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Chapter 20

On Reflection: spatial and metaphoric encounters with home and land, here and there, now and then.

Marion Arnold

In 1990, nearly four billion miles from Earth, the Voyager 1 space probe looked back from deep space and took the photograph which became known as *Pale Blue Dot.* Formally the shimmering image resembles a detail from a 19th-century pointillist painting by the French Post-Impressionist artist, Georges Seurat, but the content moved astronomer Carl Sagan to comment eloquently about one tiny dot amidst myriad points of light:

> From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. … on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.[1]

Planet Earth is our home, but for humankind 'home' has many connotations all of which convey a sense of belonging to and valuing a place within a spatial world. When Aung San Suu Kyi delivered her long delayed Nobel Peace prize acceptance speech on 16 June 2012, she observed,

> Often during my days of house arrest it felt as though I were no longer a part of the real world. There was the house which was my world, there was the world of others who also were not free but who were together in prison as a community, and there was the world of the free.[2]

[1] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), p.6. The photograph, *Pale Blue Dot*, can be accessed on the internet.

[2] This speech was widely reported in the Western press and is accessible on the internet.

Twice in these sentences Aung San Suu Kyi uses the word ‘house’. Not once in her memorable speech did she speak of home, and why would one call house arrest - a restriction of personal freedom in circumscribed space - an experience of home? House arrest turns a home into a prison.

When we go home, we seek the security of a familiar space; when we leave home permanently there is a deep sense of loss and anxiety about relocation and attendant adjustment to a new and different place and landscape. Home (safe refuge), land (occupied, claimed, contested) and homeland (place of origin or mother country) are descriptive, political, emotive terms given particular resonance as a fractured concept - Home/Land, which is redolent with ‘the diasporic condition’.

In my essay in *Women, the Arts and Globalisation* (2013), I define this concept as,

> [the] experience and subsequent narration of processes of disruption, dispersal, relocation and adaptation to new experiences of place and domicile. It is, therefore, shaped by individual and collective memory (consciousness of past places, behaviours and cultures) and current lived experience (actual interaction with physical space and place). Being within the diasporic condition, aware of both ‘here’ and ‘there’, compels acknowledgement of both past and present in order to predicate a future based on the potential to reconcile identities determined by ethnicity, gender, religion, language and generation.[3]

The diasporic condition offers a way of engaging with experiential, embodied knowledge and in this essay I focus on and discuss the implications of my past and present in relation to spatial encounters with home and land, here and there, now and then. My starting point is a small lake in Mintlyn Woods, Norfolk, England, known locally as one of several Bawsey

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[3] Marion Arnold, ‘Here, there and in-between: South African women and the diasporic condition’, in Marsha Meskimmon and Dorothy Rowe (eds.), *Women, the Arts and Globalisation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 122-123 .

Pits.[4] **Ch 20 Figure 1** To call this expanse of water a 'lake' is to romanticise a sandy, quarry pit filled with water. Over time, machinery gouged out silica sand for commercial glass production, and then moved to new sites, leaving the woods with a water-filled earth cavity, newly planted trees and grass, and signs prohibiting human activities (No unauthorised vehicles beyond this point; DANGER No swimming or diving; NO TIPPING MAX PENALTY £20,000). Scant attention is paid to these warnings.[5]

Mintlyn Woods are close to the rural home I acquired in 2000 after relocating back to the United Kingdom, where I had been born. I grew up in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, lived and worked for two decades in South Africa, and I now reside in Norfolk. I often walk through Mintlyn Woods and round a shallow lake devoid of any particular distinction; it is a sheet of water edged by greyish sand and quick-growing birch trees, pines, gorse and heaths. Viewing the water one day, I recalled the only memorable lines written by Georgian poet, W.H. Davies, eccentric friend of Edward Thomas. Davies wrote,

> What is this life if, full of care,
>
> We have no time to stand and stare.

('Leisure' from *Songs of Joy and others*, 1911)

Much has been written about walking and walking as art, but less about the art of standing still; we know a great deal about the gaze and gazing, but little about staring. Mintlyn lake is, for me, a place of spatial encounter where I stand still and stare at an expanse of water. This is a wholly different experience to the continuum of walking and glancing, or sitting and musing. At the lake I started taking photographs. They are *aides-mémoire* of my contemplative experience of land, water, surface, depth, and edge and above all, space **(Colour plates 33-36).**

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[4] An aerial view of Mintlyn Woods and its lake can be located with Google Earth technology.

