

Jamie Marina Lau

Non-self and non-place

To me, the question of writing the non-self is not whether to do it but how to approach it. As writers, we naturally tilt between the parts of ourselves that we recognize and the parts of ourselves that we don't — before we try to locate how these parts manifest differently in others too.

My idea of writing the non-self has always been informed by my writing of non-places. My novels have never really taken place anywhere in particular: 'non-places', as Marc Augé coined, are super-modern generically transient spaces where the individual experiences a sort of anonymity.

Since beginning to write as a teenager, I had never felt the authority to write any of the exact locations I had occupied, any of the exact locations my ancestors occupied. Maybe I was more interested in how we experienced space differently or just the fact that I felt no particular attachment or belonging to them. Because my family moved around a lot when I was a child, I might have been prone to focus on how we put-up and take-down new spaces around us. My last book focused partly on furniture, branding, and transplanting flora. I wrote about the homes we create, like a second skin we keep shedding.

I wonder if I write non-places and have relationships with space like this because I come from a family of nomads. Three lineages of my family look blurry, there's no objective evidence of stable dwelling. And so, I think about how the experience of belonging, how the regular perception of 'self', mutated to match new environments.

Growing up, these were probably the behaviors I had observed most:

The mannerisms of a temporary person.

One who does not feel entitled to the space around them.

I like to think about the symbiosis of reaction and performance. One whose movements are timid and overcompensating. But most of all, one who is performative. As Kim Kardashian once said, 'I play into the perception of me, but it's not really me.'

This is the nucleus of a lot of my writing. I write characters via the teeth that wriggle in their mouth. I write characters who watch other characters, imitate them, and steal the words from another's lips, who watch the facial expressions of others, then readjusts theirs.

So, many of my characters do not feel like they belong in the spaces they inhabit — and by writing the non-place, I tend to explore how some of these characters do not even feel like they can belong in their bodies. Even if they are succeeding in playing a person who does, the tiny hints which suggest they still don't are in the way that their eyes shift side to side or the temptation to slightly clench their fists.

There are varying degrees to which a person belongs; and can find a 'self' amidst particular spaces.

I like to explore this by omitting direct descriptions of characters' appearances. Instead, I emphasize on the reactions toward them. Sometimes, people feel their own belonging by making others not belong. Tactics

for this are more subtle these days. A lot of the time, the ones who have had to think about these subtleties, these small acts of violence — are also the ones who have inherited this hyper-awareness from their parents and ancestors. This hyper-awareness says everything about a character in a book. It's my personal way of exploring and trying to understand the varying degrees to which we feel safe, belonging — what informs various dimensions of the 'self'.

I think a lot about how to write performance; it is a form of non-self that makes up so much of us. It seems to keep us safe: the many versions of the 'self' we gather. Writing characters that move this way is always interesting because they seem unreliable. A lot of the time, the world doesn't teach you how to be; it teaches you how to act. Sebene Selassie has a great quote; she says: "We are not separate from each other. But we don't always believe it, and we certainly don't always practice it. In fact, we often practice the opposite — disconnection and domination." So, a new question to explore is: the practice of these versions of non-self or self — how do we regulate them, and how does it affect others?