

# The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia

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This article examines the link between people and place through a study of the ‘spatial practices’ of a small group of southern Ethiopian agro-pastoralists, the Mursi. Based upon fieldwork stretching over the past 35 years, I argue that there has been a huge change in the way the Mursi collectively imagine the world and their place within it. They have been ‘localized’, by being drawn into the ‘spatial practices’ of the Ethiopian state, and ‘marginalized’, by becoming dependent on values, norms and technologies which lie beyond their own means of production and control. I conclude that to understand how a sense of place becomes bound up with a person’s social and individual identity, we must treat place, not as a stage for social activity but as a ‘product’ of it. Such an understanding of the link between people and place helps us to appreciate that displacement is not just about the loss of place, but also about the struggle to *make* a place in the world, where meaningful action and shared understanding is possible.

It is reported that, when Cecil Rhodes was dying, at the southern tip of Africa in 1902, he asked for Matthew Arnold’s eulogy to Oxford, from the preface of *Essays in Criticism*, to be read out to him—a passage which begins ‘Beautiful city! So venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene’ (Dougill 1998: 146 and 151).<sup>1</sup> The image this anecdote conjures up, of the great imperialist dying in Africa while thinking of Oxford, is a reminder of the power places have to call forth an emotional response in us, a power which is especially potent when skilfully and artfully linked to the ideology of nationalism. One thinks of some of the most quoted lines in the canon of English poetry, such as Shakespeare’s ‘blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England’ (*Richard II*, II, ii) and Rupert Brooke’s ‘corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England’ (*The Soldier*). Where does this power of place come from? And what makes it, especially in the hands of poets, intellectuals and politicians, such an effective means of arousing collective sentiment and mobilizing common action?

In her 2001 Colson Lecture, Renée Hirschon gave us an important lead in the search for an answer to this question. She pointed out that, ‘in most societies’, place and personhood are conceptualized as ‘inextricably bound up together’

(2001: 2), an observation which she backed up with a number of well chosen ethnographic examples. There follow from this two further questions. First, how does this 'inextricable' link between personhood and place come about—assuming it is not a biological and psychological given, a 'natural' consequence of the individual's early spatial experiences? And second, what about the world we live in, the world of 'late modernity', a world in which the individual's lifespan is becoming 'separated' from the 'externalities of place' and where 'familiarity (with social events and people as well as with places) no longer depends solely, or perhaps even primarily, upon local milieu' (Giddens 1991: 146–147). What we need, clearly, is a theory of place that will apply as much to a world in which the individual's self-identity depends primarily on 'local milieu', as to one in which there exists a 'generalized sense of homelessness' (Said 1979: 18, quoted by Kibreab 1999: 385).

Over the past decade a number of anthropologists, spurred on by what globalization seems to be doing to the nation-state, have got down to the serious business of constructing, or at least laying the groundwork for, a theory of place that would serve precisely this purpose. Some of the best known titles, all appearing since 1995, are the following: *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Appadurai 1996), *Senses of Place* (Feld and Basso 1996), *Culture, Power and Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a), *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b), *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object* (Olwig and Hastrup 1997), *Locality and Belonging* (Lovell 1998) and *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World* (Amit 2000). In this article, I focus on what, in the language of these authors, would be called the 'spatial practices' of a small group of people, the Mursi, who number less than 10,000 and live in southwestern Ethiopia.

My wife and I have been regular visitors to the Mursi over the past 35 years. When I am asked how their lives have changed during this time, I find it difficult to think of any single, and overwhelmingly significant, visible marker of change. Men carry automatic rifles now, rather than World War II Italian Army rifles; women are more likely to use plastic gerry cans for carrying water, and aluminium pots for cooking, than heavy earthenware pots; and the use of cash as a medium of exchange with outsiders is much more common. But they build the same houses (dome-shaped structures covered with grass, that can be erected in a few hours), they maintain the same mix of subsistence activities (flood-retreat and rain-fed cultivation of sorghum and maize, and cattle herding) and social life is regulated by the same rhythm of seasonal movements. Behind this relatively unchanging exterior, however, there has taken place a conceptual change of the utmost historical significance: a change in the way people collectively imagine the world, and their place within it.

In the first part of this article I describe how repeated visits to the Mursi forced me to abandon my initial assumptions about the territorial boundedness and historical stability of what I called 'Mursi society'. In the second and third parts,

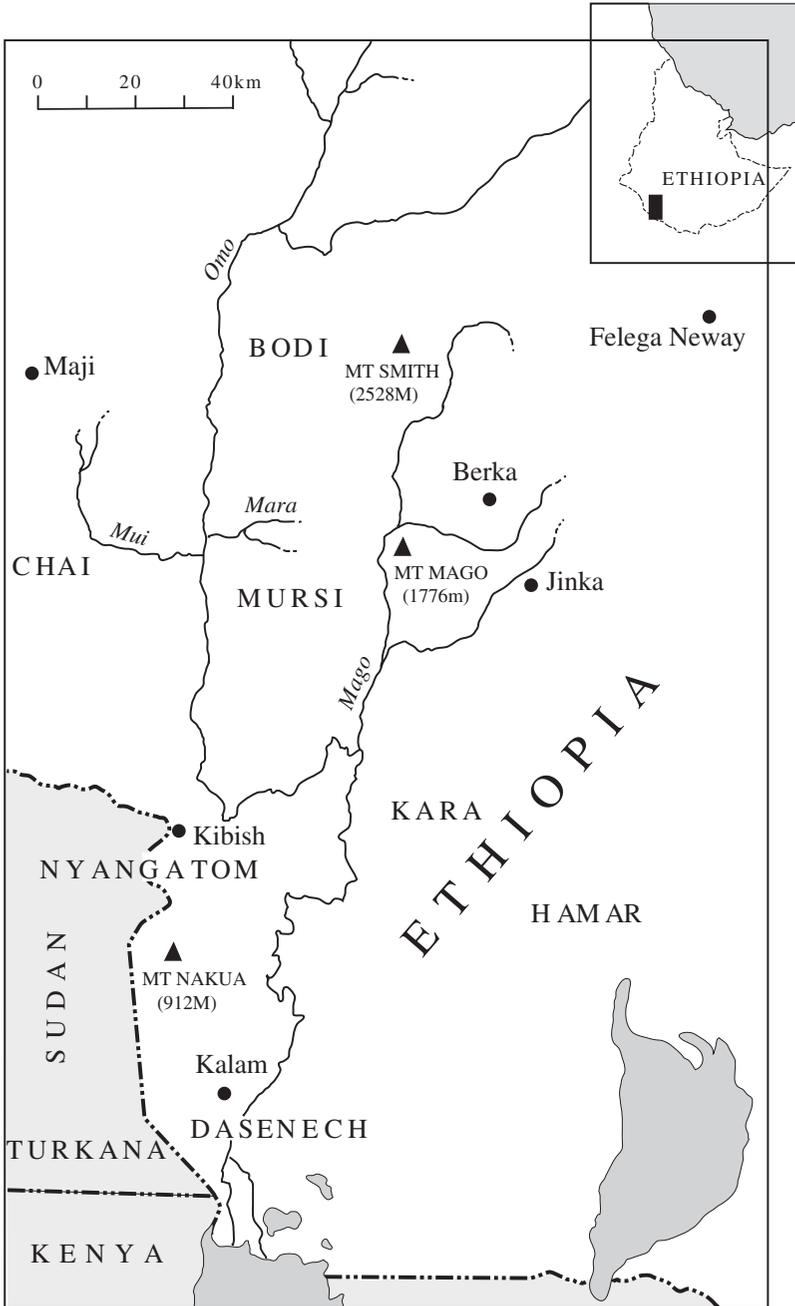
I describe the change that has come about in the way the Mursi themselves imagine their place in the world. This change has been the result of a process that can be described as both localizing and marginalizing. Localization has occurred as the Mursi have been drawn into, and constrained by, the 'spatial practices' of the Ethiopian state. (Here I shall draw heavily on the work of Arjun Appadurai and, especially, his chapter entitled 'The production of locality' in *Modernity at Large* (1996).) Marginalization has occurred as they have become dependent on values, norms and technologies which lie beyond their own means of production and control. I end by asking what conclusions can be drawn from my account that are relevant to the study of forcibly displaced people. For it is an interesting and, at first glance, a surprising fact that those who write about the displaced have, with a few notable exceptions, not exactly welcomed with open arms the burgeoning anthropological literature on the construction and maintenance of a sense of place.

