give them in-depth ideas about such disciplines. The rise of STEM and entrepreneurship has reduced the scope of teaching many subjects in the humanities and social sciences.

The bottom line is that, as educators, we need to upgrade ourselves to be in sync with the digital ecosystem. Education is dialogic communication where teachers and students engage with learning materials to discover them through a mutually enriching exchange. In my field of literature, my job is to turn the classroom into a platform for communication and artistic expression through the texts that I teach. For the technology to be effective and meaningful, I need to go beyond explaining the textual nuances and turn all kinds of media into integral parts of the educational process. This requires a redesign of the syllabus with a variety of learning approaches, and enable the students to produce legitimate works that they have thought on their own, but maybe used technology to attain them. The text can be transferred to different digital content that



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

plagiarism checker and the hiding of AI-generated codes has ensued in a cat-and-mouse chase. As teachers, we read through our students' writings, looking for not only copied and pasted materials but also bots.

Whether we love or hate technology is beside the point; we have to live with it. The academic response to generative AI has been three-pronged. The first group

Team Avoid, and Team Embrace. She thinks that the first two teams will have to give in to the ongoing AI revolution.

How do we prepare for this eventuality? The simple answer is: we need to educate the educators. The push to integrate new technology has come from our target audience, i.e. students. As digital natives, their access to online resources is not only

involves critical thinking and creativity. Assignments can include community engagement activities, group activities, online platforms, and other learning strategies to make students reinterpret texts.

Not choosing technology is not an option; it is a necessity. The challenges for teachers are: to maintain their required teaching standards in handling the upsurge of technological advancements; to strike a balance between the heavy workload and new technological developments; and to mitigate the AI-phobia that machines will replace humans.

What is required is a complete overhaul of higher education to meet the expectations of this new generation of students. Arizona State University has already partnered with OpenAI to develop models to marry higher education with AI. Harvard's education department has come up with a senior leadership collaborative platform like Perusall to reorient the teachers.

However, we need to find an indigenous solution to this problem that takes the local conditions into consideration. We have already seen the danger of standardisation in the name of ranking and accreditation, which has led us to the trap of the higher education police of Global North, and subjected us to an asymmetrical power structure relegating our position. Unless we reassess our needs, we will fall prey to the tech giants, who will slowly make us inferior, if not redundant. To teach Gen Z, we need to up our game.