



**Ecologies of Belonging: Tracing Place, Precarity and
Environmental Justice in *Borderlands: Travels
Across India's Boundaries***

Renuka K* and Jenisha T†

Abstract

Space and place are more pivotal to people living in the borderlands than to mainland residents. These borderland people live in precarious landscapes, navigating blurred boundaries in their daily lives. Notably, they often exhibit 'a sense of preference' for these uncertain and liminal spaces. This essay will situate Pradeep Damodaran's travelogue *Borderlands: Travels Across India's Boundaries* (2017) along the lines of the emerging area of place attachment under 'Environmental Humanities' in the wake of a putative 'spatial turn' in arts and humanities discourse. Exploring the preference for precarious landscapes among borderlanders offers a unique platform for literature to engage with contemporary environmental issues, which have largely centered on the relatively stable mainland. Damodaran's work reveals that the border dwellers' attachment to the place is complex, politically charged, and deeply implicated in environmental justice. Despite living in a malleable landscape, they gain a sense of protection, and the value of preference seems to cluster around a topophilic preference for the borderlands, which emerge in distinctive ways. This research examines the aspect of 'place attachment' and also aims to argue that everyday practices such as residing in precarious geographies can function as tactical forms of resistance that subvert dominant spatial orders in society.

Keywords: Borderland, Place, Preference, Space, Topophilia.

* PhD Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Science, Department of English, Central University of Tamil Nadu

† PhD Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Science, Department of English, Central University of Tamil Nadu

Introduction

In 2005, Halttunen, in her presidential address to the American Studies Association, posited that “Space and place have never been more analytically important than they have recently become in the humanities and social sciences, demonstrating that globalisation – with its acceleration of border crossings – has made place more important, not less” (2). The advent of the spatial turn at the latter end of the twentieth century tended to re-emphasise the social nature of space. It demanded a movement away from seeing space as absolute, contained, static, and unchanged, but the concept of place was slowly abandoned. Extensive debates about space and place, their similarities and differences, have engaged scholars since the time of Aristotle. While some scholars have used ‘space’ and ‘place’ interchangeably in their writings, others, such as Edward Casey and Yi-Fu Tuan, who primarily focus on place, have clearly distinguished between them, particularly through their phenomenological and affective dimensions.

Casey has explored the confluence between place, identity, and placelessness, offering critical insights into the phenomenological and existential dimensions of being placed and unplaced. His notion of “placescapes” (25) and the function of lived or embodied experiences in transforming space into place is analogous to Tuan’s postulations, emphasising the notion that places are more than mere geographical locations. Furthermore, Casey also argues that the concept of place is concrete and inextricably linked to action and thought. Therefore, through his exposition, it can be understood that, although place is often relegated to a subordinate position beneath time and space, in everyday lived experience, it holds a central and indispensable role. “Place is a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals; and the same holds for the relationship between place and space,” for Casey (13). Thus, for him, place

is not a passive backdrop but is an active, generative force that shapes human experience, perception, and memory.

In *Getting Back into Place: Toward A Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Casey states, “Even when we are displaced, we continue to count upon some reliable place, if not our present precarious perch, then a place-to-come or a place-that-was” (ix). Further, he argues that “Being guarantees place. As a result, the idea of the void is voided out” (xi). This idea resonates in the context of borderland inhabitants who, despite being situated in precarious or marginal geographies, refute the notion of spatial void. Their tenacity in living and dwelling in the liminal zones reiterates Casey’s contention that being guarantees ‘place,’ that existence itself imbues space with meaning, thereby refuting dominant discourses that frame these lands as vacant, perilous, or contemptible of habitation. Here, Casey’s notion of being and place resonates with Tuan’s concept of topophilia, which examines how space converts into place through familiarity and emotional attachment.