### A Journey Made Them

I begin with a map (Figure 1), and for two reasons. First, there is the obvious reason that this is a quick and efficient way of showing where the people I am writing about are located on the surface of the planet. The Mursi are to be found in the southwestern corner of Ethiopia, in the valley of the River Omo, about 100 km. north of Lake Turkana and the border with Kenya. But this map also serves another purpose. It illustrates a key assumption with which I began my fieldwork in 1968, namely, that a culture is the property of a spatially localized people and that the world can therefore be mapped as a mosaic of separate, territorially distinct cultures. This 'peoples and cultures' view of the world has now been thoroughly discredited within anthropology. Indeed it was already on the way out when I began my fieldwork—I just didn't notice. And I didn't notice partly because of another assumption which is still very much with us, namely that what marks anthropology out, as a distinctive academic discipline, is its method of prolonged immersion, almost always of a lone individual, in another 'place', a place known as 'the field'.

The mystique of anthropological fieldwork fits perfectly with the idea that cultures are spatially localized, which in turn fits perfectly with 'nationalist thinking, in the Western countries where anthropology developed', about nations as 'naturally rooted in the native soil of their people' (Olwig and Hastrup 1997: 4). It is presumably because anthropology wants to—and must—abandon these last two ideas, while holding on to fieldwork, literally for dear life, that there has been so much effort devoted recently to finding ways of 'constructing' or 'locating' the field in territorially *unbounded*, *translocal* contexts. Nor is there any indication of these efforts subsiding—witness, for example the 2004 Annual Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth, held at the University of Durham, which was given the title, 'Locating the Field: Metaphors of Space, Place and Context in Anthropology'.

Figure 1  
The 'Peoples and Cultures' of the Lower Omo Valley



Current anthropological anxieties about the 'location of the field' would no doubt have struck me, back in 1968, as evidence of the self-indulgent wanderings of deranged minds. Southern Ethiopia, with its relatively 'unknown' languages and cultures, seemed like 'very heaven' to this particular aspirant fieldworker, a kind of 'tabula rasa', waiting to receive the inscription of the fortunate ethnographer. I thus saw it as one of my main, if preliminary, tasks to map the distribution of the 'peoples and cultures' of this area, and I had no difficulty in persuading the Royal Geographical Society's Expeditions Committee to supply me with compass, 100 ft tape, plane table, and aneroid barometer for the purpose.

