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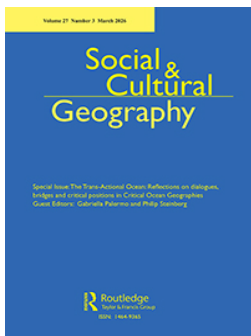
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What happened to the progressive sense of place? Exploratory place writing from Kilburn to Neukölln

Richard Phillips

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What happened to the progressive sense of place? Exploratory place writing from Kilburn to Neukölln

Richard Phillips

School of Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper opens a window on global culture and place in the twenty-first century. It does so through exploratory place writing, a diverse field of geographical literature that observes and documents places through media as varied as essays, poetry, lists and novels. This paper reads a contemporary example of exploratory urban place writing – Vincenzo Latronico's *Perfection*, a novel about millennials in Berlin – against an earlier, contrasting example that many geographers will have read, but probably not as a literary work – Doreen Massey's essay on 'a global sense of place'. There is a lot of continuity between the two texts, Latronico painting a picture of contemporary life in which the dynamics between global and local, identified by Massey, have been amplified and accelerated through new technologies and updated through cultural change. But comparison also reveals a striking difference, a sign of changing times. Whereas, Massey was both critical and hopeful, trusting in a progressive sense of place, Latronico appears pessimistic, depicting a seductive and distracted world that young people feel powerless to shape or change. Reading *Perfection*, the paper first illuminates and then interrogates this geography of pessimism, before ending on a more hopeful note.

QU'EN EST-IL DU SENS PROGRESSIF DU LIEU? ÉCRITURE EXPLORATOIRE DU LIEU DE KILBURN À NEUKÖLLN

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article nous donne un aperçu de la culture mondiale et du concept du lieu dans le 21^e siècle par le biais de l'écriture exploratoire du lieu, un domaine divers de la littérature géographique qui observe et répertorie des lieux à travers des matières aussi variées que les essais, la poésie, les listes et les romans. Cet article étudie un exemple contemporain de l'écriture exploratoire des lieux urbains, *Les perfections* de Vincenzo Latronico, un roman traitant des milléniaux à Berlin, en contraste avec un exemple plus ancien que

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CONTACT Richard Phillips  R.Phillips@Sheffield.ac.uk  School of Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

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beaucoup de géographes ont dû lire, mais pas dans un contexte littéraire, l'essai de Doreen Massey sur « un sens mondial du lieu. » Il y a beaucoup de continuité entre les deux textes. Latronico dépeint la vie contemporaine dans laquelle les dynamiques mondiales et locales, comme les avait identifiées Massey, ont été amplifiées et accélérées à travers de nouvelles technologies et mises à jour lors du changement culturel. En effet, la comparaison révèle aussi une différence marquante, un signe des temps qui changent. Alors que Massey était à la fois critique et optimiste, faisant confiance à un sens progressif du lieu, Latronico paraît pessimiste, dépeignant un monde séducteur et distrait que les jeunes personnes se sentent incapables de changer ou former. En lisant *Les perfections*, l'article met en lumière cette géographie de pessimisme, la remet en question, avant de finir sur une note plus positive.

¿Que paso con el sentido progresivo de lugar? Escritura exploratoria de lugares de Kilburn a Neukölln

RESUMEN

Este artículo abre una ventana a la cultura y el lugar globales en el siglo XXI. Lo hace a través de la escritura exploratoria de lugares, un campo diverso de la literatura geográfica que observa y documenta lugares a través de medios tan variados como ensayos, poesía, listas y novelas. Este artículo compara un ejemplo contemporáneo de escritura exploratoria de lugares urbanos —Perfección de Vincenzo Latronico, una novela sobre los *millennials* en Berlín— con un ejemplo anterior y contrastante que muchos geógrafos habrán leído, aunque probablemente no como obra literaria: el ensayo de Doreen Massey sobre *Un sentido global de lugar*. Existe una gran continuidad entre ambos textos. Latronico presenta una imagen de la vida contemporánea en la que las dinámicas entre lo global y lo local, identificadas por Massey, se han visto amplificadas y aceleradas por las nuevas tecnologías y actualizadas por el cambio cultural. Sin embargo, la comparación también revela una diferencia notable, una señal de los tiempos cambiantes. Mientras Massey era crítica y esperanzadora, confiando en un sentido progresista del lugar, Latronico se muestra pesimista, retratando un mundo seductor y distraído que los jóvenes se sienten incapaces de moldear o cambiar. En “Leyendo la Perfección”, el artículo primero ilumina y luego interroga esta geografía del pesimismo, antes de concluir con una nota más esperanzadora.

Introduction

An Airbnb listing for a one-bedroom apartment in Berlin opens a window on place in the twenty-first century. The décor and houseplants appear fashionable, eclectic and international. In the living room ‘past issues of *Monocle* and the *New Yorker*’ are stacked next to a ‘Danish curved mahogany armchair’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 14). The style of this unit and the things in it have much in common with apartments in cities around the world. The photos and descriptions gesture from the interior to surrounding streets, ‘the lush monstera stretching its shiny leaves towards the outside world’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 14). There,

guests might enjoy cafés with excellent Wi-Fi and flat whites as good as you might find in London, Lisbon, Vancouver or Melbourne. Cafés that feel quirky and original, though their exposed concrete, naked lightbulbs and reclaimed wood are vaguely familiar. Guests might wander into bakeries, microbreweries and markets, selling sourdough bread, craft beer, locally brewed kimchi and artisanal gelato. Roughly the same things as they have bought elsewhere, but with an aura of originality and uniqueness. The business model behind this listing is equally global. The ‘short-term rental’ is offered ‘at one hundred and eighteen euros a day, plus the fee to cover the Ukrainian cleaner, paid through a French gig economy company that files its taxes in Ireland; plus the commission for the online hosting platform, with offices in California but tax-registered in the Netherlands; plus another cut for the online system, which has its headquarters in Seattle but runs its European subsidiary out of Luxembourg; plus the city tax imposed by Berlin’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 17).

