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Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography

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Introduction

Place is not the content of a definite representation.
Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place*

The medium of photography has a long-lasting engagement with the nebulous concept of place, ranging from actual places captured in photographs to fictitious ones constructed by photo software. This engagement can be traced back to the photograph taken by Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826-1827), which is believed to be the oldest surviving camera photograph in the history of the medium. Niépce's photograph stands as the earliest instance of how photography is able to transmute physical places into photographed places. While in Niépce's time capturing photographs would require several hours of patience, in the present day almost anybody equipped with a photographic camera can, in less than a second, eternalize a physical place in the form of a photograph. Not only has the relationship between photography and places been preserved since the advent of the medium, but it has also been continually consolidated owing to the omnipresence of photographic images and cameras. For instance, because of hectic working schedules or economic constraints, not everyone has the spare time to physically visit places. As a result, a great number of people have their first exposure to physical places through seeing them in photographs before actually visiting those in the world. Thanks to the medium of photography, we can observe a variety of geographical locations from vast distances away, glimpsing the orient from the occident and vice versa, thus circumnavigating the world photographically through images. Photography not only helps us to "pre-visit" physical places that we can see during our lifetime, but it also allows us to arrive at places that we would not have otherwise. For example, due to the recent technological advancement of photographic apparatus, we can observe images of far-flung places around the cosmos, places from which we are a millions of light-years removed. Examples such as these serve to show the extent to which our conception of place is constructed and influenced by photography, a medium that has been incessantly utilised to capture and discover new places around the world. In fact, my own pensive reflection upon the concept of place was, too, initiated by photography, while I was attempting to discern the topographical features of the world through my camera.

Several years ago, when I started studying photography with a view to becoming a photographer, I had a strong predilection for places as my subject matter. I henceforth set off on a journey to understand places in both the real and the world created via photographic

images. As a topographer, I was commissioned to make photographs of diverse geographical locations across the globe, a process through which my insatiable desire for learning about different places was amplified. Being fascinated, or rather haunted, by places, I travelled to many countries across different continents to capture places with my camera in order to be able to revisit them through my photographs. However, being a topographer photographer not only gave me insights into morphological features of places, but also made me realise that places were not necessarily limited to that which I was capturing in photos. At some point in my career, while I was taking topographical photographs of some vast terrain, I became aware of my own bodily presence as a place within the landscape I was attempting to capture. This realisation of my corporal existence, as something constituting another place in the landscape, casted doubts on my conviction that I could capture and, in turn, fix places in photographs. Consequently, I decided to delve into the concept of place through photography, in order to examine how this medium can account for place as something that resists being rendered inert and static in both time and space. In other words, instead of simply regarding place as that which a photograph is of, which is permanently fixed in a frame, I started to view this concept as philosopher Edward S. Casey does, as something “*at work*, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient *in something else*.”¹

In his seminal work on the concept of place, *The Fate of Place*, Casey argues that during the last two hundred years of philosophical and geographical inquiries this notion has been gradually reduced to a fixed location, suggesting that places have a permanent essence in time and space. One of the main reasons for the reduction of places to fixed locations is that they have been steadily subordinated to space and time, causing each place to cease to exist as a dynamic entity in the era of “temporocentrism”: an epoch that signifies the belief in the hegemony of time.² Due to the spread of electronical technology and the resulting inclination towards a speed-up time, Casey argues, place has been shrunk to a fixed location, whereas time and space have remained consistently processual. An obvious sign of the dominance of space over place in contemporary academic discourse can be found in the prevalence of the adjective “spatial”, derived from “space”, whereas no English dictionary offers an adjective derived from “place”.³ However, through his unprecedented approach, Casey proposes and uses the adjective “placial” to address the dynamic, processual and indeterminate account of place, contending

¹ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 286. (Italics in original).

² Ibid., x.

³ Stephen Paul Hardy, “Placiality: The Renewal of the Significance of Place in Modern Cultural Theory,” *Brno Studies in English* 26. No. 1 (2013): 85.

that place is never a “fixed thing: [and] it has no steadfast essence.”⁴ By investigating the work of a multitude of thinkers, ranging from Foucault, Benjamin, and Arendt, to more contemporary ones, such as Soja, Irigaray, and Nancy, Casey argues that each of them has “rediscovered” the importance of place as an unfixed and abstract entity in a different field of study.⁵ In other words, he argues that, despite the fact that places have been gradually reduced to fixed locations, as if they are unaffected and unvarying, thanks to particular scholars, their indeterminate aspects have been preserved in different discourses. Casey suggests that specific scholars have “rediscovered” the concept of place, because they have given meticulous attention to place as something that remains equally indeterminate as time and space.

