



Spatial Attachment in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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Article Information

Article History:

Received May 02, 2025

Revised Jun 19, 2025

Accepted Jun 29, 2025

Available Online March, 1, 2026

Keywords:

Cultural Attachment,
Memory,
Place Identity,
Site of Memory,
Spatial Attachment

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Abstract

This paper examines the spatial attachment in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), exposing how the northwest landscape of London shapes the characters' lives. It analyzes how emotional ties to place influence self-perception and social mobility, which function as active forces in reforming identity. It further reveals how personal past experiences mediate the characters' attachment to specific places. Drawing on John Bowlby's theory of place attachment, which contemplates that people form deep emotional connections to physical locations that provide a sense of security, identity, and belonging, this paper argues that *NW* presents a fragmented portrait of contemporary urban life where emotional connections are tied to spatial attachment. It concludes that spatial attachment serves as a backdrop and a critical framework through which questions of belonging, memory, and identity are articulated.

DOI: [10.33899/radab.v56i104.61675](https://doi.org/10.33899/radab.v56i104.61675), ©Authors, 2023, College of Arts, University of Mosul.

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رواية زادي سميث "شمال غرب"

مروة قاسم محمد صادق * حسان مؤيد حامد **

المستخلص:

يتناول هذا البحث الارتباط المكاني كما صور في رواية زادي سميث "شمال غرب" (2012). حيث يدرس كيف تسهم المناظر الطبيعية لشمال غرب لندن في تشكيل شخصيات الرواية. يسلط البحث الضوء على وظيفة المكان باعتبارها قوة فاعلة في بناء الهوية والمجتمع والذاكرة. ومن خلال التركيز على تجارب الشخصيات الرئيسية، يكشف البحث كيف تؤثر التجارب الشخصية السابقة في ارتباطها بأمكن وأشخاص معينين، وكيفية تشكل فهمهم لفكرة المكان. بالاعتماد على نظريات الارتباط بالمكان، يناقش البحث في رواية "شمال غرب" الصورة المجزأة للحياة الحضرية المعاصرة، حيث ترتبط الروابط العاطفية بالانتماء الجغرافي. يحلل البحث الطريقة التي تؤثر بها الروابط العاطفية بالمكان على إدراك الذات والانتماء الاجتماعي. وأخيراً يتوصل البحث إلى أن رواية "شمال غرب" تستخدم تضاريس لندن ليس فقط كخلفية ولكن كإطار نقدي يتم من خلاله إثارة أسئلة تدور في فلك الانتماء والذاكرة والهوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: موقع الذاكرة، التعلق الثقافي، الذاكرة، التعلق المكاني، هوية المكان.

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1. Introduction

Memory is the ability of the mind to retain and recall stored information. It is often perceived as a mental repository of past experiences or remembered events. The cognitive process enables people to recall things, experiences, sensations, perceptions, and conceptions (Levent, 2017, p.725). Memory is closely connected with place as one of the most crucial components that captures the experiences stored in the memory of the societies. It refers to a specific location with physical and symbolic attributes, including natural and artificial features. Memory also includes a sense of space, identity, and the association people form with their surroundings, contributing to unique and meaningful social and cultural contexts (Stedman, 2003, p.1). Place preserves memories and keeps them from disappearing, allowing them to be transferred to future generations.

Memory and place have a powerful bond to attachment theory. “attachment” refers to the long-lasting bond people form with those special to them (Harlow, 2021, p.2). Attachment theory dives into the individuals’ most profound emotions, exploring their past to calculate their present behaviors and build their personality. According to John Bowlby, who evolved attachment theory, attachment is a “permanent psychological bond between people” (Segal & Jaffe, 2019, p. 1). Bowlby concentrates on infants first year and their bond with their caregivers, whose primary goal is to give them an environment of security where they can grow and flourish.