Tuan looks at the human bond of place or topophilia in three ways: the ways in which humans respond to the environment, the familiarity and awareness of the past to topophilia, and the impact of urbanisation on the countryside. He also mentions that to understand one’s environmental preference, one should delve into the aspects of biological heritage, upbringing, education, job and, most importantly, the physical surroundings. When a group, on the whole, prefers a place, it is necessary to dissect the group’s cultural history. Thus, for Tuan, culture and environment overlap. He argues that while even the visitor might have a fleeting viewpoint, the native “has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment” (63). Topophilia differs greatly in intensity, subtlety and mode of expression. The most difficult feelings for Tuan to express are those of home since it is the locus of memories. While topophilia may not be one of the most intense emotions, it can carry

emotional events or be seen as a symbol when reinforced. While Casey touches upon the sensory dimensions of corporeal place, Tuan expands his concepts by exploring various ways of perceiving a place. Exercising this concept among people living on the borders of the Indian subcontinent, particularly, becomes an exciting task to undertake.

Between Nations, Beyond Logic: Precarious Preferences in Damodaran's Borderlands

Space and place are more significant to people living in the borderlands than to mainland residents. The early 21st century saw a spate of studies dismantling the conventional border definitions due to the number of migrants and refugees crossing the borders. While many traditional scholars think of borders as the line of physical contact between nations, Wastl-Walter delineates that borderlands are creative and functional spaces that aid people on the border in developing specific cross-border economic, social, and cultural activities, which at the same time can also be perceived as a peripheral space characterised by a geographical marginality, the limited presence of state institutions, large proportions of Indigenous populations or ethnic minorities, and a weak socioeconomic structure (373). Thanachate Wisaijorn interprets the border as an in-between zone where two cultural territories intersect and form a single unit, which he terms the “borderland” (58). The heart of the discussion among border scholars is to argue that they become a territorial, dislocated, displaced entity and can be found in-between and everywhere. The notion that borders no longer have demarcated lines and can be found ‘everywhere’ has been widely explored in scholarship (Balibar; Balibar et al.; Konrad and Brunet-Jailly; Shachar). Only recently have articles challenging this notion by reintroducing the spatial dimension to border theory begun to appear (especially in the work of Peña). The renaissance of space brought concepts such as diverse notions of space, including spaces of place, non-places,

relational space, spaces of flows, striated space, smooth space, and liminal space, to the forefront. Yet, much of the scholarship above, largely conducted by geographers and humanists, focuses on urban landscapes, thereby virtually erasing or diminishing the presence of borderlands and their inhabitants. Hence, rather than imposing or duplicating the concepts derived from the mainland on borderlands, learning the nuanced “tactical” and everyday life practices is needed than the dominant “strategic” (De Certeau xix).

While place as a concept has been analysed and widely published in many areas, including environmental psychology, sociology, community psychology, human geography, and cultural anthropology, the idea is still nascent when it comes to borderland as a domain under travel literature. With the publication of works like *Gazing at Neighbours: Travels Along the Lines that Partitioned India* by Bishwanath Ghosh and *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India* by Suchitra Vijayan, Indian travel writing has seen the emergence of what may be called “border travelogues.” This essay will situate Pradeep Damodaran’s travelogue *Borderlands: Travels Across India's Boundaries* in the wake of a putative ‘spatial turn’ in arts and humanities discourse by analysing the stories of people who live on the fringes. Among the travel books about India, Damodaran’s book is a unique collection of stories about people living on the borderlands. The book was the result of his extensive travels across India’s boundaries over 18 months between 2015 and 2016, and it was shortlisted for the 15th Raymond Crossword Book Award in the non-fiction category. His travel to the borderlands, living amongst them and collecting their stories, is an archival oddity, especially considering the Indian subcontinent’s diverse landscape, from sharing borders with countries to an island that marks the end of the nation. He presents an intriguing description of the residents of ten tranquil towns, lonely villages, and pristine islands, which stand or are positioned on the edges of Indian territory. Through his

encounters with the inhabitants, it is made clear that these regions often share deeper socio-cultural and linguistic ties with neighbouring countries than with their motherland, India. Damodaran mulls over in his preface that, in his imagination, the boundaries of a nation were inhabited by people who preferred to lead free lives on the fringes, unhindered by the border regulations or societal obligations of a particular nation, with the choice of walking/swimming over to other countries whenever the urge struck them. His observation essentially implies that the places far away from our own should be virginal and removed from the troubles of the mainland, making these destination spots for the general populace of India.