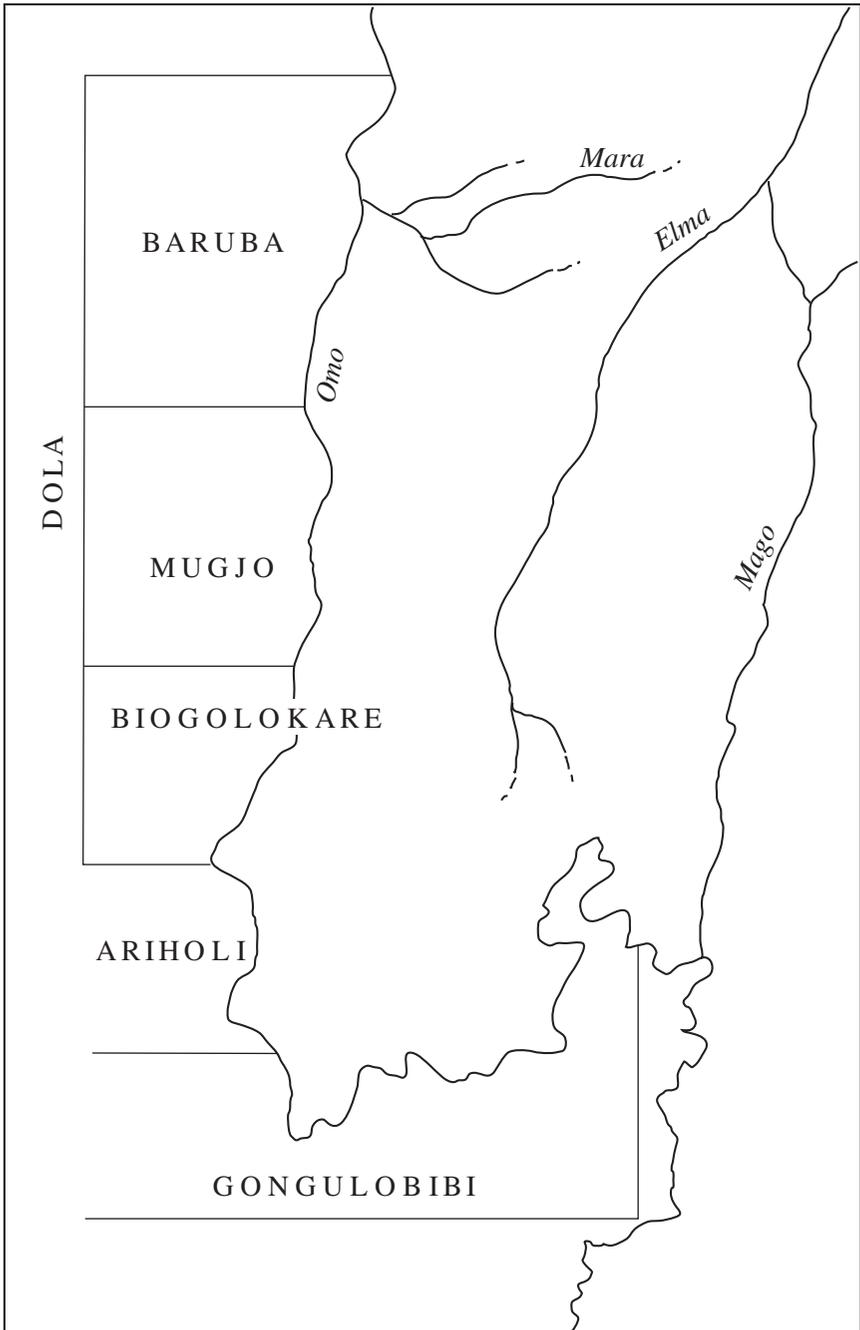
What's in a map—what does it do for those who make use of it and for those who are mapped? Maps are signs, they stand for something else. Their relationship to what they stand for, in the terminology of the philosopher C. S. Peirce (1909), is 'iconic'—they resemble what they stand for—and the more accurate the resemblance, the better the map. Maps tell us, then, where things are in the world. They tell us what to expect, and in so doing they facilitate movement, purposeful movement, about a previously unvisited and unknown landscape. But the usefulness of a map, as an aid to purposeful movement, clearly depends on the reality it represents *not* moving. This condition can normally be taken for granted when the reality in question consists of rivers, lakes and mountains. It becomes problematic, in both a practical and a political sense, when named human groups are added to the reality the map represents. A map like the one shown in Figure 1 implies the temporal and spatial *stability* of the groups whose names are inscribed on it, and the *movement* of those by whom, and for whom, the map was made. We move, they stay put.

I was not troubled by these thoughts as I set about mapping the distribution of groups in the Lower Omo Valley, partly no doubt because the group I was most interested in (and this was one of the main reasons *why* I was interested in it) appeared to be so neatly circumscribed by features of the natural environment—the Omo, Mago and Mara Rivers. But I should have been alerted to the falseness of this picture of bounded, stable groups by one of the first questions I was asked by the Mursi: had I seen any of 'their people' during the course of my journey to the Omo? They had, they told me, left these people behind, as they migrated from a place called Thaleb, their imagined place of origin, far away to the east, in the general direction from which I had come. I did not take this question seriously, largely no doubt because of my anthropological upbringing during the 1960s, which taught me that the past was definitely *not* something I needed to know about. But there was another troubling fact, about the present, that I could not so easily dismiss. Here I need to present another of my map-making efforts.

Figure 2 is an attempt to represent the internal spatial divisions of the Mursi. The divisions shown here are local groups, in the sense that their members live in the same or nearby places, interact on a daily basis in social, economic, political and ceremonial affairs and utilize the same range of economic resources. The common term for such groups in the literature on East African herders is

Figure 2

The Distribution of Local Groups along the River Omo



'territorial section' but, applied to the Mursi, this would give a misleading impression of discrete, territorially bounded segments, making up an equally discrete and territorially bounded whole. In fact, they are not territorial groups at all, if we mean by this groups with territorial boundaries. What gives them their spatial definition is that their members move back and forth, on a seasonal basis, between the same sites along the Omo for flood cultivation and in the eastern grassland, for cattle herding. But there is only a very rough correspondence between the river-bank cultivation areas used by the members of one of these groups and the areas they use for cattle herding. How then was I to represent their distribution on a map, in a way that would be exhaustive of the Mursi population as a whole? I found that this was only possible at the Omo, where one could mark off lengths of the river bank, group by group, according to the flood cultivation sites used by their members. This is a one-dimensional division, then—a continuous line being divided into lengths, rather than a continuous surface being divided into blocks (Ingold 1986: 150).

What worried me about this map was not its one dimensionality but what I saw as its 'structural asymmetry'. On the one hand, these five sub-divisions of the Mursi population were equivalent to each other. They embodied an environmental and social logic which helped to explain why there were five sub-divisions in the first place. Each was large enough to span the various natural resources on which the Mursi depended for subsistence, but small enough to allow their members to conduct their affairs as a single unit, through face-to-face discussion. On the other hand, they were not the *structural* equivalents of each other. The three northern sub-divisions, Baruba, Mugjo and Biogolokare, were grouped together into a larger unit, called Dola, which was structurally equivalent to each of the two southern sub-divisions, Ariholi and Gongulobibi. Each of these three divisions had its own politico-ritual leader, or priest (*komoru*), and each was independently responsible for turning its male members into social adults, through the periodic creation of a new age set.

The obvious solution to this 'problem'—or rather, the solution that should have been obvious to me—was that the Mursi were on the move. The northern division, Dola, was spawning new subdivisions because people were moving north to occupy new land in the direction of, and beyond, the River Mara. I could not see this, first because I was not interested in what the Mursi had wanted to tell me about their past migrations. Second, I persisted in seeing them from above, cartographically, as occupying a bounded territory. In other words, I was taking for granted the presumed isomorphism of people, culture and territory upon which the ideology of nationalism is based. I was also 'seeing like a state' (Scott 1998). I was motivated by a desire to 'get a handle' on populations and their environment by creating 'a standard grid' that would simplify and thereby make easily 'legible' a complex and ever changing reality (Scott 1998: 2). The first essential in pursuit of this objective was to 'see' the people of the Lower Omo as so many separate 'cultures' or 'societies', occupying mutually exclusive, historically permanent and clearly bounded territories.

But the Mursi did not have a territory in this sense at all: they had a place. And they did not have a boundary: they had a frontier. They were moving, not standing still.