The place has a positive relationship with attachment. “place” refers to a broad notion that includes meanings related to geography, architecture, history, religion, society, and psychology. Therefore, place attachment is a term that describes an effective positive bond between people and place and that individual’s propensity to stay close to that location. The concept of “place attachment” was first introduced by Setha Low and Irwin Altman (1992) as a process of interactions between people and their surroundings. People develop a bond with a place that embodies emotional content, which is influenced by their personal experiences (Escalera-Reyes, 2020). Since place attachment is multi-dimensional, it cannot be explained solely by a cause-and-effect relationship. Instead, it is based on the reciprocal relationship between behavior and experience. Place attachment is classified into two types: functional attachment and emotional attachment. Functional attachment is influenced by the place’s quality and relative improvement compared to other places. The emotional place attachment is determined by proximity to the place of residence, frequency of visits, types of activities undertaken by the individual, and emotional ties to a location. Ultimately, place attachment is built on symbolic significance. People give meaning to landscape and, as a result, feel attached to it.

Along with place attachment, place identity is another substantial concept that refers to the connection between people and their surroundings. A person’s place identity is part of his personality that is influenced by the places he visits. It can influence behavior, improve self-esteem through stability, and promote psychological well-being (Hernández et al., 2007). Although place identity and place attachment are widely regarded as closely connected concepts, there is no agreement regarding the relationship between the two. Therefore, place identity is viewed as a component of the individual’s social identity, which includes elements of self-concepts that arise from affiliation with a specific geographic location (Bernardo & Palma Oliveira, 2013).

The French historian Pierre Nora, best known for his work, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (1989), states that a person’s memory is influenced by their surroundings and daily activities. His notion of memory places, highlights how space can hold various memories and the value and tools of

public areas in helping people remember actions. In a city, places of memory help people remember the past. These places that hold memories create the conditions for memories to be preserved and for shared ideas to be formed and represented. Communities can create their identities when they have a social place; without one, a group lacks the foundation to build its identity (Erkan, 2024, p.125). These memory places are monuments, structures, artifacts, historical figures, writings, and symbolic locations concurrently linked to real and imagined historical representations. These places, which Nora defined as lieux de mémoire, do not have to be imposing buildings or significant historical sites in the city; instead, they can be any area where the collective memory is kept. A street name may even contribute to the preservation of the collective memory. A person, a memory, a document, a street, a public area, or a building can all be considered lieux de mémoire.

Therefore, attachment theory is influential in analyzing the relationship between people and their environments. It helps understand individuals' emotional ties to specific locations and how these ties influence their identity and behavior. The following section will analyze how spatial attachment is portrayed in Zadie Smith's *NW*, showing how the characters' surroundings shape their sense of belonging.

2. Spatial Attachment in Zadie Smith's *NW*

2.1. Memory and Place in *NW*

In *NW*, Smith unravels and rewinds narrative threads, deconstructs and reassembles transgenerational and individual memories, and plays with combinations of forgetting and remembering after experiencing traumatic events. Smith reveals the significance of her characters' pasts and their recollection of their roots. Her characters are dissatisfied with modern living, and they still have a deep connection to their origins and heritage (Al Muhana, 2023).

The memory of past loss and the threat of future loss frame the narratives of Natalie, a black woman from northwest London who reinvents herself to escape her working-class roots. She is haunted by the fear of losing others and herself, and the compartmentalized fragments of her narratives express her fears and strategies for managing them. Her narrative starts and ends with near-death encounters: a phone call that may effectively end a former friend's life and an anecdote about her saving her friend Leah Hanwell when she was drowning in the pool as a ¹child. Natalie's narrative could be read as fragments of memory encapsulating the potential to transform and contend with that trauma.

In *NW*, memory is embodied in the fragmented form and fragments of languages and stories that meet and disperse throughout the novel. The collective histories of loss manifest themselves in the fugue form of the narratives as voices and perspectives encircle each other, all intricately connected and implicated in each other's timelines, cyclically returning to the same theme each time differently.

Smith effectively portrays a sense of alienation through the experiences of the four characters from the fictional working-class estate of Caldwell, emphasizing their challenges and psychological conflict with identification and belonging. Most people living in Caldwell, Northwest London, are immigrants, "full of people from the colonies and the Russian lot"⁽¹⁾. The novel suggests that people in particular areas are still territorialized by race and ethnicity, which keeps them apart from other native people. This external division feeds into the internal psychological conflict experienced by the characters, who often struggle with fragmented identities and a deep sense of displacement. Torn between inherited cultural expectations and

¹ Zadie Smith *NW* [eBook]. (2012), 72, Subsequent references to this text will be cited by short title *NW* and page number parenthetically.

the pressures of assimilation, they face ongoing inner battles as they attempt to define who they are in a society that views them as perpetual outsiders.

