

Displacement and Identity

I want to go. I wanted to go. I didn't want. I. Go. You cannot stay here. All that is built up is gone. They aren't there anymore. You wanted to go. You left.

As a performance deeply concerned with the relationship between site and memory across space and time, *every/nowhere* uses displacement of the subject and the site as a catalyst for this ongoing dialogue. Displacement from one's home country is often associated in theoretical and analytical study with negative or forced imagery: the exile, the outcast, the refugee. Richard Sennett, in his essay *The Foreigner* (2011) notes that such notions are similarly coupled with a desperate need to cling to one's roots and cultural identity, isolated from the place of their displacement. And yet, this does not allow for the constructive potential of displacement for the formation and productive disintegration of self-identity. As a Sydney-born artist, I moved across the country to Perth (commonly referred to as the most isolated city in the world) when I was 19, having never been there previously, to begin a career as a dancer and dance maker. At the age of 27, I moved across the world to London, another place I had never experienced previously, to research this project. The lure of *terra* (or terror?) *incognita* (Whybrow, 2005, p. 37) has meant that it is increasingly difficult to locate a place that I can single out and claim as being authentically 'home'.

In order to navigate, it is essential to first be lost.

Our identities are partly shaped by our understanding or connection to location. In an unfamiliar environment, the shifts and changes of this subtly constructed relationship are made increasingly apparent. Edward Soja (1989) notes that geography plays a key part in the understanding of personal history, and indeed, history in its broader context. And yet, writing during the increasing interconnectedness and technological advancements of the 1990s, Kwon (2002) states that "the distinction between home and elsewhere, between 'right and 'wrong' places seems less and less relevant in the constitution of the self" (p. 157). According to Edwards and Usher, the globalised contemporary society is increasingly subject to deterritorialisation (an idea originally posed by Deleuze and Guattari), mobility, and un-rooting (2008). Through displacement, or enduring

'wrong' places (those that seem discontinuous with traditionally fixed notions of cultural identity) our perception of self, as tied to a particular place, evolves. This is corroborated by Braidotti (2011) who points to localisation as a catalyst for self-reflexivity, bringing a closer awareness of the relationship between self and place, yet simultaneously distancing oneself from one's origins with an increased awareness of a wider discursive framework.

Allow me the liberty of spreading myself out like batter across your flat dusty earth.

According to Rachel Kaplan, travelling actively embraces the unknown and unfamiliar reflecting an individual's desires and identity (2003). Sennett (2011) notes that by distancing the self from the 'home country', the differences between cultures (of your own, situated within a foreign one) are made apparent. This allows for a more considered reflection of self-identity than for those who have never moved. This argument can be extended to a greater appreciation and understanding of the geographical elements which themselves constitute a part of your identity.

Let me hug you through the floor from a wet, cold, muddy ground halfway around the other side and upside down. Or right side up.

This becomes particularly apparent when past places make themselves present through reflections which interrupt your experience of the present.

Let me feel the heat prickling through my skin, rather than the cold cutting winds.

I love you a little more the further away I go.

This displacement or 'foreignness' carries twin dangers: abandoning one's culture (a part of the self) in order to assimilate, and/or romanticising one's 'home', rejecting the potential to appreciate and understand the present (Sennett, 2011).

But this is not my land. I have removed myself from the safety of all I identify with, that cosy blanket of familiarity, and am thrust into a place that is not mine. They speak the same language apparently, but it is not a language I remember. I grasp at elusive threads of stolen conversations, at home and adrift.

Rejecting the geography and customs of the homeland, the foreigner is said to "self-sensor, screening out the full range of experiences...she has lived" (p. 79), yet nostalgic romanticism leaves them "enslaved...by his or her own powers of memory" (p. 83).

But, the past is sticky. It clings to your organs, wrapping them in its false comfort.

Though Whybrow (2005) points to the danger of 'taking yourself with you' on the journey (a danger, he notes, that was first articulated by Socrates), arguably, it is equally impossible to leave yourself behind. Past places are naturally carried with us, and inform our understanding of an unknown land. My response writing over the course of the year has charted movements between longing for the past and engaging with the present. Rather than being a strict longing for 'home', these memories are displaced and transformed into the productive fulfilment of a mobile need, to satisfy what is missing in your landscape. Memory acts as a filler, allowing home to be constructed from what is missing in order to satisfy deficiencies and is thus a fluid concept.

Somewhere, in a distant corridor, a light flickers on.

Nomadism vs. Migration

Steel rolling across the tracks,
the sound of metal on metal, blurred with an imposed soundscape
imagination painting in the gaps between the synapses

As a related concern, the nomadic subject or a nomadic consciousness manifests itself as a way of looking at the fluidity of the performance, in terms of both the participant/performer relationship and functional/physical site. Nomadism, as described by Braidotti (2011), is far from being placeless or without a home, but transient, and yet connected to a historical framework. Indeed, as Sennett points out, it is impossible to completely discard a sense of geographical or cultural identity (2011). Braidotti describes the nomad as carrying "her essential belongings with her wherever she goes and can recreate a home base anywhere" (p. 45). Though not stated explicitly, these essential belongings can also be constituted of the memories that are carried with us that nonetheless form part of our experience of the present.

In that moment, you are suspended,
one foot in the crystalline, the other from the burrowed loops of seconds
(a turn of phrase borrowed from the corridor compositions of a disused office block).