Curiously, when Damodaran visits ten such sites (a village or even an island), a pattern emerges: people complain about living on the fringes, and they still thrive there despite the odds. The reader is left baffled after almost every story narrated by the borderlander, whom we deem a spectral presence. Damodaran's "trivial, often mundane observations that reveal the identity of a place in subtle ways" (Pati and Longkumer 3–4) raise an important question: Why do they resent the place and continue to live there? To this end, the present research analyses why people choose to rebuild their homes in the exact location where they had experienced contemporary environmental issues such as habitat loss and severe weather changes. It also seeks to answer the question of why people remain in relatively underdeveloped and isolated villages with limited employment prospects, even after attaining higher education, by analysing the factors that entice people to live in places bound by spatial-temporal constraints. This study focuses on the affective attachment humans have towards a place that deplores logic through Tuan's concept of *Topophilia*.

Despite living in a malleable landscape, the borderlanders gain a sense of protection, and the value of preference seems to cluster around a 'topophilic' preference for the land and do

justice to the place. Exploring the preference for precarious landscapes among borderlanders offers a unique platform for literature to engage with contemporary environmental issues, which have largely centered on the relatively stable mainland, especially significant given that these regions are already marked by geopolitical precarity and now face the added burden of ecological vulnerability. Subsequently, this paper will analyse such selections from Damodaran's book, exploring their 'sense of preference' for dwellings facing environmental crises and trace the topophilic sentiment, a fortiori, that sustains them. It also argues that by choosing to stay in the noxious regions, borderlanders engage in a form of resistance, an essential subterfuge against standard ideals.

Tracing the Topophilic Sentiment in Precarious Landscapes

Dhanushkodi

Although modern weather forecasting systems can be useful in anticipating cyclones, they cannot be controlled. The multiplicity of factors, ranging from speed, pressure, and humidity, is just a few of the factors that control their landfall. Their end can be catastrophic at times, which reminds humans of their minuscule presence. "“You do believe me now, don't you?” my guide went on. ‘A place like this exists in 21st century Tamil Nadu’” (Damodaran 7). Nothing has changed for the people of Dhanushkodi in Tamil Nadu since the deadly cyclone in 1964. The place had been left to rot while the rest of the state had seen much progress. The place has the barest minimum of the basic necessities that we take for granted – electricity, food, healthcare, and education. They defer buying milk packets because they have no electricity for a refrigerator. Thus, it is unsurprising that a stranger's presence (Damodaran's visit) is a spectacle among the residents who crowd to stare at him. But the place was once booming and well-connected by road and rail until the devastating 1964 cyclone. Following the 1964

cyclone's devastation of the entire area, the then-state government declared Dhanushkodi unsafe for permanent habitation. Even though the government allotted new land for them, several fishermen relocated to their ancestral town of Dhanushkodi and continued to live there with their kids. Damodaran notes that, apart from being their ancestral home, the place is situated at the confluence of two oceans, making it a lucrative fishing spot. The people of Dhanushkodi, who have known one place and one job all their lives, do not worry about isolation. The act of relocating even after the catastrophe and the lingering presence of impending danger anytime, some 250 families of people shifted back after living in shelters for a short time because Dhanushkodi is their home, guaranteeing their being.

Apart from the cyclone, political issues too have contributed to the insolation of the region. The roads, which were wide enough to have full-fledged bus services, are now abandoned after the civil war broke out between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lankan authorities. Given the proximity of Dhanushkodi to Sri Lanka, the area has suffered significantly, and most of the 250 families do not possess a ration card and have been neglected by successive governments. On the other hand, the place still grapples with a precarious environment. Damodaran recounts the story of how he was overcome by a sudden, fierce depression when he visited Arichal Munai, the extreme point of Indian soil closest to Sri Lanka, technically the borderland. Visiting the place early in the morning, along with this local guide, what seemed to be a stillness before dawn broke into a squall. As he and his local guide ran for cover, the guide warned that the shifting sands beneath them might disappear, leaving them stranded. But just as quickly as it arrived, the storm passed, revealing a calm sea and the rising sun. This incident underscores for both Damodaran and his guide the inherent unpredictability of the region. However, upon their return, they observe the town

resuming its daily rhythms, with fishermen casting their nets and life unfolding as usual. The acceptance and integration of seasonal or devastating cyclones typical of their region have enabled the community to live with them.