[5] Despite the sign stating that swimming is prohibited, on 16 July 2013, a hot summer day, a man drowned in the Bawsey pit.

In her 2006 study on spatial theory, Jane Rendell reviews recent critical theory associated with site-writing and comments that,

> New ways of knowing and being have been discussed in spatial terms – 'mapping', 'locating', 'situating', 'positioning' and 'boundaries'. Employed as critical tools, spatial metaphors constitute powerful political devices for examining the relationship between identity and place, subjectivity and positionality. *Where* I am makes a difference to what I can know and who I can be.[6]

In exploring my diasporic identity, Rendell's final sentence has particular resonance: where I am makes a difference to what I can know and who I can be. Although my spatial encounters with a lake offer the metaphors Rendell lists, I choose to discuss another metaphor generated by expanses of water – reflection.

First, it is necessary to consider the faculty of sight and the concept of vision. Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological premises, I accept my photographs as evidence of spatio-temporal experiences produced by my embodied vision and lived temporality. As 'eye/I' witness of a physical phenomenon – an expanse of reflective water – the water I perceive generates metaphoric reflection on home and land, here and there, now and then. I stand, still, upright, and connected to the earth, and stare across water. I reflect on the meaning of my experience here-and-now, and its capacity to stimulate memories of then-and there. Reflecting on reflections facilitates the retrieval of my geo-historical, spatial past, bringing it into the present in the form of diachronic, autobiographic memory images.[7] Flickering in the inner eye, these images co-exist with my physical eye's reception and decoding of retinal stimuli. Together the images, as palimpsest, testify to the complex identity of consciousness, memory and the spatio-temporal dualism characteristic of the

[6] Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture. A Place Between (*London: IB Taurus 2006), p.151.

[7] Autobiographic, personal or episodic memory is distinguished from memory of facts.

diasporic condition, in which memory images and perceived realities collide and function comparatively.

The key to my engagement with reflective water is consciousness. Associated with an alert state of the mind, it is difficult to define largely because of its interiority, a condition of subjective embodiment. Standing still and staring at the natural world heightens sensitivity to sight, sound, scent and touch; the senses confer particularity on encounters with space and objects through a process of coming to consciousness. Tactile, aural and visual *sensations* (breeze temperature, bird song, shimmering water, the fragrance of gorse) generate *awareness* of a distinctive place and time, here and now. Awareness comes to full *consciousness* when the cognitive mind reflects or muses in language, using and gaining knowledge of the 'I'. As a result of sensory stimulation (primarily resulting from sight) I can define when and where I am, and what I am seeing, feeling and thinking.

William James (1842-1910), whose ground-breaking studies on perception[8] remain significant touchstones for consciousness studies, states,

> Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it of which for shortness we may call one the Me and the other the I.[9]

A state of consciousness stimulates the process of introspective reflection, an action of a mind conscious of its own thinking. James coined the phrase, 'the stream of consciousness'

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[8] William James (1890), *The Principles of Psychology.*

[9] William James, 1893, quoted by Johnson and Henley in M.G. Johnson and T.B. Henley (eds.) in *Reflections on* The Principles of Psychology. *William James After a Century* (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), pp. 273-4.

in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and the concept entered common parlance, attaining relevance not within science, which found this term insufficiently objective for systematic application, but in the experimental writing characterizing early modernist English literature.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), arguably the most significant 20th-century female modernist novelist, is often called a stream of consciousness writer, as is Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), Woolf's rather neglected contemporary. Woolf's modernist narratives do not demonstrate linear thinking; she represents multiple perspectives and the random ebb and flow of consciousness in fragmentary interior monologues or soliloquies, which become dialogic as they move between interior and exterior states of becoming and being. Woolf's prose is nakedly reflective as she probes her own consciousness, offering evidence of her elusive, teasing, fragile self- awareness. Her darting, questing words are reminiscent of the flickering, provisional brushstrokes of French Impressionist painter, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) of whom the critic, Octave Mirbeau, said that she 'seems to paint with her nerves on edge, providing a few scanty traces to create complete, disquieting evocations'.[10] In diaries, letters, essays, short stories and novels, Woolf too is disquietingly evocative as she explores flux, and fugitive, contradictory, transitory states of being. Her diary entry for Friday, January 4th, 1929 asks,

> Now is life very solid or shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever: will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so quick, yet we are somehow successive & continuous we human beings: & show the light through.[11]

[10] *La France,* 21 May 1886.