This apartment is fictional, as are its leaseholders, Anna and Tom. It is central to a novel by Vincenzo Latronico. *Perfection* explores the experiences of millennials – the first generation to come of age in the twenty-first century – and the places where they live. It does so through the story of a young couple – their youth, their life in the city, and their careers in the digital economy. The setting is important. ‘Berlin was, to all intents and purposes’, Anna and Tom’s ‘main pastime – exploring it, understanding it, feeling part of it’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 29). They are fascinated by the places around them, though their daily lives are locked into something much more global. Neukölln, where they live, is one of many sites including boroughs, localities, venues, parks, stations and streets that are named and described, important to their story, which also has wide horizons – criss-crossing Europe and reaching beyond.

This novel helps us to see what has become of the global sense of place, an idea brought into focus by Doreen Massey a third of a century earlier (Massey, 1991). Anna and Tom would have been infants at that time, when Berlin was emerging from a generation of division. Massey argued that places – including ‘ordinary’ places like Kilburn, where she lived in northwest London – and the people who lived in them were not simply on the receiving end of globalization; they played a part in making it. Massey’s ‘global sense of place’ remains foundational in geographical understandings of place in a globally connected world (Edensor et al., 2020; Pow, 2015), even though the world has changed so much since the essay was published.

Written when globalization was approaching its zenith and when academics were developing the theories and understandings of it that remain influential today, ‘a global sense of place’ stands alongside other foundational texts that have grappled with the concepts of sense of place (Agnew, 1987; Tuan, 2001) and geographies of globalization. Key works on the latter, first published around that time, include Peter Dicken’s *Global Shift: Mapping the Changing Contours of the World Economy* (Dicken, 1986), George Ritzer’s *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer, 1993), Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (Klein, 1999) and Steven Flusty’s *Coca-Colonization* (Flusty, 2004), plus a series of shorter works on global culture and space, notably Peter Jackson’s paper on ‘local consumption cultures in a globalizing world’ (Jackson, 2004). These early works on global economy, politics, society, culture and place have been joined by many more (e.g. Murray & Overton, 2014) and also updated – *Global Shift* going through seven editions. These foundational works, published when globalization as we came to know it was in its infancy, have

ongoing relevance, despite all the changes that have taken place since. Among these, Massey's essay remains signally important in understanding place in a connected world. Read and re-read over the years – a focus for discussion and criticism (Dirlik, 1999; Hardt & Negri, 2001), inspiration and provocation (Featherstone & Painter, 2013) – it has been refreshed and renewed. Decades on, we should expect it to need some recalibration, at very least, to reflect changing dynamics between the global and the local.

Global forces have shifted forward and back since the 1980s and 1990s: industrial offshoring that reconfigured economic geographies then has been followed by waves of friendshoring and re-shoring, bringing some activities back (Coe & Yeung, 2019). Trade barriers have been removed and then replaced by new waves of protectionism and retreat from trading blocs and the rules-based international order (Braw, 2024). There has been a digital revolution, transforming the economy, society and cultural life. Products, sectors, brands and corporations have seen their fortunes rise and fall – McDonald's and Coca Cola giving way to the likes of Microsoft, Amazon and Apple – along with transformations in the global economy. Migration patterns have lurched and changed. In the UK, annual net migration has grown from close to zero in the early 1990s to up to a million in the 2020s. So, globalization is not what it was, though some of its characteristics have persisted and others have expanded and accelerated. This raises questions about how places, which are locked into global systems, might also have changed (Bello, 2002).

Perhaps the deepest change, suggested by differences between Massey's place writing and Latronico's, is an apparent loss of hope. Massey had been 'critical but hopeful' (Amin & Thrift, 2013, p. 205) – realistic about power and inequality in a globalizing world but optimistic about the possibility of changing and shaping it. Her analysis of the global and local cohered around what she called a progressive sense of place. Latronico's characters share many of Massey's ideals but not her hope. They are well-meaning and hold progressive social attitudes and liberal values but struggle to act on their convictions and feel powerless to make a difference.

They identified as feminists and spoke out against social injustices, which in practice meant they were willing to express outrage at instances of racism or sexism that took place in New York. Anna and Tom had publicly distanced themselves from a client which refused to publicly distance themselves from a sexist ad. They donated ten dollars a month to a foundation supporting LGBTQ rights, which came to just under nine dollars after the Californian payment platform took its commission. ... Of course, all this was theoretical; in practice, their social commitment amounted to using Uber only if it was snowing and always leaving tips in cash. They didn't eat tuna. (Latronico, 2025, p. 63)

Reviewing *Perfection* for the *Guardian* newspaper, Thomas McMullan found this a 'deliciously pessimistic novel', appreciating its 'deadpan' depiction of Anna and Tom's 'hollow' lives (McMullan, 2025, unpaginated). Constantly 'yearning', both for their personal fortunes and for a better society, they are alienated and disoriented. They are not sure what they want, how to get it, or whether getting it will make them happy. They appear to live in a world of plenty and beauty, but they are constantly distracted and disappointed.