Caldwell is encircled by high-rise towers named after well-known philosophers who often studied in college, such as Hobbes, Bentham, Locke, and Russell. Despite the grand philosophical names, the towers themselves are architecturally monotonous. The repetition of: “Here is the door, here is the window” emphasizes the sameness in dehumanizing feel to the environment. Everyone lives in a space that looks the same, which could reflect how modern urban life often imposes a kind of sameness on people despite their very different lives. Caldwell is a site of cultural and emotional significance that influences the characters’ perceptions of themselves (Custer, 2014, p. 38). It represents the challenges and limitations the working class faces and the tensions involved in leaving or staying connected to one’s origins. The place reflects the character’s past experiences and relationships. It is a crucial memory site because it represents the complexity of history, identity, and collective memory.

The four main characters, Leah, Keisha, Nathan, and Felix, feel confined by their surroundings even if they move throughout North West London. The past and their environment feel confining, and they struggle to maintain a healthy connection with their cultural roots as black people. They hardly ever leave their hometowns (Vuotovesi, 2020). More than just the old estate, Caldwell is no longer merely where Felix goes for a short visit with Lloyd and where Leah goes daily. The place of memory provides the four characters with their emotional and physical basis. It is central to the characters’ histories, social experiences, and cultural identity.

The importance of memory of place, is revealed by how each character is stuck between “rout and root” (Shokouhi et al., 2020, p. 11). In Natalie’s case, the theme of nostalgia plays a central role in her struggle with identity and belonging. Natalie has historical and cultural ties to Caldwell and the Caribbean Island. After experiencing an identity crisis, she returns to Caldwell to find her roots. This return is not just physical but deeply emotional, as it awakens a strong sense of nostalgia. Natalie recalls the daily routine of her childhood here. Despite her best efforts to live a separate life, she feels bad about returning to Caldwell. Since she departed, the flat has become even more crowded: her mother is in the third room, her brother Jayden is still in his room, and her sister, nephew, and two nieces are in the bedroom from her youth. These changes deepen her nostalgia, making her yearn for a past that no longer exists in the same form. Following Natalie’s visit to Caldwell, she departs from her paralegal job. She returns to the Middle Temple with an offer of a tenancy and the money to be earned in commercial law. When she succeeds financially, she gives five percent of her money to her family and nonprofit organizations. For her, North West of London is a symbolic space where personal and collective memories intersect. The streets, housing estates, and institutions are symbolic because they remind her of decisive past experiences. These places are vital in shaping her identity and how she interacts with the world around her since they are tied to significant and formative moments.

Natalie’s past continues to influence her identity and shape her sense of self and how others view her. When Leah refers to her as Keisha, Natalie becomes uncomfortable, as the name evokes the parts of her identity she has tried to leave behind. The implications of these two names are explained by Leah’s husband, Michel, who tells Natalie: “You changed your name. I forgot that you did this. It is like: “Dress for the job you want, not the one you have “(NW: p. 71). His comment highlights the performativity involved in Natalie’s name change, which she did to distance herself from her working-class ethnic origins to assimilate into a more socially acceptable identity. An uncomfortable attachment to her past is further revealed by the emotional and physical separation she has created between her current self and her roots. When she meets

with Leah, the moment is filled with unspoken tension and hints of old trauma, revealing the fragility of the identity Natalie has carefully built. “There had been an event. To speak of it required the perfect. “Keisha Blake and Leah Hanwell, the protagonists in this event, were four-year-old children” (NW: p. 154). This event in Natalie’s life reflects the effect of social and cultural forces, primarily historical and collective trauma. This experience makes it hard for Natalie to separate her memories from the collective memory of her community. Her strong connection to Caldwell distorts her perception of time and memory, leaving her anxious.(Zapata, 2021, p.102). Psychological conflict shapes the dynamic between Natalie and Leah, although they were raised together and share an understanding of each other’s hopes and fears, Natalie differs from Leah. Natalie aims for social advancement, while Leah, a white social worker, seems content with her life and uninterested in changing her social class. Leah is portrayed as a static figure who represents death due to her inability to communicate with the present or connect meaningfully with Michel or Natalie. Leah’s inability to adapt or engage with the present reflects her internal conflict. Leah finds accepting Natalie’s supernumerary effort to adopt an upper-class white lifestyle complicated. This tension is compounded by a broader racial divide: for Black individuals, the past is a source of anxiety that they have already confronted. In contrast, for Leah, it signifies a form of death which she cannot psychologically escape (Shokouhi et al., 2020, p.13).Thus, both characters are psychologically conflicted, Leah by her inability to change and Natalie by the cost of her transformation. This inner turmoil underpins their strained relationship and highlights broader themes of race, class, and identity.