What finally made me realize this was a return visit in 1973 when we found that the Mursi were at war with their northern neighbours, the Bodi. In trying to understand the causes of this war, it was impossible to ignore the fact that there had been another Mursi–Bodi war twenty years earlier, and that this war had been concluded by means of a peace-making ritual that was held well to the south of the current northern extent of Mursi occupation. The Mursi, it seemed, were pushing forward against the Bodi, marking their progress, in time, by periodic wars and, in space, by peace-making rituals which, by their location, turned areas of previous *de facto* Mursi occupation into areas of *de jure* occupation. This interpretation was confirmed when, in 1975, the peace-making ritual that concluded the latest war was held 20 miles to the north of the place where it had been held at the conclusion of the previous war, in the mid-fifties.

I was now able to appreciate the significance of various ‘spatial practices’ by means of which the Mursi were producing and maintaining a more or less precarious sense of place in a contested environment. These included such mundane practices of everyday life as the use of the phrase ‘I’m going outside’ to indicate that one would be travelling from the relative safety of the Omo to the eastern grazing areas, where the possible presence of raiders had always to be guarded against; and the phrase ‘to show the cattle a path’, meaning to hold or take part in a public meeting or debate. The speakers at these meetings would always walk back and forth, holding a spear or rifle as they spoke, as if accompanying cattle into a potentially hostile area. These occasions would often be marked by the killing of a stock animal, and the use of its entrails in divination. The entrails would be laid out on the ground like a map, one side of which represented the Omo–Mago watershed, across which raiders could be expected to come.

The periodic rituals of the age organization, culminating in the giving of adulthood to a new male age set, are a particularly good example of place-making because of the ritual link they make between adulthood, personhood and place. The most recent age set was formed, 30 years after the previous one, in 1991. During the course of that year, each of the three structurally equivalent local groups held its own ceremony. I was present at the Ariholi ceremony. This involved the building of an enclosure around the base of a young tree which had been especially selected because it was likely to survive for at least the life of the new age set (Woodhead 1991). The members of the set were thus ritually identified with the place at which they had been made into adults. Producing adults, or producing what Appadurai, as we shall see in a moment, calls ‘local subjects’, is part of the process of place-making.

Once having realized that the Mursi were ‘on the move’, I also had to take seriously the stories of past migrations that I had so easily dismissed during my first visit to them. First there was a move to the Omo, from the west, which

I calculated must have begun early in the nineteenth century. It was difficult to doubt the historicity of this move, even though it had happened long enough ago to be embellished by one of the most widespread clichés to be found in African myths of origin—the waters of the Omo parted to allow the migrants to cross. Next, there was a move eastwards from the Omo and northwards to the River Mara which took place during the 1920s and 1930s. Some of my closest friends and best informants were the children and grandchildren of those who had been amongst the first Mursi to cultivate along the River Mara, and build their cattle homesteads in the wooded grasslands east of the Omo. And then there was a third move, in the early 1980s, to the valley of the River Mago, an area which had last been occupied by the Bodi during the early years of the twentieth century.

Because I was able to observe this last move more or less as it happened, it was possible to extrapolate backwards from it, to imagine how the earlier moves must have taken place. On this basis I felt able to assume that each was made, initially, by a small group of ‘pioneers’, an offshoot from a larger group, who travelled a relatively short distance to a new place on the frontier of the settled area, a place then unoccupied but which had previously been occupied by another group. The pioneers were followed, over succeeding years, by a ‘drift’ of individuals and families. Each move was explained by the migrants as a response to environmental pressure and as part of a continuing effort to find and occupy ‘a cool place’, a place blessed with riverside forest for cultivation and well-watered grassland for cattle herding. But each move had more or less important consequences for the subsistence activities, seasonal movements and, over the long term, the self-identity of the migrants. New, named local groups came into being and new relationships were formed, both of cooperation and conflict, with neighbouring groups.

It is important to note that none of the names of local groups shown in Figure 2 are place specific. Gongulobibi, for example, means ‘big canoes’ and Ariholi means ‘white ox’. But when I first visited the Mursi, the two most northerly and recently founded of these groups, Mugjo (which literally means ‘full of shit’) and Baruba, were referred to by the names of the rivers around which their founding members had built their settlements and cultivated. Thus the Baruba were known as ‘the Dola of Mara’, or simply as ‘Mara’ and I was told that the group that was then known as Biogolokare had originally been identified by the name of another river, the Darthum. It seems that, as the members of a pioneering group become more and more ‘emplaced’ in an area, their original place-specific name comes to be dropped in favour of a nickname that enables them to be identified, and to identify themselves, without reference to place. This may seem perverse and paradoxical, but it can also be seen as a logical consequence of a cultural commitment to a theoretically unending process of movement into new and contested areas, a process in which new groups are gradually differentiated by spatial distance from parent ones. So, when members of the Baruba group began their occupation of the Mago Valley in the early 1980s, they could call themselves ‘the Baruba of the Mago’.

I once tried to sum up this realization that Mursi identity was a product, rather than a cause, of movement by saying that they had not made a journey—a journey had made them (Turton 1979). But what this phrase failed to make clear was that this was a journey that could never be completed, for two reasons. First, the community's hold over place was seen as inherently precarious, making necessary not only continued military readiness, but also the periodic performance of 'spatializing' rituals. Second, there was no sense of an eventual arrival at, or return to, a specific place. They were not harking back to an imagined place of origin, but forward to an imagined and *ideal* place of arrival. Their 'land of dreams', to use Antony Smith's phrase (1986: 28), was ahead of them. So it seemed that the Mursi were engaged in an ongoing 'project' of place-making and self-reproduction, a project that was changing them, even as it created new realities 'on the ground' for their neighbours.

But although they could not complete the journey, they could always be stopped in their tracks. For this to happen, they would only need to come up against another reality-making and place-making project, more powerful than their own. And this is what has happened to them over the past few years. In the next section, I describe how the Mursi view of the world, and of their place within it, has been affected by their increasing engagement with the Ethiopian state and by the growing penetration of their world by the card-carriers of late modernity—such as anthropologists, film-makers, missionaries and tourists.

### **'Our Land Has Shrunk'**

This is where it becomes helpful to introduce Appadurai's contribution to the construction of a general theory of 'locality production' and, in particular, what he has to say about the 'contextual' nature of locality. He defines locality as a 'phenomenological quality', or 'dimension' of social life, to be distinguished from 'neighbourhood', which he defines as an 'actually existing' social form in which locality is 'realized' (1996: 178–179). He chooses 'neighbourhood' as an alternative to 'place', on the grounds that neighbourhood 'suggests sociality, immediacy and reproducibility' (1996: 204). I do not think it would misrepresent his meaning to treat 'locality' as synonymous with 'sense of place'.