Although the processual and indeterminate account of place have been discussed in relation to particular discourses—such as Doreen Massey, who proposes a “progressive sense of place” that provides mobility in cities, and Yi-Fu Tuan, who observes place as a pause in a movement that transforms a location into place—it is Casey’s reading that does not favour any particular discourse from which the indeterminacy of places can be fleshed out.⁶ Instead, he looks at the indeterminacy of place in a variety of fields, ranging from architecture to the human body, arguing that the discussions of placial qualities cannot be confined to any particular field, but can manifest themselves unconstrainedly in all possible arenas. In the words of human geographer Tim Cresswell, “geography is about place and places. But place is not the property of geography—it is a concept that travels quite freely between disciplines and the study of place benefits from an interdisciplinary approach.”⁷ That is precisely why Casey asserts, “since there is no single basis of the primacy of place, there is no monolithic foundation on which this primacy could be built,” because “what is at stake is a polyvalent primacy” of place.⁸ In other words, Casey is putting forward the idea that places can be identified as such through a variety of methods and discourses, and therefore there cannot be a single field that can claim to be able to fully explain the notion of place. Moreover, he contends that place is not necessarily seen as a location, such as a room in a building, which can be captured and fixed in a photograph, but is to be regarded as that which continually resists permanent embodiment.⁹ That is to say, for Casey, a place is never identified by the location at which it is situated nor by the material

⁴ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 286.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Doreen Massey, “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. Ed. Bird, et al (London: Routledge, 1993), 59-69. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

⁷ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, Second edition (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2015), 1.

⁸ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 337.

⁹ Ibid., 231.

construction that has constituted it, since it is not to be regarded as a localisable entity at all. Instead, he conceives of place as that which continually evades a finalised representation. Strictly speaking, for Casey a place is never delimited to what it is, where it is, and to when and how it subsists in time and space.

In this dissertation, by embracing Casey's understanding of place, and giving precedence to this concept over that of space, my primary aim is to indicate how photography can substantiate his dictum that "place is not the content of a definite representation."¹⁰ That is, I will discuss how the medium of photography can make clear the notion that a place is never simply presented or fixed, but exists as something that is endowed with indeterminacy regarding its presence in space and time. To do this, this dissertation will be triangulated by the fields of photography, philosophy, and geography. As a result, not only will this work contribute to the burgeoning theoretical research on the concept of place in relation to photography (e.g. *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* and *Photography and Place; Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945*), but also to broader interdisciplinary research that probes into this notion, culminated in works such as: *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*; *Getting Back Into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*; and *Space and Place: Perspective of Experience*.¹¹ To achieve its goal, this research breaks down the participatory elements of photography into six tropes: the photographer, the camera, the photograph, the image, the spectator, and the photographic genre. Thus, each one of the subsequent chapters will be devoted to the discussion of these themes. By paying close attention to each trope of photography and viewing it through the concept of place, I will discuss, exemplify, and eventually foreground how photography can manifest the spatiotemporal facets of places. Therefore, the main question that concerns this dissertation is: *How can a close reading of photography, through the lens of geography and philosophy, make evident and extend the spatiotemporal account of place?*

By breaking down the constitutive elements of photography into six tropes, I aim to highlight how this medium is comprised of places, each of which instilled with latent temporal

¹⁰ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 231.

¹¹ Helen Westgeest, et al. *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives*, edited by Helen Westgeest (Pennsylvania: Valiz, 2009); Donna West Brett, *Photography & Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 2nd edition; Jeff Malpas, *Places and Experiences: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

and spatial features. In other words, rather than only considering a place to be the subject matter of photographs, this research examines all the partakers of a photographic act as places, thereby drawing out their placial characteristics. To this end, I will study how each constitutive element of photography, viewed as a place, interacts with and interferes in different spaces and times, thus viewing spaces through places rather than the opposite. In doing so, this interdisciplinary study aspires to put forward a geophilosophical reading of photography, which incontrovertibly privileges places over spaces, through a medium whose history has been intertwined with place since its very conception.