The problem of adaptation is lucidly present in the novel, particularly in how Natalie and Nathan struggle with their past and attempt to survive in a society that marginalizes. As for Nathan, he has a complicated relationship with his roots. He criticizes the social injustices that prevent him from having a future and tries to share with Natalie his memories when it seems like he may have one: “There’s no way to live in this country when you’re grown” (NW: p.281). Nathan interrupts Natalia as she begins to ask him, "But don't you remember?"(NW:p,282). This moment reflects not only a psychological conflict but also a problem of adaptation since Nathan struggles to reconcile his past with the present and cannot envision a future within the social constraints he faces. Although Nathan and Natalie lead different lives, they are connected by a shared sense of alienation and unwanted. Both characters seek to forget their past and are driven by a powerful will to survive (Zapata, 2021, p. 102).

The problem of adaptation lies at the heart of Felix’s story. His mother is originally from Ghana, and his father is a Jamaican immigrant. Felix and his father moved to London in search of a better life. However, their hopes ended in disaster because they were rejected by the society, which refused to take responsibility for the migrants. To protect himself from the present social injustices, Felix’s father, Lloyd, has confined himself in his apartment and lives in the past. He feels that time has stopped passing. For him, the past is a threat and bitter memory. Felix’s understanding of his father’s background is the foundation of much of his current responsibility (Shokouhi et al., 2020, p. 16).

Laurent Mellet asserts that, city streets and various locations might be full of memories and meaning for Londoners who have lived there. (Custer, 2014, p. 27). Felix's thoughts are filled with the observations of a native who knows every crack in the pavement and every corner in the city when walking through NW6. Felix can see from the windows of the recently renovated Kilburn Tavern that the carpet has been replaced with hardwood and that a velvet-covered booth used to be in the vacant corner: “Felix glanced through the window to the interior: no more velvety corner booth”(NW: p. 150). The city life, particularly in London, can be deeply connected and strangely isolating. According to Mellet, even though people share names and histories, urban living often leads them to avoid personal interaction(p.189). This theme is reflected in Felix,

who feels uneasy when someone from his past, such as the Khan boy, unexpectedly greets him outside Grace's flat. That brief moment brings up memories Felix would prefer to ignore. Additionally, Mellet suggests that to truly move on from the past, a person must actively engage with city-walking through it and allowing space for new and unplanned experiences (p.191). Felix attempts to leave behind the past and redesign his life in a new place (Custer, 2014).

2.3. Spatial Attachment in *NW*

Natalie has a strong and lasting connection to the part of London where she grew up, particularly northwest London. She cannot completely separate herself from it. Even though she now lives a middle-class life, she stays near Caldwell, her old neighborhood. That part of the city represents a sense of home and belonging. Natalie objects, saying, "I don't go south," when requested to speak for a charity on the other side of the Thames (*NW*: p. 344).

Natalie is emotionally attached to her family and community. She supports her family and donates ten percent of her salary to charities. Her work on pro bono death penalty cases in the Caribbean islands reflects her strong ancestral ties. Natalie is not satisfied with her deliberate departure from her previous neighborhood. Nevertheless, her charitable deeds can be viewed as a cosmopolitan virtue, a moral engagement with her community that confirms her partial devotion to her old local group. Her connection to the local community gives her a feeling of responsibility and value. However, Natalie's connection to her local community is essential to her identity. The local community serves as the basis for Natalie's motivation, shaping her self-definition and serving as a source of personal authenticity. Natalie is determined not to lose her loyalty to it, even when recent issues in the larger community threaten this bond (Yuvalari., et al., 2021, p. 151).