No novel can tell the whole truth about a time and a place, a generation and a city. But some can provide insights into these subjects (Hones, 2015). Think, for example, of Virginia Woolf's fictional evocation of London in the aftermath of the Great War in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), or Zadie Smith's panorama of multicultural Willesden, a neighbourhood

not far from Massey's Kilburn, in *White Teeth* (2000). Both bring cities and themes – in these examples, modernity and diversity – into focus (Pinder, 2013). Their insights are partial, situated and profound (Rose, 1997). The same is true of *Perfection*, a novel that opens a window on millennials and their lives in the city. It has found a ready and appreciative audience. Its English edition, published by Fitzcarraldo Editions and New York Review of Books, has sold well, been widely reviewed, and been shortlisted for the International Booker Prize, 2025. If its reception is anything to go by, *Perfection* has rung true.

Latronico's novel also reaches towards some broader questions, which I take up in this paper. Most immediately: What has happened to the global sense of place? And to the progressive sense of place? And, contrasting Latronico's pessimistic story with Massey's optimistic essay, what has happened to hope? Where, without hope, is a progressive sense of place? If hope opens up possibilities, capacities and capabilities (Anderson, 2006), then what are the consequences of losing it? Does hopelessness close down possibilities, or does it have capacities and capabilities of its own? David Pinder suggests that it might. He argues that confronting 'what seems impossible' can be an important step in the pursuit of 'the possible' (Pinder, 2015, p. 28; after Lefebvre, 2003[1970]). *Perfection* says a lot about the seemingly impossible. Anna and Tom are perpetually frustrated and disappointed, feeling unable to make a difference in the world, even in the smallest details of their lives. And yet, I will suggest, their sense of the impossible may be a point of departure, rather than simply an unhappy ending. This leads to a final question: Where can we look in search of hope today – for people and for ordinary places?

Exploratory urban place writing

A novel provides a particular insight into place, one that is shaped by its literary form and the constraints within which the author is working (Cooper, 2020). This is true of a wide range of writing, which can be a powerful means of geographical enquiry (Carter, 2008; Cresswell, 2019; Ward, 2014). To paraphrase Raymond Williams (1961, p. 23), we can learn to see a place by learning to describe it. We can also learn to see a place by learning to read how others have described it. This means paying attention not only to the originality and uniqueness of their writing, but also to the literary form within which they are working, the conventions and constraints that shape what they can say about a place (R. Phillips, 2018).

To understand the sense of place portrayed in *Perfection* – then to focus upon its global dynamics and implications for hope and hopelessness – it is first necessary to contextualize this book as a particular kind of novel and example of place writing. *Perfection* was published in Italian in 2022 and then in other languages including Sophie Hughes' English translation in 2025. It retells an earlier novel, Georges Perec's *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, published in French in 1965, with English editions in 1968 and 1990; the latter by David Bellos is generally considered the most successful (Perec, 1965, 1999b). Both novels tell the story of a young couple – Anna and Tom in *Perfection*, Sylvie and Jérôme in *Things* – through the lens of the things they have or would like to have. Both bring places into focus – Berlin and Paris, localities within each of these cities, and their wider geographical spheres. This literary form – a novel retold – opens a distinctive window on the world and on place. It is an example of exploratory place writing – a field that Perec explored

through a number of other literary forms including poetry, list making and site description (Becker, 2001; Bellos, 1993; Sheringham, 2000). This writing is a form of geographical fieldwork: a vehicle for observation, documentation and interpretation (Phillips & Kara, 2021; Zebracki et al., 2025).

Though creative and academic writing were once seen as opposites, the two have converged as academics have begun to approach writing more creatively, experimenting with literary forms such as storytelling, description, fiction and poetry (Eshun & Madge, 2012; Lorimer, 2019) and appreciating the literary qualities of their own canon and practices. Massey's essay on place is a case in point. It has been praised as clear, accessible writing, mercifully free of jargon and light on citations, enabling it to reach relatively wide audiences (it was first published in a magazine: *Marxism Today*) (Kalindades, 2020). But Massey was doing more than this; she was working within a literary form that served her purposes and shaped what she could say about and through place: the essay. Elsewhere, she worked with other forms including storytelling (Featherstone & Painter, 2013), but in this case her medium was the essay. Essayists – including writers such as Michel de Montaigne, William Hazlitt, George Orwell and Rebecca Solnit – typically use direct observation and personal experience as points of departure for exploration and analysis (France, 2006). The essayist 'writes while experimenting, turns his object this way and that, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees' (Max Bense, quoted by Adorno, 1984, p. 164). In this tradition, Massey wrote 'a global sense of place' in the first person, beginning with immediate observations of her 'pretty ordinary' neighbourhood. Walking along the high road, she continued another essayistic tradition. Like a walk, and sometimes describing a walk, an essay can 'be seen as the collection of fragments – everyday reflections, ideas, sights, visions, sounds' (Sheringham, 2000) – which accumulate and crystallize, retaining 'overtones of tentativeness' (Forsdick & Stafford, 2006, p. 14) rather than fixed and 'final conclusions' (Adorno, 1984, p. 165). Massey introduced ideas and arguments that she was to reiterate, refine and firm up over the years that followed, but were tentative in this, their first outing (Kalindades, 2020). Through observations of Kilburn, which she contextualized within wider historical geographies of colonialism and capitalism, inflected by power relations of gender and race, Massey distilled a series of broad themes and arguments. Writing at a time when globalization was on the march (Smith, 2000), she spoke directly to contemporary audiences who could see what she was talking about, but the ideas she distilled have wider and more enduring relevance. In the tradition of the essay, she reached from the specific and the concrete to the general and conceptual.