Looked at in this way, one can ask how the relationship between locality, as sense of place, and neighbourhood, as a 'substantive social form', is affected by what Giddens calls the 'dynamism of modernity' (Giddens 1991: 20). Appadurai is at pains to point out that, everywhere,

... locality is an inherently fragile social achievement. Even in the most intimate, spatially confined, geographically isolated situations, locality must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds (1996: 179).

Despite the fact that most anthropologists who write about such situations take locality, as do their subjects, for granted, the ethnographic record is full of evidence that 'hard and regular work' (1996: 180) is needed to produce and maintain a sense of place. This 'work' includes everything from the building of

houses and settlements to rituals of all kinds. Rituals of naming and initiation are particularly relevant to place-making because, with their spatial and temporal symbolism, they are designed to produce 'local subjects, actors who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbours, friends and enemies' (1996: 179). The work of locality production is, always and everywhere, a constant struggle to keep at bay 'an endemic sense of anxiety and instability in social life' (*ibid.*).

We cannot expect to get very far then, in understanding the impact on locality production of the 'dynamism of modernity', unless we go beyond the initial insight that locality is everywhere an 'inherently fragile achievement'. What can take us further, I believe, is Appadurai's analysis of 'the problem of context'. I have found this analysis particularly helpful in thinking about the recent experience of the Mursi, as they have been drawn into the locality producing 'project' of the Ethiopian state. Let me try to summarize that part of his argument which is most relevant to my present purpose.

Neighbourhoods—the 'substantive social forms' in which locality is 'realized'—imply context in two senses. First, they *are* contexts: they provide the 'frame or setting' for the conduct of meaningful human action and for the production of 'local subjects' (Appadurai 1996: 184). Second they *require* and *produce* contexts: they have to be carved out from 'some sort of hostile or recalcitrant environment' which may include other neighbourhoods (*ibid.*). In this sense, 'The production of a neighbourhood is inherently colonizing' because it 'involves the assertion of socially . . . organized power over places and settings that are viewed as potentially chaotic or rebellious' (183–184). Appadurai calls this the 'context-generative' quality which is a necessary aspect of all locality production.

But although all neighbourhoods are 'inherently colonizing', some are more colonizing than others. What makes the difference is

. . . the relationships between the contexts that neighbourhoods create and those they encounter. This is a matter of social power and of the different scales of organization and control within which particular spaces (and places) are embedded (Appadurai 1996: 186).

In the modern world, the most powerful context-generative social formation that any neighbourhood is likely to encounter is the nation-state, in which 'neighbourhoods exist . . . to produce compliant national citizens—and not for the production of local subjects' (Appadurai 1996: 190; see also Scott's critique of the 'hegemonic planning mentality' of 'high modernist' statecraft, with its exclusion of local knowledge and know-how (1998: 6)). The nation-state has produced 'extreme examples of neighbourhoods which are context-produced rather than context-generative', including urban slums, ghettos, prisons, concentration camps and refugee camps. These are 'the starkest examples of the conditions of uncertainty, poverty, displacement and despair under which locality can be produced' (Appadurai 1996: 193)—but produced it nevertheless is. To see how this applies to the Mursi, we can begin by looking briefly

at their latest, and almost certainly their last, pioneering migration, to the River Mago.

This move began in 1980, at the end of a decade during which the Mursi had experienced their worst famine in living memory. The economic arguments for moving were overwhelming. With a permanent river, large areas of relatively untouched forest and a more reliable rainfall regime than the Omo lowlands, the Mago valley offered excellent prospects for both flood-retreat and rain-fed cultivation. Another very important attraction of the area was that it was only a few hours' walk from the nearest settlements and market villages of a group of highland farmers, the Aari. By moving to the Mago, the Mursi could therefore improve their access to market exchange, which has become for them, as for other drought affected populations in Africa since the 1970s, a vital means of surviving periods of hunger. The fact that the Aari would be bound to see the arrival of the Mursi, virtually on their doorstep, as an encroachment on their territory was not considered a serious obstacle to the move by the Mursi.

Before the migration began, in September 1980, senior men of the Baruba group formally debated the issue for four consecutive days and sent a party of ten men to scout out a particular area in the Mago Valley. When these men returned with a favourable report, a small number of families—probably less than 100—set out together, spending two nights on the way and taking with them an ox and a sheep. Having arrived at the appointed place, they sacrificed the animals, scattered the chyme of the ox in an act of ritual purification and proceeded to share out amongst themselves plots for flood cultivation along the banks of the river. A delegation was sent to talk to the nearest Aari, who raised no objection to the arrival of the Mursi. It must have been obvious to both sides, of course, that the Aari had no choice but to be welcoming, given the superior military capability of the Mursi. This superiority was based not only on the greater firepower of the Mursi but also on the organizational advantages of the age set system, which makes it possible to mobilize relatively large numbers of young men at short notice. During the first few years of occupation, the expected bumper harvests were duly achieved. Although crop yields then began to fall, they have remained, on average, higher than in the Omo lowlands, with the result that the population of Mursi in the Mago Valley has continued to build up. This was a 'colonizing' move by the Mursi, then, backed up by the threat of superior military force, in which they had successfully carved out a new 'context' for themselves in a contested environment and, in the process, created a new context for their neighbours. But there was an important difference between this and their two earlier moves, to the Omo and the Mara: this one had brought them face to face not only with the Aari but also with the hugely superior 'context-generative' power of the Ethiopian state.

It was not until the early years of the twentieth century that the Ethiopian state, under the Emperor Menelik II, began expanding into the southwest. This was partly in response to the need to establish international boundaries with the colonial territories of the European powers. It was also driven by the need of

the centre to extract resources, including ivory, gold and slaves, from its periphery through raiding and tribute. Christopher Clapham has noted that this was a pattern of state-building familiar in many parts of the world but which had been

...pre-empted in most of sub-Saharan Africa by the imposition of colonial rule... African states prior to the colonial era... seldom possessed fixed boundaries (which arise when the power of one state is checked by that of neighbouring states), but spread out from the core into hinterlands of tributary rule and mere raiding (2002: 9–10).

