Absent Spaces

Ranjit Singh and Bart Zwegers

Introduction

> Dislodged from her lifelong home by April's nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Anastasia Remizenko, 73, stood in the yard of her new house here, pining for an elusive warmth. . . . "I miss the old wood stove where I used to curl up at night. These houses don't have them. . . . They are warm, but it's not the same thing."[1]

On April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded near the city of Pripyat, Ukraine, dispersing enormous quantities of radioactive material into the atmosphere. In the aftermath of this disaster 135,000 people in an eighteen-mile radius from the plant were evacuated, most of them never to return.

Over a number of revisions that we have done of our understanding of this technological disaster, we realized that our essay should begin with a faint memory of our conversation on the memories of the disaster's victims. Over the span of the discussion we concluded that, "Time is topological." There is a certain innate freedom in stating a claim before trying to prove it. As a reader, one can create possibilities of understanding the statement in ways that might turn out to be entirely

different from the original intention of the authors. We would certainly like to invite more interpretations of this claim, but in the context of this essay we wish to explore it along the conceptualization of spaces emanating from a place. Drawing inspiration from the work of Edward Relph[2], in this analysis *place* has the connotations of a geographical location while *spaces* are the perceived emotional contours along which such a place is rationalized and experienced. Here we are not arguing that places don't have meaning and value, instead we are arguing that this meaning and value attached to places can also be substantiated by the spaces created around them. Time as a construct remains embedded within this conceptualization of space. Spaces subsist on time, sometimes as memory of the past in a place, sometimes as lifeworld[3] of the present and sometimes as a possibility for the future. Hence, the experience of time is shaped by the experience of a place as spaces.

Responding to debates around globalization, the idea of place has become increasingly popular, notably in anthropology and geography. It is generally recognized that there is a particular strength in places as tools to foster identity, because their physicality forms the tangible evidence for identity and territorial claims. The tangibility of a place creates the sense that the memories attached to it are immutable and justifies politicized forms of identity formation. However, neither places nor the values and meanings attached to them are unchangeable. In fact, places constantly change and their supposedly fixed value and meaning are subjected to continuing negotiation. The physicality of a place not only forms "a physical anchor or geographical sense of belonging, but also allows us to negotiate a sense of social 'place' or class/community identity, and a cultural place or sense of belonging."[4] The question that we want to raise in this essay is what happens to people's identity and sense of belonging when the place they associate with themselves has become uninhabitable. Is being in a fixed place necessary to create a sense of community?

Since we have established that places are experienced as spaces, we will explore how the nature of such spaces change in the absence of the place from which they originate. We are interested in the narratives of victimhood emanating from memories of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the removal of Pripyat as a place from the lifeworld of the evacuees with the subsequent creation of the Zone of Alienation[4] Alienation[5] around the city. We are interested in the case of Pripyat, because of the unique narrative of victimhood that evolved around it. Unlike the disasters in Nagasaki, Hiroshima or Bhopal, the victims of Chernobyl express narratives of displacement more prominently than narratives of

destruction. The inability to return to Pripyat is the central theme around which this community of victims is built. These evacuees have experienced and expressed a phenomenon that we have come to call *absent spaces*. We understand absent spaces as perceived emotional contours of memories along which the absence of the place is rationalized and experienced.

Georges Perec conceptualizes space along with emotional contours of memories of stability, when he writes that, "I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted, places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin. Such spaces don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self evident. Space is a doubt; I have constantly to mark it to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to create it."[6] His conceptualization of space is an abstract notion that realizes a specific, yet ambiguous and poorly defined, normative goal of stability. In the context of this essay, Pripyat offers a unique contradiction to Perec's analysis of places. Pripyat has become a point of departure or origin to which the evacuees are forbidden to return. The disaster that made Pripyat unchanging and almost untouchable—because of the absence of human interference in present times—also made Pripyat into a memory of stability that evacuees do not experience in the years that followed the disaster.

However, stability is only one aspect of this experience. Perec's analysis of places works equally well for an analysis of memories. In a manner quite similar to our experience of places, we would also like there to exist memories that are stable and deep-rooted, memories that become points of reference, of departure and of origin, but even memories become in doubt with the passage of time. Memories are continuously revised, reinterpreted and represented in the context of the present lifeworld of any person. Hence, absent spaces enable an understanding of memory as a doubt and a continuously evolving experience by designating an unchanging place as the point of origin of these memories.

Narratives of Victimhood

In the case of the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, Pripyat offers an anchor—tangible evidence—that, once, they were normal people. Pripyat becomes an aggregation of dreams because it represents the normalcy of victims' former lives. After their evacuation, the identity of the victims becomes centered on their inability to return to that state of normalcy.