Latronico's novel presents a contrasting example of exploratory place writing. Again, its possibilities are a function of the literary devices and conventions it plays with. First, a device that Latronico borrowed from Perec is his disciplined attention to ordinary things and happenings. Perec developed techniques for 'training the gaze' to see and document the infraordinary – things so familiar they go unnoticed and unseen (Perec, 1999a, p. 50). Sylvie and Jérôme learned to see the city:

They paid attention to the way others dressed; they noticed the furniture, the knick-knacks and the ties displayed in shop windows; they mused on estate agents' advertisements. They felt as if they understood things they had never bothered about before: it had come to matter to them whether a neighbourhood or a street was sad or jolly, quiet or noisy, deserted or lively'. (Perec, 1999b, p. 41)

Latronico borrowed and echoed these devices, listing places where Anna and Tom have stayed, and noticing details: 'The initial string of short-term flat shares in Friedrichschain. The Kreuzberg studios used as crash pads. The sofa beds in Neukölln' (Latronico, 2025, p. 26). These lists coalesce into pictures of place. Here, some readers may be reminded of Danny Miller's study of a street in London, comprising an inventory of the objects in each home (Miller, 2008). Latronico's Berlin, in contrast with Massey's 'pretty ordinary' Kilburn, is an extraordinary place with its unique and generative history and geography, politics and economy (Till, 2005), not to mention its exciting cultural scene and nightlife. But it is the ordinary and seemingly trivial things – many of which crop up in other places – that hold Anna and Tom's attention, and it is this infraordinary realm that Latronico brings into focus.

Second, as novelists, Latronico and Perec explored events and places from particular points of view. This meant deciding who was telling the story and what they and the other characters could see or know. Point of view in fiction is a counterpoint to the academic concept of positionality (Rose, 1997). Writers of fiction have more freedom than authors of non-fiction social science, who examine rather than choose their own positionality. Though *Perfection* explores places through the eyes of a young couple, the point of view is more complex. Latronico, following Perec, employed a 'shifting narrator' – sometimes looking down on his characters, sometimes seeing through their eyes – achieving a 'simultaneous passion and detachment' (both quotations Bellos, preface to Perec, 1999b, pp. 9–10). The narrative voice shifts too – from an active to a passive voice, from declarative statements (they did) towards an open-ended and provisional use of the subjunctive (they would). This opens up multiple perspectives, Anna and Tom sometimes seeming in control of their lives, sometimes passively reactive, and this brings multiple and shifting perspectives on how they see and inhabit places. By following these characters – their experiences, ways of seeing, hopes, occasional wins and frequent disappointments – it is possible to gain some broader insights: into the geographies and worldviews of their generation. Anna and Tom bring places into view.

This leads to a third exploratory dimension of *Perfection*, in the form of a narrative tension that drives the plot. From the opening description of the apartment through the places they go and the things they do, *Perfection* is primarily the story of a couple's quest for financial security. Anna and Tom want money, though they are not sure how much they need or what will satisfy them, and they are not very good at getting it. They also want to make a difference in the world, though again they are not sure quite what or how. Their unfocussed and unrequited desires bring a mundane mystery to the story, holding the attention of readers who might wonder, if not necessarily care very much, what happens to them and whether they find what they are looking for. Anna and Tom's ambition holds their story together, prompting their movements to and around Berlin and Europe, and bringing those places into focus. Through their stories, lives and places unfold, change and are revealed.

These contrasting examples – a deceptively formal essay and a tightly composed novel – introduce the diversity and also the unity of exploratory place writing and begin to indicate how it may be read as a source for understanding senses of place. More specifically, this essay and novel are examples of urban exploratory place writing. Massey's argument is pitched broadly but implicitly urban. Her walk along a city street may have parallels in a country lane but would not be quite the same. Latronico's story is

equally, unashamedly urban; Anna and Tom love Berlin and define themselves through the city. So, while these reflections on exploratory place writing resonate, they are most immediately concerned with urban geographies.

I now turn to a closer reading of *Perfection*. This novel helps us to see what became of Massey's critical but cautiously optimistic, global and progressive sense of place in the first decades of the twenty-first century

A global and millennial sense of place. But is it still progressive?

This section revisits the themes of Massey's essay, asking where Latronico has taken them, and how in doing so he has responded to changes in places like Kilburn and Neukölln. This essay is well known so it can be summarized briefly. Four key points are as follows. First, places in a globalizing world have many of the same constituents, making them seem similar, but they remain unique, each place shaped by a series of specificities. Second, places are made by connections and through flows – of people, things, styles, ideas, cultures. Always in motion, places are moving parts within a continually changing and increasingly global world. Third, these movements are uneven, structured by a form of spatial power known as 'power geometry', which defines who's in and who's out, who's mobile and who isn't, and who's in charge of all this movement. Fourth, Massey advocated a progressive sense of place. She acknowledged that change can be unsettling and that it is easy to be defensive when neighbourhoods seem to be changing out of recognition. She advocated the opposite, embracing connections and seeing boundaries as porous and relational rather than defensive. She argued that it is possible to approach place progressively while remaining critical of globalization and conscious of the inequalities and injustices it creates. She affirmed the power of people in working-class neighbourhoods to make a difference in the world, shaping rather than simply reacting to events and circumstances.