[11] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol. 3 1925-30,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.218.

Having tested her new forms for non-linear narrative in short stories and her early novels[12], Woolf finds her voice and vision triumphantly in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and in complex interior monologues and dialogues in *The Waves* (1931). Her writing on the moment and temporal experience has affinities with Henri Bergson's theories of *la durée* (duration), when time, divorced from quantitative measurement, is experienced qualitatively as psychological and subjective. In his conclusion to *Time and Free Will*, Bergson argued that 'deep introspection … leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly *becoming*'.[13] 'Deep introspection' – deep feminine and feminist introspection - characterizes Woolf's excursions into her states of being and permeates characters such as Mrs Ramsay and artist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, and the six characters who populate *The Waves*. Woolf locates the self spatially in specific rooms and outdoor places,[14] alerting us to the fact that spatial location and time cannot be pried apart or theorized separately.

For Woolf, an intensely visual writer, there is no great revelation about the meaning of life but 'little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark'[15] generate consciousness of time and being. In her short story, 'The Moment: Summer Night' Woolf asks,

> … what composed the present moment? If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it'.[16]

The verbs Woolf employs – tremble, quiver, waver - interfere with clarity; the present is unknowable; it is consciousness not fully rationalised, like life itself. Her reflection on time,

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[12] *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

[13] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will,* (Montana: Kessinger Pub. Co, 1910 [1888]), p. 231.

[14] See *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Jacob's Room* (1922)*, To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931) for reflection on states of being related to architectural and natural spaces which induce reflection.

[15] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* (London: Dent, 1964 [1927]), p. 186.

[16] Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press,1981), p.9.

articulated through analogy with different transparencies of glass, is not unlike the transparencies in rippling water reflections and so, I suggest, Virginia Woolf's writings about moments of being and her ideas on consciousness connect with my lake's reflective, shimmering surface. She offers innumerable examples of self-consciousness as subjective, introspective reflection, often stimulated by the self being acutely aware of the spatial situations in which it receives sensory information.

In 1908, before she had published anything significant, Woolf articulated what was to become her central concern as a writer. While travelling in Italy she had been drawn to a Perugino fresco, which she found beautiful, but her journal entry notes,

> I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the minds [sic] passage through the world; & achieve in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process; the flight of the mind.[17]

Standing and staring at reflections in an expanse of water, and reflecting on the diasporic condition, I too endeavour to make 'some kind of whole made of shivering fragments' effected through 'the flight of the mind', as I engage with past and present. Staring at a landscape here, I remember other spaces there (none of which have anything to do with water[18]), and I am mindful of difference related to the diasporic condition and nomadic experience. 'Nomadic remembering' Braidotti observes, 'is like a constant quest for

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[17] *Woolf, Virginia, A Passionate Apprenticeship. The Early Journals 1897-1909. Virginia Woolf, (*London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p.393.

[18] Many of the paintings and drawings I completed while resident in the African hinterland are concerned with rock, earth, trees and the floral landscape. I never lived near water and this may explain why reflective water, abundant in British lakes, ponds and ubiquitous puddles is 'other' for me and now engages my visual attention.

temporary moments when a balance can be sustained, before the forces dissolve again and move on'.[19]

When standing and staring at my lake with its littoral zone of sandy margins, I am alert to the elemental significance of land, water, and the sky, reflected in water. I record them photographically to prompt memories of the lake and its capacity to initiate memory, through reflection. I know the lake in winter when frozen whiteness and icy opacity banish reflections and do not serve my metaphoric purposes, but when ice melts, water communicates with sky and earth, reflecting their forms in different states. Where earth meets water I may see precise, mirror images on a pellucid, flawless surface, or splintered, shimmering images carried by rhythmic ripple-patterns. If the day is bright, the water reflects a blue, cloudless sky (Figs. 1-6) which, escaping diurnal time, reaches back into the cosmic time of black, deep space. Water, the interface between land and sky, draws sky into and onto it, as luminous light-space, still or restless.