The role of place in fostering identity has been a subject of continuous debate within academia. Many scholars have argued that place is no longer relevant in our globalized world and have tried to de-emphasize the idea. However, in recent times, the significance of place for the (re)creation of identity is increasingly being stressed. The importance of actually *being* in a place has also been emphasized by numerous authors. For example, Edward Casey argues that "there is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it."[7] Tim Richardson and Ole Jensen claim that an acknowledgement of the act of *being* in a place and experiencing it with the full range of bodily senses is crucial to the sense of place.[8] This is to say that meanings and memories of past communal experiences are remembered through contemporary interaction with physical places. Through these interactions, the meaning, value, and significance attributed to a particular place changes.[9] Hence, the interpretation of the communal past subtly alters with each encounter between a place and the people who associate themselves with it. In the evacuation zone of Pripyat, however, such encounters are impossible, and the recreation of communal memories happens through alternative mechanisms, such as commemoration ceremonies and the creation of online forums such as the public project of pripyat.com.[10] The notion of place, as an absent space, becomes the essence that drives the communities created around these mechanisms. In this case, the community identity no longer revolves around the place as such, but around the community's shared burden of being displaced from it.

The public project of pripyat.com has been created "by former Pripyat inhabitants as an unofficial site of Pripyat. Nowadays it [has] turned into the world's biggest online community on Chernobyl disaster. [They] understand the great importance of this city for future generations, and [it's] helplessness. Therefore, [they] struggle to [ensure that] Pripyat [is] considered as a museum city and placed under guard."[11] This treatment of Pripyat as a museum city itself expresses the desire of the victims for the city to remain stable, unmoving, unchanging, and preserved.

There is an innate sense of the burden of memories that permeates the experience of exploring this website. The website offers an aggregation of news articles, other assorted publications, photographs, literature, and art surrounding the Chernobyl disaster, information on people and their fates, and a link to the National Museum "Chernobyl" which has about 7,000 artifacts—"declassified documents, maps, photos, sights of folk culture of the Ukrainian Polesie"[12]—on the left sidebar of the Homepage.

Pripyat.com also provides a current bi-weekly assessment of radiation readings of different sections of the city. While these links themselves offer a rich source of information for a discourse analysis on the different kinds of narratives of victimhood emanating from the disaster, we will specifically address the nature of different kinds of memories that the website evokes. For example, the cityscape of Pripyat used in the header of the website persists through the experience of exploring its content. It is an unchanging reminder of the physicality of the place that still exists but is almost untouchable. The memories of the victims associated with Pripyat need the validation of the cityscape for them to be tangible.

The footer of the Homepage offers two sections that showcase a thriving forum[13] of Chernobyl victims and the address book of the Chernobyl Zone advertised as "Virtual Pripyat."[14] The address book is a "service for those who seek friends, loved ones, living or previously involved in the LPA [*Likvidatsiya posledstvii avarii* or Liquidation of the Consequences of the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station] on the territory of the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation."[15] This section currently showcases a message by Vladimir Y. Malyshev, who writes that, "I'm looking for the colleagues-liquidators of the Engineering Battalion (a/h 36 826), location - Stechanka village. I served myself from November 86 till the end of February 87 in the position of Head of Service of petroleum battalion."[16] The physicality of a place offers a tangible validation for the doubts that memories leave as they are shaped by the lifeworld of the present. In the absence of the place, memories feed on validation from conversations. Memory as a doubt in absent spaces needs a community of people that offers to listen.

We can locate this need as we explore the bulletin board[17] within the address book of this "Virtual Pripyat," where messages left by the last inhabitants are represented as scraps of notes addressed to each other, trying to recreate a lost community. The top of the left-hand sidebar offers hope: "Everyone will be found! :)"[18] We find snippets of the stories of victims who are trying to find their classmates, fellow liquidators, old love interests or simply anybody who can recognize them from their old photographs. These relationships are essential to the validation of memories that have become doubtful with the passage of time.

The collection of websites that pripyat.com offers is an attempt at giving a sense of closure to the story of victimhood surrounding Chernobyl. Any notion of normalcy or status demands its rituals of storytelling. With the address book and forum, pripyat.com digitalizes these rituals for its community. Every life as a story demands closure, whatever the variety of

interpretations, and every life is connected to places and the people that surround it as a source of its identity. Victimhood as a state of being is an incomplete, aborted story. Order is not restored. Justice is not complete. It is a perpetual disruption of expected narratives. A sense of expectations is distorted. Personhood, which biographically demands a collection of stories and the availability of timetables, is thwarted. Time becomes fundamental to the idea of narrativity. The past becomes a perpetual burden on the present, and in the absence of the place, displacement becomes the narrative wherein the past overshadows the present. Closure in this context would be a replacement of the physicality of the place by a space that allows the community that belonged to that place to thrive and survive. Nevertheless, it seems that such a replacement cannot be completely actualized and this, to a certain extent, explains the option of registering for trips to the Chernobyl Zone and the city of Pripyat on the left-hand sidebar of pripyat.com. These tours seem to be a way of experiencing Pripyat as a physical place to strengthen the sense of loss that defines the identity of this community.