The populations of these ‘hinterlands’ became ‘semi-citizens’, some of whom the centre was prepared to trade with, some of whom were forced to pay tribute and some of whom were there simply to be raided (Johnson 1986: 221). The Mursi came into the last category, which at least had the advantage for them that no serious attempt was made to exercise administrative control over them. This left them free to follow a strategy of avoidance—amounting almost to denial—in their dealings with the agents of the state, whom they called ‘Kuchumba’. (The Mursi still use this word to distinguish between the descendants of ‘colonizing’ northern Ethiopians and their ‘colonized’ highland neighbours, such as the Aari, whom they call ‘Sunya’.)

This strategy of avoidance and denial was still serving the Mursi well when I first met them, but it began to look decidedly threadbare, at least to an outside observer, in the dramatically changed political environment that followed the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. The Soviet-backed military government, known as the Derg, which then took over, set about imposing, for the first time in Ethiopia, what Clapham has called a ‘project of *encadrement*, or incorporation into structures of control’ (2002: 14). Unlike any previous Ethiopian government, the Derg embraced an ‘ideal of nation-statehood in which citizens would equally be associated with, and subjected to, an omnipotent state’ (*ibid.*). But it has only been since the present ruling party, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), came to power in 1991, that the Mursi have had to face up to the fact that their strategy of disengagement from the state is not only outdated, but also counter-productive. Paradoxically, the EPRDF’s radical re-structuring of Ethiopia as a federation of self-governing ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’, has enabled it to incorporate peripheral groups like the Mursi into ‘structures of control’ much more successfully even than its immediate predecessor, the Derg (Turton forthcoming 2006).

A dramatic demonstration of this changed relationship between the Mursi and the state came just three years ago. Under a tacit threat of military reprisals, Mursi elders were forced, in a long drawn out process, to collaborate with the government in persuading a number of young men who had taken part in a raid on the Aari to give themselves up to the police (Turton 2003a). This raid, in which between 30 and 40 Aari, men, women and children, had been killed, was in retaliation for the killing of a young Mursi mother, as she slept overnight in an Aari settlement with her one year-old child, on her way home from

market. In one of many meetings held to debate this issue, the politico-ritual leader of the northern Mursi, Komorakora, summed up the situation facing the Mursi in spatial terms.

Our land has shrunk. There is nowhere else for us to go. On both sides of us, the hills are full of Kuchumba and we only have this tiny bit of land in between. If the government attacked us, where could we go? They would wipe us out and our enemies would laugh. And if we were not finished off by the government, we'd be finished off by hunger.

This amounted to a public admission, first, that avoidance and disengagement were no longer a viable strategy for the Mursi as a way of dealing with the Ethiopian state; second, that traditional means of 'locality production' (of which the raid on the Aari can be seen as an example) were now counter-productive; and third, that they could no longer imagine themselves as a people with a permanent option to make a new place for themselves, in a new area.

Translating this into the language of Appadurai's theory of 'locality production', we can say that the Mursi occupation of the Mago valley was 'context generative', in the sense that it produced new contexts, not only for the Mago migrants but also for the Aari and, to some extent, for the agencies of the state. But by bringing the Mursi face to face, as it were, with these agencies, it also created a situation in which all future Mursi locality production was likely to be carried out in a context overwhelmingly produced, not by them, but by the state. In words that apply equally well to the Mursi, Appadurai describes the similar experience of the Brazilian Yanomami as follows:

The Yanomami are being steadily *localized* . . . in the context of the Brazilian polity. Thus, while they are still in a position to generate contexts as they produce and reproduce their own neighbourhoods, they are increasingly prisoners in the context-producing activities of the nation-state, which makes their own efforts to produce locality seem feeble, even doomed (1996: 186).

The Mursi also are being 'localized' by the activities of the nation-state, in the sense that these activities have blocked their potential movement into new areas. But there is another, and perhaps more fundamental, way in which they have experienced 'localization' over the past few years: they have come to see themselves as occupying a peripheral or marginal place in the world. This is the experience (hardly unique to the Mursi) of becoming dependent on (in the sense of seeing as necessary to a satisfactory lifestyle) values, norms and technologies, the production of which is beyond the knowledge and control of one's own community.

### **Necklace Beads, Rifles and Tourists**

While it is true that this experience of marginalization has, for many Mursi, intensified and become inescapable over the past ten years or so, its origins can be traced to a time well before they became 'prisoners in the context-producing activities of the nation-state'. Apart from wanting to know whether

I had met any of ‘their people’ on my way to the Omo Valley, there were two other questions, about the origin of glass necklace beads and firearms, which Mursi frequently asked me during my first few months of fieldwork. It was almost as though they had stored up these questions, waiting for the first opportunity to put them to an appropriate informant.

