

**W**HY SHOULD geography be boring? It is so only for those who insist on relating it to the rote learning of capitals and place names, national products and exotic peoples, the longest rivers and the highest mountains. This kind of geography prepares you well for the blue cards in Trivial Pursuit, but little else.

Then there are the concerns of a more progressive and pragmatic geography, one trying valiantly to exercise a social conscience by focusing on

## Borders

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environmental problems and current affairs. In this geography, ecological, cultural and economic theories are applied to issues of how society organizes or disrupts its lived-in worlds. This is the geography of acid rain, the erosion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the rainforest, the pollution of rivers, lakes and seas. It is also the geography of population and resources, urban versus rural land use, of a developed First and Second World existing at the expense of an underdeveloped Third.

This kind of geography objectifies the world and lays it on a Procrustean bed of theory, analysis and explanation. So much, however, is left out. As in William Blake's solemn depiction of Urizen Creating The Universe, the compasses of knowledge cannot bound the infinite: they can only attempt to impose rational order on a material world by attempting to span it.

This is why we embrace another geography. For us, deeper understanding comes from looking closely at people in place, at ordinary women and ordinary men in their customary locales. People and place become a dualism that allows us to illuminate some of the processes that structure distinct cultures and societies. What is the meaning of place? Why do people experience place differently? How does place shape people? How do people shape place?

Our chosen title and metaphor, *Borders*, implies both subject and method. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a border may be any of the following: (1) a side, edge, brink, or margin; a limit or boundary; the part of anything lying along its boundary or outline; (2) the district lying along the edge of a country or territory, a frontier; (3) the boundary line which separates one country from another, the frontier line.

What better place to be than poised on a border? Being there allows us freedom and opportunity to move wherever curiosity dictates, to cross back and forth between one realm and another, to roam physically and intellectually, through time as well as through space.

One of our touchstones as professional geographers is that we recognize in the work of others a refined appreciation of the relationship between people and place. Northrop Frye, for instance, argues that artists are essentially "vegetable," that they have their roots in the piece of earth they paint or write about.

# Living places



William Blake's Urizen creating the universe with the compasses of knowledge

This can certainly be seen in the fiction of Latin American writers, several of whom excel in capturing the essence of their protagonists' engagement with place. The bustling, erotic Bahia of Brazilian storyteller Jorge Amado; the dark, troubled Guatemala of Nobel prizewinner Miguel Angel Asturias; or the eccentric, bewildering tropics of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The works of these three authors provide us with remarkable insight into the making of people and place.

For such writers, place is more than the stage upon which their characters develop their narratives. The landscape, rather, is a metaphor for the existential verities of living somewhere, of creating a home or belonging. In *Justine*, the first episode of his place-drenched *Alexandria Quartet*, Lawrence Durrell reflects: As a

poet of historic consciousness I suppose I am bound to see landscape as a field dominated by the human wish—tortured into farms, ploughed into cities. A landscape scribbled with the signatures of men and epochs. Now, however, I am beginning to believe that the wish is inherited from the site; that man depends for the furniture of the will upon his location in place, tenant of fruitful acres or a perverted wood. It is not the impact of his free will on nature which I see (as I thought) but the irresistible growth, through him, of nature's own blind unspecified doctrines of variation and torment. She has chosen this poor forked thing as an exemplar.

Film allows a more immediate access to place. The Second Kingston International Film Festival plays in town No-

vember 1 to 4, borrowing as one of its themes the title of the film *Black And White In Colour*. That particular film casts a geographer as its hero and pivotal dramatic figure, the person who keeps his cool (as well as his esteem for both European and non-European others) when his fellow countrymen buckle under pressure after France goes to war with Germany in the scrub and savannah of Africa.

Consider also the talents of Werner Herzog as director and Klaus Kinski as actor in *Aguirre: The Wrath Of God*, a powerful evocation of the ill-fated trek of Spanish conquistadors in their search for El Dorado during the conquest of Peru in the 16th century. Who, when watching *Dersu Uzala*, cannot be struck by Akira Kurosawa's moral meditation on the price native peoples pay for being in the way of progress and development? Similarly, the Glasgow and Glaswegians of Bill Forsyth's *Comfort And Joy* and Gregory's *Girl* don't just appear on the screen by accident. Both celluloid people and celluloid place mirror the real thing.

But never is it the real thing, nor can it be. No matter how powerful the metaphor, no matter how accurate the verisimilitude of image or word in communicating an awareness or sense of place, film and fiction only provide vicarious experiences of the world we live in. Neither medium can compare with our actual encounters in the field, geography through the soles of our feet. No armchair expert can expect to appreciate the nuance and variation of lived reality unless they are viewed in local context.

**T**HIS IS WHAT Barry Lopez, last year in *Harper's*, referred to as the "real geography." For him, this takes the form of an affinity that rests "with men and women more or less sworn to a place, who abide there, who have a feel for the soil and history." Essentially populist in philosophy and methodology, this approach requires the student of place to engage with people in the context of the material and psychic landscapes they have created. Lopez elaborates:

If I were now to visit another country, I would ask my local companion, before I saw any museum or library, any factory or fabled town, to walk me in the country of his or her youth, to tell me the name of things and how, traditionally, they have been fitted together in a community. I would ask for the stories, the voice of memory over the land. I would want first the sense of a real place, to know that I was not inhabiting an idea. I would want to know the lay of the land first, the real geography, and take some measure of the love of it in my companion before I stood before the paintings or read works of scholarship.

This is the kind of geography we will explore, turn by turn, in this column in the months ahead. For those readers still seeking help with the blue cards, we hope the pursuit will not prove trivial. Rather, we trust it may allow an enrichment and enjoyment of all our real geography. □

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