Massey's themes provide a framework through which to explore the updated, still but differently global sense of place, which is revealed in *Perfection*. Before exploring the ongoing relevance of each of her points, through the lens of this novel, it is necessary to set the stage by introducing millennials, their circumstances and their experiences of place.

A millennial sense of place

On the surface, Anna and Tom's world is unrecognizably different from Massey's. Perhaps the biggest difference is the internet. Millennials were born between the early 1980s and late 1990s, the first to reach adulthood in the twenty-first century and the first generation of digital natives (Dimock, 2018; Martin & Lewchuk, 2018), using the internet to 'communicate who they are, what they think, and how they live' (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010, p. 40). After playing online as children, Anna and Tom fell into the industry that defined their generation. 'The internet came of age with them' (Latronico, 2025, p. 24) and vice versa. This took place within a global framework. As one reviewer put it, their story captures 'what it feels like to participate in the globalized culture of the internet era' (Kyle Chayka, quoted by Latronico, 2025, p. iii).

The digital revolution has transformed relationships between people and places, shifting perceptions of space and time (Ash, 2012; Dai & Liu, 2024). Anna and Tom curate a digital version of their lives and places, one that is often more alluring and is always more controllable than the reality. They are at home online as much as in the physical world. 'They lived a double life. There was the tangible reality around them, and there were the images, also all around them' (Latronico, 2025, p. 51). Images pop up on their phones and tablets and could grab their attention at any point – 'While they waited for the U8 or the M29. While they took a piss' (Latronico, 2025, p. 51). The digital world also mirrors the form and rhythm of their geographies. Their frequent walks – 'roaming the narrow cobbled streets of Schillerkiez, or the linden-laden squares of the grander end of Mitte, marvelling at every little detail: the jungles of tropical plants behind the windows, the geometric pattern of the flagstone pavements' (Latronico, 2025, p. 29) – are reminiscent of scrolling online. Passing through Berlin, their attention flickers from site to site, thing to thing. Some observers worry that the smartphone generation suffer from poor attention spans, being constantly distracted by superficial novelties, unable to settle or to focus (Jackson, 2010; Murphy, 2020), all the while manipulated by cultural industries that compete for and direct their attention (Stiegler, 2010). Others are less judgemental, arguing that the human mind naturally fluctuates between concentration and distraction (Dillon, 2013), that this is better understood than condemned (A. Phillips, 2019), and that young peoples' hyper-attentiveness can be a pragmatic and even empowering adaptation to an information-rich digital world (Hayles, 2012; Wilson, 2015). In an essay for *The New Yorker*, Joshua Rothman (2015) draws together these contrasting perspectives on digital culture:

Our minds wander, and life is full of meaningless moments. Whole minutes go by during which you listen to Rihanna in your head, or look idly at people's shoes, or remember high school. Sometimes, your mind is just a random jumble of images, sensations, sounds, recollections; at other times, you can stare out the window and think about nothing.

Anna and Tom would understand all this; their lives comprise a series of seemingly meaningless moments, gazing at the flickering and shallow images that flash before them online, or walking aimlessly through Berlin. Meaningless or not, these distracted and fragmentary experiences and observations coalesce into their accumulated sense of place.

The digital is just one defining characteristic of millennial experience. Others include ambivalent economic circumstances, this generation living through the financial crisis of 2008 and experiencing a form of precarity, and cultural and political sensitivities, millennials tending to enjoy fewer opportunities than their parents, and being exposed to and drawn into heated culture wars. These experiences have a bearing upon experiences of place, as we shall see in the following sections, which read *Perfection* against the four themes of Massey's essay.

A differently global sense of place

First, the sameness and uniqueness – the series of specificities – that Massey observed in Kilburn are also present in Anna and Tom's Neukölln. The contents of their apartment are as global as their web designs. When they leave Berlin for Lisbon, towards the end of the novel, they find many of the same designs and styles – 'the brushed concrete flooring, the

rubber plant, the bar with its Danish redesign, and it felt like they were in Berlin' (Latronico, 2025, p. 93). These places seem interchangeable. Anna and Tom's interest in the details and particularities of Berlin seems superficial. They joke about never having been to the West without seeming to know that Neukölln had been in that sector. They 'were aware of the Wall and the broken glass, but really their awareness didn't exceed a few anecdotes rattled off to make it look like their life there had more substance' (Latronico, 2025, p. 30). Their minds are often elsewhere. Most of their newsfeed and social media are from other places and in other languages, including online editions of American news sites. At most, they have one eye on Berlin. The one thing they are really sure of is its bone-chilling winter cold.

It is not just places and things that are increasingly global and seemingly homogenous, but people too. *Perfection* is the story of a search for the perfect apartment, café and job, but also for the perfect self. The title develops an idea from the writer Malcolm Lowry, quoted by Perec (1999b, p. 17), examining the assumption that 'civilization' has made humans 'more happy, more free and more perfect'. Characters in the novel seek such perfection. 'They would spend hours building personal websites and profiles that reflected their tastes and interests' – 'things that made them special' (Latronico, 2025, p. 24) but are common currency. Though they are not consciously interested in houseplants, cooking or the presentation of food, Anna and Tom acquire tastes in these matters, photographing and sharing images of their 'fire-roasted cauliflower and umami' (Latronico, 2025, p. 59). Through their web design, they also enable others – individuals, companies, brands – to use common ingredients and shared tastes to define themselves differences. This picture of small differences in people and place echoes Massey's analysis of the specificities that made places similar and yet unique. This analysis remains persuasive, though the detail of the specificities has changed.