Moreover, Spatial attachment is metaphorically presented in *NW*. The characters are bound to their neighborhoods by geography, cultural practices, personal histories, and social expectations. This attachment often gives rise to cultural conflict, especially for characters like Natalie, who must navigate between the working-class culture of her upbringing and the middle-class norms of her current professional life. Although she maintains the same theme of wearing suede boots with tassels, gold hoops, and demine skirts, she orders clothes online for local outings. She selects an outfit that makes her feel African, even though nothing she wears is from Africa other than the bangles and earrings, conceptually. This selective styling reflects an internal cultural conflict, her desire to express her heritage while adapting to a modern, urban lifestyle that often distances her from its origins.

Sartorially, Natalie kept to the same theme: gold hoops, denim skirt, suede boots with tassels, the hair bobble with the black and white dice, and her work clothes in a rucksack on her back (*NW*: p. 346)

These items are often associated with specific urban aesthetic and visual markers of her connection to her roots in northwest London. To build an authentic identity, Natalie uses cultural symbols such as gold hoops and denim skirts (Yuvalari et al., 2021, p.150). Even after achieving success as a middle-class lawyer, she continues to present herself in the traditional style of an African woman, indicating a conscious connection to her heritage and the customs of her origin. Yet, this stylistic continuity masks an ongoing cultural conflict between embracing her social mobility and preserving the authenticity of her background.

Furthermore, Natalie's closest connection to her parents' Caribbean culture is food. In her work "I'm Nobody, Who Are You? Rev. of *NW*, by Zadie Smith" (2012), Alexandra Schwartz notes that Smith follows the long-standing English literary tradition of using meals to signify social class and cultural identity (p.39).

At her dinner parties, Natalie offers excellent coffee with lemon tarts, and while eating out, she orders European cuisine, highlighting her elevated social status and its association with European tastes. Her desires can be interpreted as an unconscious longing for home and reflect her Jamaican and working-class heritage. To re-establish some connection with a sense of place, Natalie immediately returns to shopping at an African minimart while searching for the foods of her youth during her visit to the big British supermarket (Goudos, 2013). While working as a lawyer, Natalie usually eats Jamaican lunch, which includes “pattie, fish dumplings, and a can of ginger beer” (*NW*: p. 113). These food choices underscore her cultural conflict, the tension between the professional identity she performs and the cultural identity she feels internally. Indeed, one of her Brayton classmates recalls her as a coconut, which is brown on the exterior but white on the inside. She might disagree, saying that her goal is success rather than being white. To achieve this, she would insist on using Blackness strategically (Custer, 2024, p. 52), further revealing the complex negotiation between personal ambition and cultural loyalty that defines much of her identity struggle.

Moreover, a perfect illustration of place attachment is Natalie's complex relationship with her environment, particularly her roots in northwest London. Upon hearing a song in a park café, Natalie notices that the performer is Amy Winehouse, who was an iconic figure in music:

The lovely voice came through the speakers in the park café. Natalie Blake and her friend Leah Hanwell had long ago agreed that this voice sounded like London – especially its northern and north-western zones – as if its owner were patron saint of their neighborhoods. Is a voice something you can own? (*NW*: p. 345)

Through voice, Natalie's reflections convey a complex image of the location. For Natalie and Leah, Amy Winehouse's singing voice holds a deep emotional connection to northwest London. This connection goes beyond Amy's spoken accent, which can be read through commonly recognized markers of identity, race, and nationality. These are the main defining characteristics of intersectional identity politics in diverse urban settings. However, when she sings, Natalie and Leah sense something in Winehouse's voice; it is about the atmosphere of the area where Winehouse comes from (Halligey, 2022, pp. 507-08). To them, Place is created and represented by Winehouse's voice, and her voice carries a sense of love and belonging, almost like a spiritual symbol of the area.