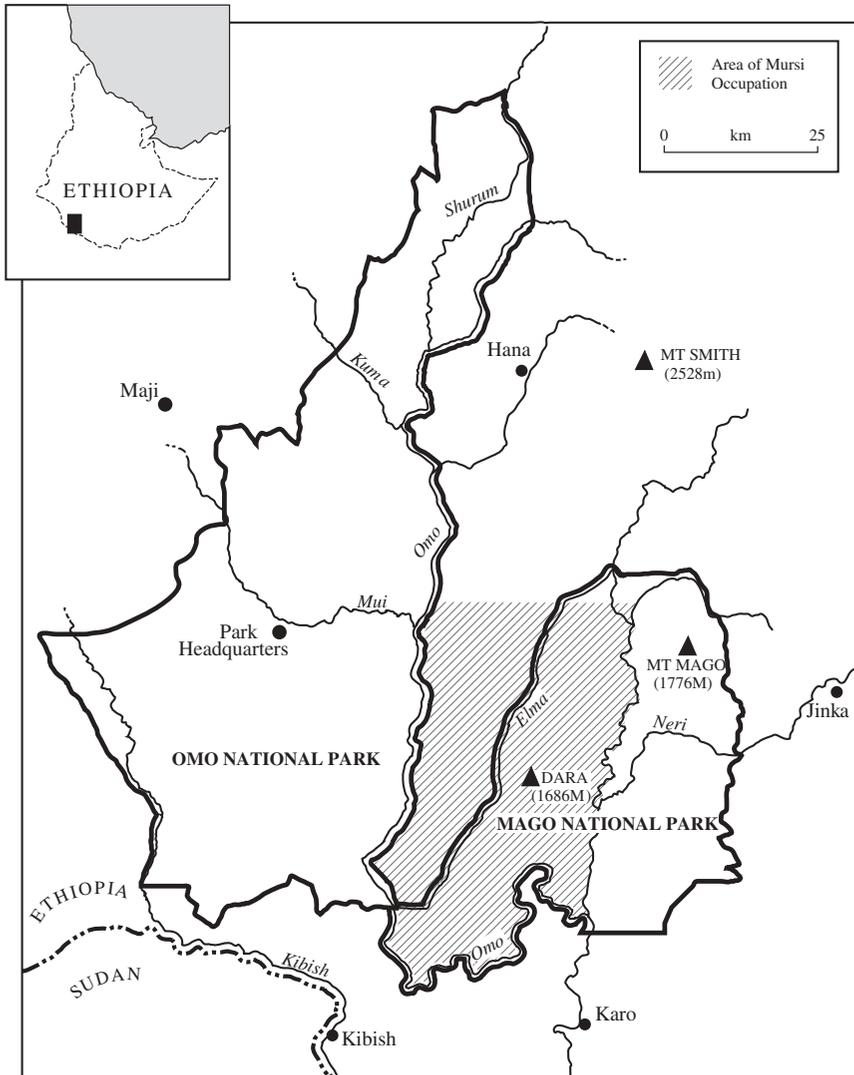
Glass necklace beads were introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period when European explorers and mercenaries and Ethiopian soldiers and settlers were ‘opening up’ the southwest for trade, raiding and the collection of tribute. Before this, necklace beads were made from dried berries, strung on giraffe tail hair. The indestructibility of glass beads, and their commercially produced colours, meant that they quickly and comprehensively replaced these earlier beads, though they continued to be strung on giraffe hair. It is probable, furthermore, that the introduction of glass beads helped to make necklaces more symbolically significant, as expressions of a person’s social identity, than they had been previously. Firearms were introduced about the same time as glass beads, and they equally comprehensively replaced the spears and shields that Mursi men carried at the beginning of the last century. There is no clearer indication of the extent to which firearms have become part of the cultural self-identity of the Mursi, than that they have been incorporated into the system of bridewealth exchange. A marriage cannot be concluded without the transfer of cattle from the groom’s to the bride’s family, but it is common practice for a rifle to be included in the bridewealth, where it is counted as the equivalent of four head of cattle.

What people wanted to know from me was how glass beads and firearms were produced. It was clear, from the way they phrased their questions, that they already had their own theories about this. On what kind of tree, they asked, did glass beads grow? And was it true that rifles—clearly a technological rather than a natural product—were made by smiths who lived and worked under water? New knowledge and information is, of course, always absorbed and accounted for in ways that are least likely to shake our existing cognitive and cultural assumptions. These Mursi theories about glass beads and rifles had the advantage of leaving intact their view of themselves as occupying a central place in the world. They were the equivalent of the strategy of avoidance and denial adopted towards the Ethiopian state. For neither glass beads nor rifles were imagined to be products of a recognizably human process of technological production, located in another ‘neighbourhood’ that was ‘context-generative’ in relation to the neighbourhood they occupied. Glass beads were seen as products of nature—it was just that the trees in question did not grow in their country. Rifles, on the other hand, were seen as supernatural products, made in a place that was simply not inhabitable by ‘normal’ human beings.

Maintaining belief in such convenient fictions has become more difficult over the past 30 years, as the range of items which the Mursi have come to see as necessary for a satisfactory lifestyle, but which are beyond their technological capacity to produce, has steadily expanded. These items now include plastic gerry cans, aluminium pots, cotton cloth, blankets and commercially produced

clothes. There has also been a steady growth in Mursi contact with the 'outside world'. These contacts have included our own comings and goings (sometimes with a film-crew in tow), the conscription of half a dozen Mursi into the Ethiopian army in the 1980s, the arrival in the Mago Valley, from 1987 onwards, of a succession of Protestant missionaries, the establishment of the Omo and Mago National Parks, enclosing large areas of land occupied by the Mursi (see Figure 3), and by a growing number of European, North American

Figure 3  
The Omo and Mago National Parks



and Japanese tourists. I do not have the space to consider each of these influences in turn, but it is worth devoting a few words to tourists, since they can be seen as paradigmatic representatives of the 'world of the globally mobile' (MacCannell 1976; Bauman 1998: 77–102).

Tourists are attracted to the Omo Valley by the image presented to them, in travel agents' brochures and travel articles, of one of the last 'wildernesses' in the world, inhabited by wild animals, naked warriors and—in the case of the Mursi—women wearing large pottery or wooden discs or 'plates' in their lower lips. Judging by its ubiquitous appearance in travel brochures, advertisements and on postcards, the lip plate has become, for those organizing tours to the Omo lowlands, a symbol which encapsulates the quintessentially 'tribal' and 'untouched' existence of the Mursi. Ironically, however, it is their growing need for cash, as their economy becomes increasingly dependent on market exchange, that drives the Mursi to supply the tourists' demand for photographs. For what the tourists are most interested in is photographs of women wearing lip-plates. A woman hopes to be paid 2 Ethiopian birr (about US\$0.25) for each photograph taken of her, but she usually has to settle for a lot less. Although eagerly sought after by both sides, this 'encounter' between the Mursi and tourists appears to be as uncomfortable and unsatisfactory for those who take part in it, as it is disturbing for those who witness it (Turton 2004).

The tourists are archetypal consumers, eager to spend their money on what they do not need. The Mursi play the part of archetypal primitives, eager to be photographed in order to obtain money to pay for what are, or have become, necessities: grain, medical and veterinary drugs, plastic gerry cans, pots, cloth and goat-skin skirts. Having taken their photographs, the tourists climb back into their air-conditioned land-cruisers and head off for their safari camps and hotels, places as far removed from the world of the Mursi as are the Northern cities from which the tourists set out on their expensive 'adventure' holidays in the first place. The uneasiness of this encounter is no doubt partly explained by the 'predatory nature of the photographic act', an act which 'turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' (Sontag 1979: 14). But another part of the explanation lies in the evident fascination of the tourists with the lip-plate, which the Mursi know is seen as a sign of their backwardness. As one watches the Mursi—men and women, though mainly women—standing sullenly to be photographed, and visibly flinching as the video cameras approach from different angles, panning up and down their bodies, it is difficult not to conclude that they feel both violated and demeaned (Woodhead 2001).