Second, what has become of the connected places – made through flows and movements – that Massey identified in Kilburn? The places in *Perfection* are made through the movements of people, insects, things, styles, information and money. The internet has been an important vehicle for this. Though in some ways a departure from Massey's world, this has intensified and accelerated an aspect of the global sense of place that she identified. Social media simultaneously connects Anna and Tom to and distances them from the people and places around them, helping them find friends and build networks in Berlin, but also to 'bypass local news and German-language sources', diluting local ties. The digital economy has speeded up the flows that bring places into being and bring them together. Places in *Perfection* are also connected in more tangible ways. Anna and Tom criss-cross Europe – travelling from their unnamed hometown in Italy to Berlin, returning for occasional weekends and holidays, also embarking on short-haul mini breaks, then to work in Lisbon, Sicily and finally settling somewhere in southern Europe. Their mobility is not unusual. Anna and Tom's friends in Berlin are from many countries – Italy, France, Poland, Portugal, Israel, Belgium, the United States – Germany being the notable exception. Meanwhile, refugees and economically precarious migrants arrive from Syria and North Africa. Everyone and everything, it seems, is on the move, landing in different locations, combining and making places as they go. 'Gourmet hamburger joints were popping up everywhere. Bedbugs, previously only a problem in the US, were on the rise in neighbourhoods all over the city, with dermatologists mapping spikes in cases on streets with a higher concentration of short-term lettings' (Latronico, 2025,

pp. 61–62). Neukölln and Berlin are shaped by comings and goings, arrivals and departures. ‘The city ebbed and flowed like a tide. Winter would bring the usual flurry of defections, and spring a fresh wave of expats’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 61).

People who are mobile can seem to have a short-term and shallow relationship with where they are; and they are sometimes portrayed this way by others, especially reactionaries. Anna and Tom’s knowledge of Berlin can be vague. It also has a quality that everyone in their circle appreciates, defining common ground for shared experiences. Referencing Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1957/1972) – as Perec did in *Things* – Latronico’s narrator explains that Anna and Tom’s ‘mythology’ was ‘shared by all the Spaniards, French, Italians and Americans they met’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 27). This mythology is powerful, especially outside the city and in an international arena, where creatives including designers, artists and musicians leverage the idea of Berlin to sell their services and establish their kudos. ‘Berlin-based’ inspires confidence among clients in places that are portrayed as provincial. As much as the city itself and the life they might live there, Anna and Tom want what Berlin represents, its meaning and value on a global stage.

Third, what has become of the power geometry – where not everyone is equally mobile or in control of their mobility? Anna and Tom witness the arrival of refugees, many of whom are temporarily accommodated at an iconic place of transit: Tempelhof Airport. They also see changes within their own circle, with more skilled and affluent, slightly younger professionals arriving from Bavaria and the United States. The city remains a place in flux but with a changing character and profile. Anna and Tom are conscious of their own freedom to move within Europe, travelling affordably and visa-free, in contrast with the constrained movements of some others. But they are travelling on the cheap, making do with early morning flights and uncomfortable accommodation. They do not plead poverty but are frustrated. Surrounded by more affluent and discreetly successful young people, they are acutely conscious of class differentials, which are more complicated than the binary of digital nomads and refugees or insiders and outsiders. Their story explores a nuanced power geometry.

Set against Massey’s essay, the places in Latronico’s novel are still global, but differently so. In some ways they are more European than global. Anna and Tom enjoy the freedom to travel, live and work within the European Union. Meanwhile, the EU has reinforced its external borders, attempting to build a ‘fortress Europe’ (Guarino, 2025). Similar patterns are visible in flows of things, technologies, money and information, which move freely within the EU, less so with other countries. Still, Anna and Tom’s Berlin is global in the sense that it is shaped by connections within and beyond the city, within and beyond Europe. These dynamics are uneven, continuing to reflect what Massey called power geometries, which give rise to a differently global sense of place.

A progressive sense of place?

Fourth, did the choice between a reactionary and progressive sense of place, which Massey distinguished earlier on, still apply in the 2000s and 2010s? Massey’s progressive sense of place involves thinking of places in relational rather than bounded and reactionary terms, embracing rather than resisting the propensity of places to change (Featherstone & Painter, 2013; Wills, 2013). But is this still tenable? Again, *Perfection* provides some insights.

Whereas Massey acknowledged that change can be unsettling, before quickly rising above such understandable but defensive reactions, Latronico explores these feelings with more sustained and nuanced empathy. Anna and Tom are unsettled, not by refugees, but by new waves of privileged migrants who subtly displace them. Slightly younger, more highly skilled and affluent professionals push up rents and change the atmosphere of cafes, with their 'luminescent Apples' and air of 'intense concentration' (Latronico, 2025, p. 61). Anna and Tom are also disoriented by changes in the physical landscape of the city: the demolition of landmarks, the gentrification of neighbourhoods. For them, as for many of their generation, the development of Tacheles, the abandoned department store that had been squatted by artists and activists, saddens them. On daily walks they notice changes in the city and grow nostalgic. 'There, on the ground floor of that building, was Elvira's apartment, with its screeching roller shutter that they had nicknamed "the iron curtain". There, outside that florist, they would sometimes meet the Bosnian guy who dealt them MDMA' (Latronico, 2025, p. 85).