Conclusion: Remembering Places

This essay should be seen as a first attempt at conceptualizing the role of absent spaces in creating the identity of a community. Places have a way of capturing imaginations, and no matter how many alternative, intangible carriers of memory may be conceived, experiencing a place with a full range of bodily senses seems fundamental to the creation of spaces and memories around places. Hence, we think that the future of research around absent spaces should be focused on exploring to what extent virtual spaces can replace the physicality of a place.

Revisiting our original claim, it can be observed that time as a construct being experienced by these victims is in a state of liminality—in between the everydayness of the present and the romanticized and remembered past. While Pripyat might not have people living in it anymore, it is still very much a part of the lived experience of its former inhabitants that is projected onto the present to create narratives of victimhood. Time, for these evacuees, is stuck somewhere in between, as the absent space of Pripyat takes over the experience of any other spaces that their rehabilitation has offered. The communal identity of these victims is still based on the burden of displacement, instead of being rationalized in spaces offered by rehabilitation.

Any act of remembering is essentially a storytelling exercise. The past events become the subject matter of the present story of the victim. The

story of the memory of a place doesn't necessarily need immersion of the senses into that place. The absence of that place can be an equally strong motivation. The lived experience of the place in the past is enough to romanticize it, creating the sense of loss that rationalizes victimhood. The relationship between space, memory, and identity is intertwined in the story of the victim. As place becomes estranged, the identity of the victim becomes embedded in the memory of the stability that that place offered. As a few victims who returned illegally to the places from which they were evacuated said to Svetlana Alexievich, who has documented the oral history of this disaster, "No one's going to fool us anymore, we're not moving anywhere. There's no store, no hospital. No electricity. We sit next to a kerosene lamp and under the moonlight. And we like it! Because we're home."[19]

Notes

1   Gary Lee, "Chernobyl Evacuees Long For Homes They Left Behind; Effects of Accident Linger in Region," *The Washington Post*, 14 December 1986.
2   Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).
3   Lifeworld is defined as a grand theatre of objects variously arranged in space and time relative to perceiving subjects, which is already-always there, and is the "ground" for all shared human experience. For detailed analysis, see Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1936).
4   Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75.
5   The Zone of Alien*ation is still c*ontaminated by radiation and is administered by a special administration under the Ukrainian Ministry of Emergencies. Thousands of residents refused to be evacuated from the zone or illegally returned there later. After several attempts at expulsion, the authorities have now reconciled with their presence and even allowed limited supporting services for them. Articles and information on the present life of some of the inhabitants of the Zone of Alienation can be accessed from the public project of pripyat.com established in 2004 as an unofficial website of the city of Pripyat.
    Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "People and Fates" 2004, accessed January 19, 2012, pripyat.com/en/people-and-fates
    Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Virtual Pripyat: Address book of Chernobyl Exclusion Zone," 2006, accessed January 19, 2012, addyour.name/.

6 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, John Sturrock, ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 90–91.
7 Edward Casey, "How to get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena," in *Senses of Place,* ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press), 18.
8 Tim Richardson Tim, and Ole B. Jensen, "Linking discourse and space: Towards a cultural sociology of space in analysing spatial policy discourses," *Urban Studies*, 40, no. 1, (2003): 7–22.
9 Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.
10 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Welcome to Pripyat!" 2004, accessed January 19, 2012, pripyat.com/en.
11 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Welcome to Pripyat!"
12 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Museum 'Chernobyl,'" accessed January 19, 2012, pripyat.com/en/museum.html.
13 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Forum of Pripyat", accessed January 19, 2012, forum.pripyat.com.
14 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Virtual Pripyat: Address book of Chernobyl Exclusion Zone," 2006, accessed January 19, 2012, addyour.name/.
15 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Welcome to Pripyat!"
16 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Welcome to Pripyat!"
17 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Bulletin Board", accessed January 19, 2012, addyour.name/bulleten_board.php?lang=en.
18 Public Project PRIPYAT.com. "Virtual Pripyat."
19 Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Picador, 2006), 41.

Ranjit Singh and Bart Zwegers are currently employed at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, The Netherlands. While Ranjit works in the Department of Technology and Society Studies, Bart is affiliated with the Department of History. Both of them have recently finished their Research Masters degree in Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology (CAST) from Maastricht University.