

THERE THERE

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"There is no there there" Gertrude Stein famously declared upon her return to Oakland California where she spent her childhood.

Oakland disappointed Stein in two important ways. It had neither the idyllic pre-industrial, rural small town there of her remembered past nor the there of the world's centers of commerce and commodity culture, a there that Stein had become accustomed to. Her disappointment was ideological, based as it was on her acceptance of dominant representational strategies, but it was by no means novel. Many who measure their experience of place and time against preconceived expectations have always shared Stein's melancholia.

Such was the experience of Gérard de Nerval, a 19th century French Romantic writer, during a visit to Cairo. In a letter to his friend Théophile Gautier, Nerval lamented that nothing looked 'genuine' in the Cairenean streets or shops. 'Cairo', he felt, was much better experienced in the 'oriental' cafes of Paris. Dismayed, he wrote, "I have already lost, kingdom after kingdom, province after province, the most beautiful half of the universe, and soon I will know of no place in which I can find a refuge for my dreams; but it is Egypt that I most regret having driven out of my imagination, now that I have sadly placed it in my memory".(i)

Rather than examine the imagined contents of what he had come to 'know' as 'Egypt' and the mechanism by which his expectations of 'Cairo' were formed, Nerval blamed his disappointment upon some fundamental lacking in the people and places he found there. Also, in his assumption of the right to define the places he set foot in, he demonstrated just how powerful is the ability to organize expectations. In the end, rather than challenge his colonized imagination, Nerval, much like Stein and Oakland, chose to believe that there was no Cairo in Cairo.

Such a triumph of ideological forms of representation over the lived experience of distinct places traces the path carved out by the history of colonialism and global capitalism. Ammiel Alcalay puts it this way, "much more than an individual psychological situation, this process of valuing representation over reality masks an almost total disregard for the particulars of the human condition in specific places while cordoning off areas in which power can fulfill its function within an ideology of supremacy. If the 'natives' amount to nothing more than romantic landscape refracting material that only reflects distorted or idealized images of the visitors back at themselves, then it stands to reason that the land of the natives is of no particular value unless that value is invested by someone else: namely, the colonizer, imperial power, corporate shareholder, or tourist."(ii)

In such paths to 'progress', the security of ruling relations has always relied upon the power of representation to create a picture of the world that is consistent with the view of rulers. As Timothy Mitchell discusses, forming images of places has been an essential part of making them 'knowable', and through such abstract 'knowledge', conquering them.(iii)

Much like the doctrine of Terra Nullius marked colonized spaces as empty and awaiting the colonizer to give it value, hegemonic representations have worked to

separate people from their actual lived experiences and to empty out place of the meanings held for it by the people who are there. People and places become one-dimensional image-commodities awaiting conquest: sights waiting to be 'seen'. This is as true for our images of 'home' as it is about those we anticipate in our travels. Indeed, constructing a hierarchy of theres is an integral part of ruling projects. Some places, such as Stein's 'Oakland', are worth leaving just as other places are worth arriving at.

Photography has played a key role in this process. Already by the mid-19th century, the 'great age of imperialism', the Institut de France pronounced that the camera shows a 'true' correspondence between image and reality. One that would "provide a new, almost mechanical kind of certainty," a certainty reinforced by the frequency one saw a particular photographic image of a particular place or of particular people.(iv) The more one saw of the same thing, the more it came to be valued, thereby increasing the desire to be there and, most especially, to be pictured in front of there. Claims of accuracy aside, photography allowed you to be anywhere you wanted, regardless of where you actually were.

These two interrelated impulses have informed the traditions of travel and studio photography from the start. Backdrops, alternately understood as both actual sites and painted (and more recently digital) ones, have played a crucial role in creating the subjecthood of the sitters. Being pictured confers and confirms the worth of the person(s) in front of the sites on display. I. Was. There.

In the 19th century, the middle classes, unable to afford the cost of commissioned oil portraits, were nonetheless able to access its photographic version. Studios proliferated – stocked with backdrops and props that imitated the domestic and leisure spaces of the wealthy – on one hand, foyers, drawing rooms and ornamental gardens, on the other, rowboats on lakes and poses amongst exotic flora and fauna. If Nerval thought 'Cairo' was better in Paris, then a better 'Paris' could just as well be in Oakland!

Later, photography, primary an activity by professionals prior to WWII, became ever more available to the middle classes and some affluent sections of the working class in the Global North.

In a world of increasing mobilities – driven by leisure or dislocation, by desires for 'cultural' self-enrichment or sheer survival – the "conquest of the world as picture" that Martin Heidegger astutely noted, effects the destination of those on the move as well as what they 'see' when they get there. Even more so, the world becomes stages, especially if the place one wishes to be is nowhere nearby. As John Urry notes, sites became sights: Mom and Dad in front of the new house; wild Aunt Mildred at the Taj Mahal! Me in the USA! (v.)

Our appetite for backdrops remains just as ferocious and just as fiercely hegemonic. Professionals and hobbyists alike simply pan their cameras until the backdrop places the subjects there. All that lies outside is unphotographed and therefore unseen, unseeable and unknowable. For the proper trophy shot, all that is made undesirable or is thought to reflect poorly upon those being photographed must be exorcized from the picture and eventually from memory and history. Such erasures are at the core of banal, everyday operations of power.

In There There we investigate the distance between the there and there identified by Stein's disrupted imagination. The images we show are part of a growing collection of photographs created since late 2003. Tracking our own movements from 'home' to cities where our work takes us, we have hired studio photographers to picture us in front of their most popular backdrops. In turn, we photograph the photographers photographing us, and their studios.

Hiring only those we can reasonably afford, we find that in contemporary North America, many studio photographers are situated upon the same rung of the racialized ladder as we are. Most of us are more or less recent migrants from outside of the centers of world power. Backdrops of the good life mediate our encounters. Perhaps this is the reason that the photographers we meet cater mostly to a 'local' clientele, those for whom this 'good life' is not readily experienced.

There There records and remembers where we were and shows where the studio photographer thought we would rather be. There There records both what we look like and the mechanism of being seen.

As the collection grows, the distinction between the exotic and the everyday, 'home' and elsewhere, becomes more and more confusing. The backdrop in Jaipur is 'Agra' and its Taj Mahal. The backdrop in Toronto is 'Italy'. Everywhere are mottled backdrops of non-descript swishes and swirls, a further leap into abstraction, presumably to signify an everywhere space of privilege and sophistication. Conversely, the photographers' studio in Delhi looks like New York City, the one in Washington DC looks like the one in Honolulu. The only difference seems to be the degree of material clutter in the photographer's studios.

While both the differences and similarities demonstrate the evermore-powerful hegemonic system of worth, the places and especially the people do not conform to the theres of picture postcards. Instead, the growing collection documents moments where ordinary people pause to look at each other. We see both an unsettling encounter with official worldviews and an estrangement from such hegemonic sights. The pictures show the space between the there of conquest and the there where ordinary people live, work and die.

Endnotes

i Cited in Alcalay, Ammiel. 1993. *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 66.

ii Ibid. p.67

iii Ibid. p.65-6.

iv Mitchell, Timothy. 1988. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Ibid. p.65-6.

v Urry, John, 2000. *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London and New York: Routledge.