Feeling left behind by a city that is swirling around them, where they sense they are losing ground, Anna and Tom face the hard reality that the change they are witnessing is not just external, but also within themselves. They can no longer 'tell whether the change had occurred in the city, so much more open in their twenties, or in them, who were now closer to forty' (Latronico, 2025, p. 86). Accepting the passage of time, coupled with their apparent inability to move forward in their own lives and to keep pace with others, is more challenging than getting used to new migrants, especially those who never competed with them, or accepting the demolition of landmarks. These feelings of being left behind, of failing to fulfil ambitions, expresses a more general feeling of powerlessness. There is an everyday frailty to these characters: they are not always good or likeable, and they are often frustrating, but some readers may feel able to identify with them.

Anna and Tom do have personal and political ambitions, but they don't feel they have the means to fulfil them. Reviewing the book, Kyle Chayka (quoted by Latronico, 2025, p. iii) observed that the story captures what it feels like to feel 'overwhelmed by' the 'globalized culture of the internet era', attempting 'futilely, to make it'. Like many others of their generation in European and other western countries, they are educated and ambitious but struggle to find well-paid or secure employment. Millennials have been held back by debts and housing costs, and many have lower living standards than their parents (Ng et al., 2010). Some inherit from relatives who accumulated wealth in better economic times, but continue to struggle financially (Martin & Lewchuk, 2018). Anna and Tom embody this predicament, and they can never quite afford the rent for their modest apartment. They make some initial progress, securing freelance work as web designers, but their clients are all from their hometown and they fail to attract more lucrative contracts. They see that hard work is not enough. They know they have been lucky in some ways – inheriting money, being born into a peaceful and prosperous period in history – but recognize their reliance on luck as a kind of precarity.

Anna and Tom also struggle to follow through on their political convictions. Their efforts are variously feeble, half-hearted, frustrated and ridiculous. Wanting to change the world, they end up not eating tuna and avoiding Uber. They can be distracted by the superficial realm of 'food and fonts' (Thomas-Corr, 2025). They seem to embody their generation's allegedly 'performative wokeness' (Sobande et al., 2022, p. 1579). They are less invested in politics than in personal advancement, but they do care. They learn the

hard lesson that it isn't necessarily enough to care or to think and say progressive things. To mean anything, these sentiments have to translate into action. In this, Anna and Tom end up frustrated. They sense opportunities to take a stand – not just to express opinions but to act on them – when refugees start arriving. They attend meetings, offer their apartment as a distribution point for donated clothing, and volunteer their professional services. Despite their best efforts, they eventually realize that they are not helping. They find their skills in web design are not very practical when it comes to supporting vulnerable people from war-torn countries, and their poor grasp of German and complete ignorance of Arabic also get in the way. They express solidarity online but nobody outside their peer group is really listening. Their posts affirm their belonging to a tribe of like-minded millennials but do nothing to change society or help others.

In their personal lives, too, they struggle to put principles into practice. Like others of their generation, Anna and Tom tend to be open-minded about issues such as gender and sexuality (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), but this does not change what they do; how they live their lives. Half-heartedly visiting sex clubs – another distinctive feature of the Berlin scene – they gain admittance by claiming to be bisexual and to have an open relationship. But they never go through with the actual sex. Others – usually older people – belittle and ridicule the politics of millennials as shallow posturing, inauthentic, ineffectual and self-serving – virtue-signalling by oversensitive and impractical 'snowflakes' (Duffy, 2021, p. 13). A more sympathetic way of putting this is that they care about others and want to make a difference and a contribution (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010) – but 'do not know how' (Ng et al., 2010, p. 290) or have the means to do so.

Anna and Tom's uneasy mix of personal and political ambition and impotence is expressed in a sense of place that is progressive in spirit but frustrated in practice. Berlin stirs these desires. There, they constantly encounter things they can't afford, apartments and lifestyles that are out of their reach, and people who seem more successful. They are exposed to all of this as they walk the streets, go to cafes, attend gallery openings, go clubbing and hang out in parks. Their walks are chronicled in lists of the things and sites they pass by, notice and want. They love the city where they are trying to make a life for themselves, but usually it is a place of unrequited desire, reminding them of what they don't have and seen unable to get, and also of the loftier dreams and progressive visions they are unable to do much about. Latronico draws this out in an epigraph, quoting Perec (1999b, p. 81): 'That was where their real life was, the life they wanted to know, that they wanted to lead' (Latronico, 2025, p. 11). Their inability to satisfy these wants and desires, which reach from the personal to the political, is a source of disappointment and sets the ultimately pessimistic tone of their story.

Conclusion: hope, but it will not be hope exactly

Perfection is a story of continuity and change. Despite shifts in the detail and content of cultural life, and despite the acceleration and amplification of interactions and movements, there is much continuity in relationships between the local and non-local. The details of Anna and Tom's Berlin – the stalls selling sourdough and gelati, the cafés and shared workspaces where hipsters line up in front of laptops – are superficially very different from those of Massey's London. But some fundamental patterns remain. Things and styles in Berlin also crop up in other places such as Lisbon, combining in

ways that make different places familiar but unique. Places are still defined by connections, though these have generally multiplied and accelerated, spurred on by new information and communications technologies and by the partial removal of barriers to the flow of capital, goods, information and (some) people. This is not an uninterrupted or smooth process. As in Massey's time, not everyone is equally mobile or in control of their mobility. But in other ways Latronico's Berlin does feel different from Massey's London. Massey's critical but optimistic analysis – in which people retain the capacity to shape their own lives and their world through the places where they live – seems to have given way to something more pessimistic and passive.