Interestingly, Braidotti notes that, unlike the nomad, the migrant (or the foreigner) is "caught in an in between state... a suspended, often impossible

present; it is about missing, nostalgia and blocked horizons” (2011, p. 59). This in-between place is viewed by Braidotti as a destructive occupation, which I would argue is not necessarily true. I have been keen to reimagine in-betweenness as productive: using shifts between past and present in order to develop both a greater focus on attention and consciousness, and the way distance is deconstructed and re-constructed through memory. In this way, I am interested in a form of nomadic consciousness as “active, continuous...transitions and passages without predetermined destinations” (Braidotti, p. 60) which, I would argue, is also what Sennett is trying to promote.

Landscapes rush by, the definition of stones faded at the edges
merging together with foreign waters.

Therefore, I am looking at a form of intellectual ‘wa/ondering’ (Whybrow, 2005) which encourages imaginative reconstructions of identity as fluid. I am looking at a model that is not tied disadvantageously to the past, but one which embraces shifts of consciousness in order to actively question and re-evaluate the relationship between person and place.

A geography unmade, undefined, unrecognisable

No fixed address.

“The nomadic subject is not always in motion or fleeting – she also requires periods of rest or *stasis*” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 65). Whybrow (2005) points to his period of time in Berlin as a “situated nomadism” (p. 20), formed from James Meyer’s writing regarding personalised, lyrical nomadism as a phenomenological or ephemeral interaction between objects, people and spaces in real time. This is a form of nomadism seeking to be located within historical frameworks, fundamentally connected to the material conditions of mobility. According to Whybrow, displacement allows for the recognition of the subject’s identity as fluid, ephemeral and contingent, a process of becoming that is never fully resolved.

Kwon suggests critically that the paradigm of nomadcity disguises itself as “freedom of choice’...the ‘choice’ to belong anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere” (2002, p. 165). This is an option afforded to those who are privileged to be able to choose displacement. Indeed, the focus in *every/nowhere* is a personal one, rather than one born out of forced mobilisation.

I chose to come here

Yet, arguably notions of subjectivity, identity, place and memory are more akin to organic evolution, rather than a choice to decide the nature of 'belongingness'. Living as a foreigner has required me to "deal creatively with one's own displaced condition, deal with the materials of identity...One has to make oneself" (Sennett, 2011, p. 69). Even chosen displacement has a similarly disorienting effect, which can be no less initially traumatic, as experienced by Whybrow whose "whole being feels as if it has been blasted out of me" (2005, p. 37). Braidotti (2011) looks to a model of nomadism as a fluid state of being and becoming that allows movement between the binary distinctions of mobility and fixity, locality and foreignness. Rather than rejecting one for the other, transformation requires moving beyond these binaries and identifying the creative power of fluidity (or the non-fixedness of such boundaries), which I have tried to negotiate in this work.

Watching over, gathering, passing. I hold the corners of the space with my fingertips.

It is strange to be upside down here. Look just as hard as if there was nothing, you still need to make sense of it.

Kwon points to the tensions inherent in making a career as an artist interested in site work, that of the debate between fixity and the mobility necessitated by the intermittent and fluctuating career of the artist (2002). Local artists undoubtedly have a head start in creating work that is 'of' a specific community, including familiarity with the landscape, history and social issues. Kwon notes there is a tendency to consider the "artist's status as either a sited insider (=success) or an unsited outsider (=failure)" (p. 135). This debate has been a fundamental part of the evolution of this project. As an artist who has spent years creating work in Australia (and primarily in Perth), I have developed a strong relationship with that particular community, its mechanics, architecture and social relations. In the process of re-negotiating my identity in a place that is foreign (and with which I have had no previous relationship), any attempt to design a 'site-specific' project seemed like a forced interaction, an arranged marriage where neither party is particularly well acquainted. However, Kwon is clear that this does not preclude 'foreign' artists from crafting a project that is a valuable contribution to the community, noting that an unstable relationship between identity and belonging can fuel the creative process. Indeed, Edwards and Usher note that the idea of "insiders and outsiders... is unsustainable (2008, p. 40).

every/nowhere increasingly developed as a dual relationship: a growing connection with London, its weather, people and architecture, through spending more and more time walking its streets; and an unstable, memorialised relationship with sites (initially Australia, but as the year developed, these included Prague, Berlin, Dresden and Bulgaria), which are accessed through the imagination, but also maintain a visceral, embodied connection. The result is a relationship to site that is fluid and evolving, highlighting the idea that space is not a fixed concept, but can be interrupted by the movements of the imagination. These movements distort distance, and bring together here and elsewhere in a productive in-between space where identity can be challenged and re-constructed.

Unfamiliarity will protect you from the cold.

Braidotti (2011) resists the image of the glamorous, global citizen, in favour of nomadism as an analytical understanding of the deconstruction of spatio-temporal relations, and the power structures from which they emanate. This produces a “cartographic reading of the present... more like a weather map than an atlas, my cartographies mutate and change, going with the flow while staying grounded” (p. 13). Relating this to a nomadic reading of site, we can deduce that this hypothesis supports a relationship that is flexible, embracing the physicality of site, and the connectedness of subject to place. Yet, it also creates freedom from a rigid adherence to this connection, and allows the flexibility to be adaptable and embrace the unknown. Indeed, *every/nowhere* attempts to reflect this relationship, embracing both the seduction of a sense of belonging to a place, and questioning how displacement productively unsettles and reframes this identity. I am attempting to reframe Kwon’s *anywhere, everywhere, nowhere* (2002) as being fundamental to understanding the fluid relationship between identity, site and memory.

Stand up, in order to continue.