Bachelard describes home as our “first universe” (4), a microcosm where we find security and familiarity. Even when disconnected from global affairs, individuals derive solace from their homes, transforming this intimate space into their entire universe. In this sense, the home becomes synonymous with one’s perception of the wider world, offering a profound sense of belonging and continuity, which is visible in the inhabitant’s narration. Even though the lament of the resident is ubiquitous throughout Damodaran’s book, one can decipher after reading a few pages that the resident’s outcry is only a call for a better quality of life, not a protest against the place. An elderly tea shop owner keeps his shop open only for his familiar, long-time customers, still rising early each day to serve tea to the fishermen, for whom his shop marks the first stop before their long day at sea. If he does not wake up and get his shop ready, a significant part of their routine will collapse because his shop is the only one for the entire community. Even though the tea shop owner comments to Damodaran that running a tea shop is like being in jail, he continues to wake up before even the fishermen.

As Chrystopher J. Spicer writes, “Storytellers continue to reveal and re-affirm relationships between the catastrophe and the community, between their place and their culture” (13). The communal cohesiveness of Dhanushkodi, the last land of India, is an indication of the regional love that the community shares, a story of a catastrophe that they met with resilience and tenacity, and came back to their original place. The incessant roar of the waves and the turbulent gusts of wind are the constant companions for these families, but they alone find solitude from them. The story of 1964 is a tale that tested their spirits, one that later became a shared reality. Sharing the same trauma and chaos

might unite people around a cause that celebrates uniqueness and individuality, making them different from those who do not. However, these people return to clear the ruins and rebuild their lives in the place they know. The residents embrace the primordial abode, appreciating the humdrum routine, and prefer to live in the isolated land while patiently waiting for the government to notice them. The sense of familiarity felt by these people is a highly complex one, especially after their homes were ravaged by the cyclone and they returned to build from scratch. The reluctance to part with old ways is akin to some people's attachment to an old slipper or worn-out dress. Hence, Dhanushkodi becomes a preferred place, protecting them from the bewilderment of the outside world and offering them a sense of comfort that no other place can possibly provide.

Minicoy

Islands signify a small tract of land surrounded by water, which makes them detached from the mainland. The general assumption that islands are defined by their isolation, offering them as "natural laboratories" (Quamman 18), has been disproven by many scholars. Elizabeth Deloughrey also argues that tropical islands, as an isolated and ahistorical space separated from world-making, were an intrinsic aspect of British colonial ideology (305). It is thus surprising that Tuan, who is renowned for his works on environment and topophilia, imprisons the island in an imaginative realm:

Unlike the tropical forest or the continental seashore [the island] cannot claim ecological abundance, nor—as an environment—has it mattered greatly in man's evolutionary past. Its importance lies in the imaginative realm.... In numerous legends the island appears as the abode of the dead or of immortals. Above all, it symbolizes a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss,

quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent.
(118)

Tuan fails to capture the significance of the island as a lived environment, one where humans can belong. By drawing on evolutionary history and mythology to support his point, it appears that he has undermined his concept of topophilia by overlooking the people who live on islands. By claiming that islands exist only in the imaginative sphere, he compromises the sense of place of islanders. While numerous pieces of literature exist on islands being the place for castaways, exiles and even prisoners and have been a source of inspiration for many writers, as Massey rightly points out, any given place can still have a character of its own (153). Tuan, at the beginning of the chapter titled “Environment and Topophilia,” writes that certain environments can provide the necessary stimuli for humans to perceive topophilic feelings, and these sensory stimuli are infinite (113). While he regards the seashore and the valley as great stimulators, he confines the island to the human imagination, viewing it as a temporary escape from the high-pressure environment on the continent (120). It is thus highly likely that in his romanticised depiction of islands, Tuan overlooks the lived experiences of islanders themselves. It is, hence, coherent to derive the same reasons that Tuan lists as the descriptors of an island – a dearth of ecological wealth and seclusion from the pretentiousness of city life helps the islanders, as a community (spatially bound), to sustain and thrive, as is visible in the story of Minicoy.