And yet, there are grounds for questioning this reading of the novel and the world it portrays, and for refusing to give into its 'delicious pessimism' (McMullan, 2025, unpaginated). Reading Latronico's novel against Perec's provides some clues, grounds for a little optimism. Anna and Tom are conscious of their political impotence and wonder if this is a generational curse. They think of their parents and grandparents, who faced clear battle lines – being 'tossed about by the raging seas of a century that had now ended, leaving only calm in its wake' (Latronico, 2025, p. 69) – and were forced to act decisively.

They would have liked to have been in their twenties for the summer of '68 or when the Wall fell. Previous generations had had a much easier time working out who they were and what they stood for. The problems back then might have been more urgent, but they also had clearer solutions. Now there were too many choices, with each one leading off on endless branches, preventing any real change. Their idea of a revolutionary future didn't go beyond gender balance on corporate boards, electric cars, vegetarianism. Not only had Anna and Tom not had the chance to fight for a radically different world, but they couldn't even imagine it. (Latronico, 2025, p. 69)

Comparison with Perec puts their pessimism into perspective, suggesting at very least that millennials are not the first generation to feel powerless and disoriented. Sylvie and Jérôme felt equally helpless.

Earlier generations, they would sometimes tell each other, had probably found it easier to reach a fuller awareness of themselves and of the world they lived in. They would have liked, perhaps, to have been twenty during the Spanish Civil War, or during the Resistance when problems seemed clearer (Perec, 1999b, p. 70).

They see that their opposition to war in Algeria, however sincerely held, made no difference; it was just another received opinion, shared by peers who read the same newspapers and cohered around 'the sameness of their points of view' (Perec, 1999b, p. 45). So, if Anna and Tom admit their ideas are derivative, their politics shallow and self-serving, then at least they are not the first to do so. Young people of other generations have struggled in similar ways but have lived lives that exceeded their own low expectations. These expectations are symptoms of blind spots, of failing to see the choices they are already making (how to engage with digital technologies, for example) and the options that are open to them. Learning to see these choices and options, they may begin to see possibilities, however modest these may initially seem.

The ending of this novel is fittingly open – if not optimistic, then at least ambiguous about its pessimism, with escape routes for the reader in search of hope. Again, Anna and Tom's fortunes are prefigured by those of Sylvie and Jérôme. 'Full of hope, they will write carefully pondered *curricula vitae*. Their

luck – but it will not be luck exactly – will be in’ (Perec, 1999b, p. 126). They will be invited to an interview. Their story ends in the first-class carriage of a train to a provincial French city where they are to take up their new jobs and settle. The hopeful scene is qualified when they eat on the train, seemingly realizing some of their consumerist dreams: ‘the meal they will be served will be quite simply tasteless ... ’ (Perec, 1999b, p. 126). *Perfection* ends on an equally ambiguous note. An unfortunate uncle comes to the rescue. ‘Luck – but it will not be luck exactly – will be on their side’ (Latronico, 2025, p. 110). He leaves Anna his renovated farmhouse. They use all the skills, contacts and tastes they have acquired in Berlin to turn the property into a guesthouse. There is hope, if not for their loftier political and social ambitions, then at least for themselves. The story ends with glowing reviews from their first, handpicked and indulged clutch of guests, in May 2019. Readers of the book, published several years later, know what was coming and how it was to affect tourism. Would the pandemic qualify their happy ending? Or, as in *Things*, would they realize that financial security could not bring the happiness they were hoping for; would it be ‘simply tasteless’? Not ‘luck exactly’ then, but ambiguous at least.

Latronico – as narrator and author – affects neutrality, observing without commenting, diagnosing or intervening in the way that Massey sought to. He holds a mirror to the world, helping the reader to see it better, without suggesting what they might go out and do. It is often said that a novel, unlike an academic thesis or a political manifesto, should show rather than tell, and this is no exception. It reveals the world without providing a diagnosis or blueprint for change. To question this apparently apolitical stance, it helps to read Latronico against Perec. Some readers, especially in then-communist countries, read *Things* as a ‘denunciation of consumer capitalism’, commodity fetishism and private ownership (Bellos, preface to Perec, 1999b, p. 9). They welcomed its portrayal of an unequal western society where desires will never be satisfied and its deference to Marx, who gets the last word in the form of an epigraph. Perec denied that *Things* was anti-capitalist, insisting his intentions lay elsewhere and that readers should decide for themselves on its meanings. Which they will: reviewing *Perfection* for the London *Sunday Times*, Johanna Thomas-Corr (2025) finds a ‘devastating critique of aspirational consumerism and personal branding’. Read this way – even in a decidedly capitalist newspaper – the novel can be a vehicle through which to see the world freshly and critically. Opening a window on the world – bringing what Perec called the infraordinary into focus – can be a starting point for political action, progressive and otherwise (Amin & Thrift, 2013; Jameson, 1988). This is something that Massey tells and Latronico shows. By seeing the world, we can imagine ways to change it. Anna and Tom may have forgotten or given up on this but the reader doesn’t have to, and their story provides a portal to this possibility: a kind of hope.

Perec gave the last words of his novel to Marx. In the spirit of retelling his story, I end by quoting David Harvey, from his millennial intervention on geographies of hope (Harvey, 2000, p. 17): ‘I believe that in this moment in our history we have something of great import to accomplish by exercising an optimism of the intellect’.

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