Further, the characters' subjective experiences in Kilburn's inhabited spaces differ because the way the area is designed reflects differences in location and social class, which shape the characters' experiences. For instance, Leah's town is perceived and experienced differently by her than by others who have differing views about northwest London. Even though she feels disconnected from the urban area, she still feels comfortable being born and raised there. She is attached to the past and struggles to connect with her husband or Natalie. Leah does not accept Natalie's attempt to adopt an upper-class lifestyle. She feels an attachment to her local environment. She continues to reside in the Caldwell estate, the working-class area where she grew up, and works for a non-profit organization, reflecting her attachment to her community. Leah finds comfort in her memories etched in space. She cannot physically or emotionally leave her council estate because she is trapped in looking at her existence through the lens of her history (Stroia, 2020, p.5). Rather than following social expectations around motherhood and career advancement, Leah stays in her childhood neighborhood. Her inability to have children affects her relationship with Michel, highlighting her inner conflict between personal choice and social pressures.

As for the place identity, space determines the characters' identity and social status. The cultural script the characters are encouraged to follow is determined by the districts where they identify themselves.

Natalie Blake, Nathan Bogle, Felix Cooper, and Leah Hanwell are all stuck in an unattractive part of northwest London. The novel demonstrates that social class is cultural construct that its characters act out. Since a person's class identification is mostly a pre-discursive act, there is no space for self-invention.

Hui Wang challenges the idea that there are true class identities by pointing out that “who we are has long been determined by where we live and what we do” (p. 386). Therefore, the setting of the events serves as a limitation for the characters; self-invention is impossible if you're from a low-income background. Individuals in these communities are expected to speak in specific accents tied to their class, even though they could theoretically choose whichever accent they want. In practice, however, they are socialized into a particular class identity, limiting their ability to redefine themselves (Vuotovesi, 2020, p. 73).

Felix Cooper's interaction with car salesman demonstrates how a person's environment functions as a determining factor for identity. Felix, a thirty-two-year-old mechanic, was raised in a working-class family that suffered greatly from poverty and frequently faced discrimination due to his economic status and race. His social class and race lead others to perceive him as a petty criminal. In contrast, the salesman, Tom Mercer, is a well-educated man who works in advertising and resides in the wealthy Mayfair neighborhood. The two characters have diverse perceptions of space since they come from different places, which reflects their class inequalities (Wang, 2016, p. 389). Although Felix and Tom meet for commercial purposes, their inability to comprehend one another is caused by the strict and mutually exclusive class structure. Despite being Londoners, they do not know each other's social environment. This event refers to the reality that a person's social space determines who they are. Tom and Felix have different perspectives about London. For instance, Tom cannot find the neighborhood where Felix lives. Similarly, Felix reads the tube map and thinks that “it did not express his reality. The center was not —Oxford Circus but the bright lights of Kilburn High Road”(NW: p. 190). Felix observes that the center of London on the map is an inaccurate representation of his reality. His understanding and rejection of what central London is highlight the fact that a person's social space essentially defines their class identity. After discovering that Felix comes from a deprived area in Northwest London, Tom's behavior toward Felix becomes patronizing. He begins to treat Felix through the lens of stereotypes, assuming criminality based on his background. This is evident when Felix is considered to be a drug dealer by Tom because he links his social environment to drug problems. “My girl thinks I have an invisible tattoo on my forehead: please ask me for weed” (NW:p. 118). Felix says, denying this while admitting that his Caldwell heritage and skin color make him a drug dealer. This interaction shows how space functions as a crucial factor in establishing power dynamics between the characters while revealing how dominant social scripts about class and race influence perception and behavior (Vuotovesi, 2020). In “We Are Not Free to Choose: Class Determinism in Smith's *NW*” (2016), Hui Wang displays how the wealthy are the ones who set the rules for the people of lower social class ranks to follow. Geographically, *NW* examines how the city shapes the main characters' perceptions, which is a partly spatial configuration of identity. In certain respects, it influences the characters' identity and the persona they decide to project.

3. Conclusion

As first-generation migrants try to adapt to the culture of their new country, they remain deeply nostalgic for their homeland. They pine for what they have left, including the geographical location as well as the friendly community and emotional ties they recall from their home country. Smith explores these themes with great nuance, often weaving them into her narrative. Her characters navigate their life with strong emotional bonds to place. Smith delves into the unique characteristics of each location that make them both unique and attractive as well as complex and unsettling. Her work makes a decisive literary contribution to

how people understand geographic issues of place, especially as they intersect with urban life, mobility, identity politics, and the everyday practices of experiencing place.

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