I look at land, trees, and bracken, and their spatial reversal in water. I 'see' the world of my temporal being, metaphorically reversed through migration from south to north: despite everything in my new place called home being clearly identifiable, all is actually transformed, unfamiliar and as upside-down as the night sky constellations. Visual clarity is not certainty and my photographs of water deliver partial truths, representing surface, and only occasionally hinting at depth.

The enigmatic nature of reflected reality is visible in a remarkable photograph by Fay Godwin (1931-2005). *Flooded Tree, Derwentwater,* (1981)[20] represents a moment of such

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[19] Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006), p.168.

[20] *Flooded Tree, Derwentwater,* (1981) is reproduced in *Landmarks* (2001), p.61. It is online in the British Library Fay Godwin archive (http://imagesonline.bl.uk/?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&q=fay+godwin+flooded+tree+derwentwater). Godwin initially made her reputation as a portrait photographer before devoting herself to landscape. Her fascination with the land led to her publications *Land* (1985), *Our*

absolute stillness and such illusionistic ambiguity, that it is impossible to differentiate the tree's three-dimensional form from its reflection on the immaculately flat surface. The water presents two characteristics – a reflective, horizontal plane, and a transparent volume of liquid overlaying pebbles visible in the depths. The photograph expresses Bergsonian duration, a qualitative engagement with time which defies quantitative measurement as diurnal seconds, minutes and hours. The evidence of the eye, communicating with the 'I', suggests the seeming suspension of time and becoming; the world achieves stasis and timelessness. There is no past or present; there is duration.

Tension between water's surface and depth is both literal and metaphoric: surfaces reveal; depths conceal. Nan Shepherd, whose wonderfully evocative book, *The Living Mountain,* (1977; reprinted 2011), writes of the surface and depth of a Scottish loch in which she was bathing,

> We waded on into the brightness, and the width of the water increased, as it always does when one is on or in it, so that the loch no longer seemed narrow, but the far side was a long way off. Then I looked down; and at my feet there opened a gulf of brightness so profound that the mind stopped. We were standing on the edge of a shelf that ran some yards into the loch before plunging down into the pit that is the true bottom. And through that inordinate clearness we saw to the depth of the pit. So limpid was it that every stone was clear.[21]

We may see so clearly through still water that surface and depth cannot be distinguished. Agitated surfaces, on the other hand, assert themselves and conceal the depth of water. Personal or autobiographical memory arises from the depths of the unconscious, often prompted by some retinal stimulation which initiates an association with temporal distance –

Forbidden Land (1990), *The Edge of the Land* (1995), and *Landmarks* (2001), the catalogue of her retrospective exhibition.

[21] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain. A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011 [1977]).

the past. ‘There’ was different from ‘here’ making identity then different from now, and requiring construction of another life-narrative, a process proposed by Fredric Bartlett when he observed that ‘the past is being continually re-made, reconstructed in the interests of the present’.[22]

My lake sometimes offers still, clear reflections which induce moments of reflective clarity. At other times a wind-blown, agitated surface with fragmented image patterns generates only flashes of consciousness and memories of lives here and there. Sometimes the reflections are so blurred that awareness of ‘then and now’ merely flickers at the margins of cognition and memory. Accepting that we have multiple selves because we change (you don’t step into the same river twice; you don’t actually step into the *same* river once),[23] I look across reflective water from the margin here to the lake edge there, and wonder about my diasporic condition and identity then and there, and identity here and now.

At the lake’s margin water meets land; water seeps into earth; there is no absolute boundary; there is ebb and flow; time passing cannot be time known. Provisional meaning emerges from reflection. The present moment, represented by appearances in the exterior world exists simultaneously with an interior slide show of images retrieved from memory. Time can be reversed just as the world of appearances is reversed in a sheet of water, but the time flickering in memory images is deceptive.