In the first chapter, by deploying a phenomenological scheme that pays significant attention to lived experiences of the human body and the way in which the body perceives the world, I will look at the photographer's body as a place. Drawing on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward S. Casey and Edmund Husserl, I will discuss how the photographer's body should be regarded as a place that inherently resists permanent localization. Then, through a comparative analysis of two American landscape photographs, I will exemplify how a photographer can convey the bodily experiences of being in the landscape through his or her photographs. Thus, in this chapter I will foreground how the photographer's body can be deemed a "lived place", instilled with indeterminacies and conflicting forces, and how such a place interacts with its surrounding space. In the second chapter, however, I move away from the photographer to investigate the camera's role as a non-living agent in a photographic act, making explicit how the camera as a place deals with space. Drawing on a wide range of scholars, such as Vilém Flusser, Stanley Cavell, and Siegfried Kracauer, and by applying their theories on a instructive case study, I will discuss how the camera as a place fixes the space to which it is exposed by means of a passive intervention. Subsequently, by reflecting on Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes' views on photography, I will discuss how the camera can simultaneously give and block access to the photographed subject. Hence, I will conclude this chapter by discussing how the camera can be seen as a contingent place that interferes, fixes, and eventually problematizes the space to which it is exposed.

In the third chapter, I will shift my focus from the camera to the photograph, to demonstrate how the photograph can be seen as a place that is identified neither by its material constituents nor by the location at which it makes an appearance. By focusing on mobility and reproduction as the unique characteristics each photograph is endowed with, I will illustrate how photographs can be seen as constantly sailing places, which do not provide any permanent localization. Drawing on philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, I will argue why photographs' trajectories and directions in cyber space cannot be predetermined. Thus, in

this chapter I will demonstrate how the photograph can be seen as a “placeless place” whose identity is only marked by its dispersiveness and multidirectionality in different spaces. In the fourth chapter, I will switch my focus from the body of the photograph to its surface; that is, I will look at the photographic image as a place that is replete with latent spatial features, calling it “photographic place”: the perceptible visual place that we observe when we look at photographs. In order to foreground the spatiality of the photographic place, I will focus on the photographic frame as an edge that both preserves and discards a segment of space, in order to indicate how the frame can confer a liminal character to photographic places. Therefore, in this chapter I will demonstrate how the photographic place can become a liminal place, through viewing the frame as a boundary that provides the possibility of mental projection and spatial expansion in mind of the viewer.

Having foregrounded that places cannot be delimited to where they are, what they are, which direction they go to, and how they appear, in the fifth chapter I will include the spectator in my discussion in order to discuss the confrontational aspect of places. Drawing on the work of geographers, such as Nigel Thrift and Andrew Merrifield, I will discuss how a place can be seen as a single moment in a process, which cannot be materialised or fixed, but instead must be transiently confronted. To this end, I will apply the concept of “event” to photography, which has been given particular attention by philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, and photography theorist Ariella Azoulay, to illustrate how the spectator of photography can cause a confrontational place to come about. Therefore, in this chapter I propose that the inclusion of the spectator in a photographic act can engender an evental place: a place whose confrontational aspects allow it to come into being in different times and spaces. Having already discussed how each partaker of a photographic act can be viewed as a place, in the last chapter I will discuss how a particular photographic genre deals with places, both in the world and in the word of photography: “aftermath photography.” By including a wide range of photographic practices, such as landscape, street, and cityscapes photography, aftermath photography manifests an intrinsic affinity for both physical places and ones embodied in a photograph. By confronting us with desolate photographed places, taken from areas that have witnessed scenes of disaster in the world, the genre of aftermath photography provides the possibility of reflection upon the past through photography. To look at how this genre deploys places to communicate its subject matter, I will narrow my focus to the way in which aftermath photography deals with landscapes, both physical ones and embodied ones. To do this, I will first discuss the relationship between landscape and place, suggesting that a physical landscape can actively affect the photographer. Having argued that a material landscape in the world can

affect the beholder, I will turn to its representation to see how the image of the given landscape conveys meaning to the spectator. To this end, by giving distinct attention to the function of image and text in aftermath photography, I will discuss how this genre conflates the temporal suspension of landscape images with the rhetoric of news photography to deliver its content. Therefore, in this chapter I will propose that in the aftermath genre the subject matter is not simply communicated through the photo or the caption, but through the space in-between them.

In this dissertation, taking together all the six approaches mentioned above, I am going to embark on a journey to rediscover the spatiality and temporality of places through photography. As Casey has contended, what is irrefutable about the concept of place is its “polyvalent primacy,” the fact that places can exhibit their indeterminate features in a multitude of discourses and practices. In this interdisciplinary approach, I probe into photography to show how this medium can bring the spatiotemporal dispositions of places to the forefront. As such, by closely examining each constitutive element of photography throughout this dissertation, I will argue how they can be seen as places that manifest indeterminate, contingent, dispersive, liminal, and evental features, aiming to conduct a geophilosophical analysis of photography that regards the aforementioned characteristics as the prerogative of places.