Minicoy, a spatially isolated island, has been a part of India’s neglected history. This is visible in a local resident’s recollection that many Minicoy natives were unaware of India’s independence from British rule until 1951. Administratively, it is a census town in the Indian union territory of Lakshadweep. According to the 2011 Indian census, the island of Minicoy had a population of 10,447. The island is blanketed with coconut

trees, and naturally, the coconut business seemed lucrative. However, the indifference of successive governments toward promoting the local industry has led the islanders to buy even coir ropes from the mainland. Lately, the only popular profession is studying to become a sailor and waiting for a call from a shipping company. Despite receiving little to no support from the mainland, the people of Minicoy have successfully created a self-sustaining community and take pride in being the largest contributors of sailors to the Indian Navy.

Hassan, a Minicoy resident, claims that the entire community flocks to help those in need. These lines witness the spirit of community quarantined by the sea: “Nobody in this island is ever alone or homeless people” (Damodaran 55). Although officials complain that islanders feign illness to obtain permits and visit the mainland, they often resort to sightseeing and aimless roaming. The mainland is, for them, a tourist destination to observe the ills of the continent. “We don’t ever consider leaving our island because here, we are one close family,” Hassan declared, reiterating their unity, while Nizam nodded in agreement, “It is our great asset. Elsewhere, I would have had to struggle for a living alone, with no support whatsoever from the community” (Damodaran 56).

Essentially, they have cultivated a sense of place and identity, ultimately achieving contentment with their delicate circumstances. The lack of natural luxuriance kindles the enterprising spirit in the islanders, who learn to respect their immediate environment and make use of it judiciously. They have created a story there, and the spatial imprisonment does not seem to be an issue, as they prefer the island over the mainland. The ability to call the entire island a family showcases the recondite affair of their ‘sense of preference’ and uncovers the topophilic sentiment among the inhabitants who consider the island their greatest shared asset. Although they share a collective bond, it is, in fact, the particular experiences and

singular happenings that consolidate the sense of belonging, resulting in preference.

Campbell Bay

“Those ten years of our life were completely wasted,” recalls Shankar, one of the surviving residents of Campbell Bay in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, after the devastating tsunami of 2004. A National Geographic publication on the Indian Ocean Tsunami notes that the “earthquake in the ocean triggered tsunami waves that raced towards the shores of a dozen countries along the Indian Ocean. Some locales were struck by waves 110 feet tall – the height of an 11-story building” (Fradin et al. 92). Damodaran also notes how the residents were unaware of the word tsunami before the tragedy struck. Until 2004, the residents of Campbell lived peacefully in a lush green environment, with the place blessed with natural abundance. While some people left for the mainland after the tsunami destroyed everything they knew, many returned to their homes after enduring hardships in the shelter bases. When Damodaran visited the place, the residents were conducting and organising meetings to rebuild the place, but as Shankar notes, there is not much they can do without the government’s help. These are the same people whose playtime involved little hunting trips, fishing in the freshwater, and playing hide and seek in the forest. For the children of Campbell Bay, the forest was their companion, their playmate, but the tsunami took them away. By rebuilding the same place, the people want their children to enjoy the same merriment of forests, lakes, beaches and sea without any fear, “seeing it as a creature of destruction but also a source of nourishment” (Rastogi 144). The tsunami, as always, is headlined around the world as taking place on a particular date is not just a temporal event. It is essential to recognise it as an unfinished story rather than considering it as a singular event that has occurred. As William Wright notes, “things do not go

‘back to normal,’ but rather what is considered normal, ordinary and part of the everyday fundamentally changes” (6).

An interesting form of tophophilia lingers in some of the older residents of Campbell Bay. While we have seen so far that people attached to these borderlands are natives, around 300 families migrated from the mainland to Campbell Bay under the Indira Gandhi-led government. The then-government’s resettlement policy offered them land, money to build their homes, vessels, furniture, livestock, and even free rations. These families tilled and worked on the land, and started seeing the results of their labour. While this was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the residents, after surviving the tsunami that had taken away everything, raised a rather simple question: “What is left there for us to return to?” (Damodaran 373), referring not to the tsunami-ravaged lands but to the mainland. These older residents came to Campbell in their younger days, worked hard, and created a family in an ecosystem that has become a part of their lives; thus, the idea of returning to the mainland for a better life seems an alien concept. The neglect of the successive governments towards Campbell Bay is evident in many of the residents’ stories, whose narration makes the tsunami the centerpiece. For the residents, life before and after the tsunami represents a profound turning point, marking not just a moment in history but a deeply personal narrative of loss, resilience, and strong community-building. Their children, who grew up in a pristine environment, eating nature’s offerings, also do not wish to go to the mainland and find it “suffocating” (Damodaran 372). The politics, communal disharmony riots, traffic and pollution are all non-native concepts on an island like Campbell Bay, where people from multiple communities and religions co-exist and identify themselves as one group. Yet, there is a lack of viable transportation facilities for even residents like Sephal Majumdar, a beach lifeguard at Campbell Bay, whose only son secured a spot at a prestigious residential school on Car Nicobar Island but fell ill in the first month. Sephal could not meet his