Binary oppositions are theoretical constructs but lived experience seldom confirms them as oppositional forces. Paul Cézanne deduced this after long hours of standing at his easel and staring at landscape. He depicted multifocal, conceptualised spaces, reconfiguring perceived three-dimensional space on flat planes, rendered redolent with illusionary depth. Working with colour, the essential sensory language for painters, he explored experiential space here

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[22] Fredric Bartlett, *Remembering* (1932) in Beike, D.R.,Lampinen, J.M. and Behrend D.A (eds.), *The Self and Memory*, (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), p.209.

[23] This aphorism by the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus c. 535 – c. 475 BCE, appears in two slightly different forms in Plato’s *Cratylus.*

and there, located between perception and cognition, and held both in a state of consciousness, which was then translated into pictorial equilibrium. Virginia Woolf, having listened to Roger Fry, art historian, painter and critic, explaining Cézanne's objectives, understood the conflict of oppositions in painting and writing. In *To the Lighthouse*, her character, Lily Briscoe,[24] strives to 'achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces'. As a painter Lily tries to locate balance though art and ponders, 'It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on. She stared, frowning'.[25]

My experience of the diasporic condition demands accommodation of two opposite forces – lives lived differently in homes and homelands here and there. As a result of migration, one crosses boundaries. This is the theme of Ruth Padel's book of prose and poetry, *The Mara Crossing* (2012), in which she proposes that,

> Human beings are both fixed and wandering, settlers and nomads. Our history is the story of the nomad giving way to the settler but when people are unsettled they have to migrate … Home and migration belong together, two sides of the same ancient coin. Home is something we make, then things change, either in ourselves or in the world, we lose home and have to go elsewhere.[26]

In *Landscape with Flight into Egypt* in *The Mara Crossing,* she writes,

> Landscape is your life seen in distance, when you know

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[24] Through the character of Lily Briscoe, Woolf demonstrates her grasp of Cézanne's pictorial principles, knowledge she gleaned from the writings and conversations of her friend Roger Fry. Fry's *Cézanne: a Study of his Development* (1927) remains an insightful and significant account of the painter, and Woolf's *Roger Fry. A Biography* (1940) demonstrates clearly that she understood Post-Impressionist principles.

[25] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* p.224.

[26] Ruth Padel, *The Mara Crossing,* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012) p.2.

for just an interval of sunlight, how to join

time travelled with time still to go.[27]

We move on, aided by reflection. For the artist – painter, poet, photographer – art engages artfully with time, enabling us to become seers in our exterior and interior spatial worlds so that we can echo Lily Briscoe's revelation which ends *To the Lighthouse* – 'I have had my vision'.[28] Woolf's painter did not, however, experience the diasporic condition and its affliction of double vision but here too, art – painting, poetry and prose – may, with photographic *aides-mémoire* of a lake's space and reflections, facilitate meaningful reflection on states-of- being here and there, now and then, and justify standing and staring at a lake.

Lake

She is unremarkable:
white skin, white hair blend into white Anglia.
But Norfolk/Yorkshire/Cockney accents ask,
'Where are you from'?
Amidst this island nation's myriad voices,
My vowels denounce me,
Efface English birth,
Impose the stranger's strangeness.
    Where am I from?
    What land did I walk?
South of the Zambezi broken by mighty *Mosi-oa-Tunya*,
North of the great, grey-green, greasy Limpopo,

[27] Ruth Padel, *The Crossing*, p. 145.
[28] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* p. 242

Savannah spaces flaunt

Wine-red, bronze, burgundy, spring-leafed Msasa trees.

Brachystegia spiciformis,

Brilliantly mocks

Darkest Africa.

    Where am I from?

    What ancestral land?

I recite England's kings and queens from Egbert to Elizabeth,

Know novels, poetry, music, art, learnt in colonial schools,

Disconnected from

    heat, sunlight, drought,

    ochre grass, red earth, mud huts,

    flying ants, butcher birds, flame lilies, granite,

    black servants.

Domicile: Anglia, Africa, Anglia encore,

Encountering

    squally showers, daylight, snow,

    green greenness, grey sand, Norman churches,

    hedgehogs, blackbirds, teasels, flint,

    lollypop ladies.

Present and past lives lived here and there,

And a mirrored lake

Reflecting bracken, gorse and birch.[29]

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[29] Marion Arnold, *Lake* (Balgowan: The Caversham Press, 2012). This is a limited edition (edition of 30) artist's book; the cover design comprises a linocut title.