son for a week since there were no ships or helicopters available to go to Car Nicobar. His vivid recollection of this incident serves as a call for improved infrastructure in the area that was devastated by a historic tsunami. With a sense of belonging, all these residents prefer Campbell Bay and long for a better quality of life in their homeland.

Conclusion

While topophilia fuses space and time, the debate over which of the abstractions takes precedence is hard labour, as the range and intensity of the feeling takes the fulcrum. The inhabitant is not an impassioned entity but rather a subject intimately tied to the place. They live in spaces that they have made meaningful themselves. They are all spaces to which people are attached in one way or another. Although the people have their share of tragedies from living on the outskirts, the connectedness to the place they live, where they find their space, is firmly ingrained. The argument developed thus far seems to be captured in its entirety in Tawang, an extremely cold border town in Arunachal Pradesh when Damodaran asks a resident ““Why would an educated young man live in a godforsaken place like Tawang, which can barely manage four or five hours of electricity every day and lies a good fifteen hours away by road from the nearest railway station or airport?”” (Damodaran 230). The young man replies he did try living on the mainland for a while, but he was not happy and moved back to Tawang, where he feels the comfort of a home (Damodaran 231).

The borderlanders from Dhanushkodi, Minicoy, Campbell Bay and Tawang choose to stay in the peripheral geographies that are consistently threatened by ecological degradation, cyclones, and governmental neglect, depicting their defiant attachment to place, challenging the urge for relocation and the dominant logic of disposability that often renders such regions invisible in the national consciousness. This act of ‘staying put’

challenges the dominant state narrative that frequently renders borderlands as peripheral, insecure, or expendable zones requiring surveillance, militarisation, or abandonment (Jones 126–45). As scholars like Michel de Certeau argue, everyday practices such as residing in precarious geographies can function as tactical forms of resistance that subvert dominant spatial orders in society (xix). Likewise, Eyal Weizman expounds how spatial politics, particularly in conflict zones, operate through the control and reconfiguration of land, yet the people who remain assert a counter-claim to space and belonging (7–9). Their persistent presence transforms into a kind of daily resistance, where sustaining in the same place is not only necessary but also an attempt to demonstrate one's identity, sense of belonging, and historical continuity. Even as authority produces space by cutting it up, differentiating between parcels of space, and abusing borders and markers, these communities resist the logic of fragmentation by embodying a continuity of presence (Pile and Keith 3). Moreover, Razack argues that peripheral geographies often become repositories of resistance precisely because they challenge spatial technologies of domination that seek to control movement and visibility (158). Thus, the borderlanders, through their embodied practices of endurance and emplacement, reconfigure these spaces not as voids but as lived geographies that defy state-imposed meanings of disposability and marginality.

Place, according to Massey, is a synthesis of space and time, essentially to be seen “as spatio-temporal events” (130). Criticising the time-space compression concept, she calls for a progressive sense of place where factors apart from capital are also taken into account, since not all social groups are equally placed in the power geometry. While space and time are coterminous to aid one in developing a sense of preference for a place, it seems that for Borderlanders (if we call them a

community), this sentiment towards a place is not reactionary due to their sense of dislocation from the mainland but is to be located among the kernel of uniqueness that is parroted in the story of every borderland. Rather than recognising places as areas bounded by boundaries, it might be helpful to think of them as articulated moments within networks of social relations and understandings. Thus, on a wider scale, this act of recognition makes the Borderlanders witness their place not as mere lines drawn on maps but as places capable of simultaneously orchestrating the conventional system of spatial dividers—by linking them with other places—and also developing a sense of preference towards them amongst the chaos and disorder internally.

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