It is also difficult not to see this as a vivid representation of the relationship between the world we inhabit, the world of the rich and the globally mobile, and the world the Mursi inhabit, the world of the poor and the localized. There is an obvious sense in which we all live in the same world—the physical world, planet earth. We share this world with the Mursi and they are increasingly affected by its growing interconnectedness. But we experience this world differently. Ours is undeniably a world of movement, a globalized world in which distance has been made more or less irrelevant to communication. The world of the Mursi is

localized in two senses. First, their options for movement into new areas have been closed down by the 'context-producing activities' of the nation-state. Second, the very interconnectedness from which we benefit, has made the Mursi dependent, in fact and in aspiration, on things and ideas, the production and distribution of which are beyond their reach and control.

The Mursi who asked me, 35 years ago, about glass beads and rifles were not simply expressing idle curiosity (as I thought at the time) but, rather, they were giving voice to a deep-seated concern about their place in the world. Most Mursi were then able to see themselves as occupying a place that was physically and morally central in relation to the outside world, a place which they could still see as the source of the norms and values which gave purpose and meaning to their lives. Over the intervening years, and for the reasons I have described, many have come to see the centre slipping away from them and, worse still, they have no idea where it is now located. They have come to experience what Zygmunt Bauman has elegantly described as 'the discomforts of localized existence' (1998: 2).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show, from my own experience of long-term research amongst the Mursi, that to understand how people experience place, and how it becomes 'inextricably bound up' with their social and personal identity, we must treat it, not as a stage upon which social activity is carried out, but as a *product* of social activity—and a fragile one at that. I want to end by considering the relevance of this to the study of people who, unlike the Mursi, have been *forced* to leave their homes, often at what amounts to a moment's notice.

It has been rightly pointed out, by Gaim Kibreab and David Parkin among others, that the way people experience movement to a new place, and the extent to which this is a shocking and disruptive experience, is determined by the conditions under which they move (Kibreab 1999: 406; Parkin 1999: 309). The most important of these conditions, in Parkin's words, concerns 'whether and how much people see themselves as being displaced against their will and whether their notions of territorial attachment and autochthony can be retained and even extended to areas not necessarily adjacent to each other' (Parkin 1999: 309). The Mursi who moved to the Mago Valley clearly did not see themselves as 'being displaced against their will', even though they did see themselves as responding to growing pressure on their subsistence base. They were also able to see themselves as repeating a pattern of pioneering movements that had become part of their self-identity as Mursi. Those who moved were, in this sense, more Mursi than those who stayed. And third, the landscape into which they moved was relatively close by and easily 'legible', in terms of the disposition of subsistence resources. One could say that, for the Mago migrants, there was no obvious rupture of continuity with the place from which they had moved.

For those who move in much less conducive circumstances, the task of 'producing locality' in a new place seems to be dominated by efforts to repair

or re-establish continuity with the place of origin. This 'work' of continuity maintenance was described long ago by Elizabeth Colson, in her account of how Gwembe villagers, displaced by Zambia's Kariba dam, 'learnt' a new environment and gave it a familiar imprint by using old neighbourhood names for new settlements (1971: 49–53). The same theme has been explored more recently by Parkin (1999) and Hirschon (2001) in their Colson Lectures, by Liisa Malkki (1995a) in her study of Burundian refugees in Tanzania, by Graeme Rodgers (2002) in his doctoral thesis on former Mozambican refugees in South Africa and by Laura Hammond (2004) in her recent book on the 'return' of Tigrayan refugees from Sudan to a new resettlement site in the western lowlands of Tigray. The place-making practices these authors describe include the telling and retelling of stories about the former place, the re-creation of familiar features from the lost environment, the transportation of familiar objects and personal mementoes and the maintenance of social links to what Rodgers calls 'an imagined place of belonging' (2002: 142).

These accounts help us to understand the strength of attachment to place in human social life, by treating place as a product, rather than as a precondition of social activity, and by analysing specific place-making practices in detail. In this way they enhance our understanding of what it means to be displaced and, therefore, our 'imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers' (Rorty 1989: xvi). But these authors represent the exception rather than the rule in the literature on human displacement. As Rodgers points out, those who write on this subject tend to pay 'little attention to social and cultural constructions of the . . . places occupied by refugees and other forced migrants', preferring instead to concentrate on the 'physical and productive properties' of these places (2002: 136–137). If this is so, then it becomes interesting to ask why recent anthropological theorizing about place and place-making—about *emplacement*, in other words—has not made more of a mark on the wider literature dealing with *displacement*.

One answer could be that there is a degree of impatience with what might be seen as the needlessly obfuscatory language of the theorizers. But what we are talking about here is the apparent avoidance, in the literature on displacement, of an approach to place and place-making which is the current orthodoxy, not just in anthropology but also in other disciplines, especially geography and archaeology (Tilley 1994). We therefore need an explanation which goes beyond mere irritation with the 'discursive practices' of late-modernity. In my view, the explanation is to be found in the 'dependence . . . on policy definitions and concerns' which Richard Black has suggested is one of the 'principal weaknesses' of the field of refugee studies (Black 2001: 58).

The approach to place which I have been discussing is a 'de-naturalizing' one, in that it seeks to treat as 'figure' what was previously taken for granted as 'ground' (Appadurai 1996: 182). Such an approach is not, of course, peculiar to academic theorizing about place. As Antony Easthope says, at the beginning of *Contemporary Film Theory*, 'Every version of contemporary theory begins by breaking with the naturalist attitude' (1993: 1). But a de-naturalizing approach

to taken-for-granted categories and concepts can lead to difficulties when one is trying, not only to understand the world, but also to influence those who have the power to change it. This problem has been expressed by Finn Stepputat as follows:

When researchers use ... de-naturalizing analytics on categories that are introduced in order to help or protect people, such as 'refugee', 'repatriate' or 'internally displaced people', they are entering a loaded political field where they have to be very much aware of the effects their arguments may have (1999: 416).

There seems to be an anxiety, then, that by treating the sense of place, and the link between place and personhood, as the result of a continuing effort at 'locality production', in which we are all engaged, we are in danger of playing into the hands of governments and others who may wish to diminish or ignore the pain, suffering and therefore the rights, of those who have been forced out of their homes. The same worry seems to be aroused by the 'anti-sedentarist' thinking that is part and parcel of seeing place as a cultural construction, and which insists on treating movement as a normal, rather than pathological characteristic of human life. I do not suggest that those who share such anxieties actually *believe* that the link between place and personal identity is 'natural', or that sedentarism is the 'natural' condition of human life. But by not grappling head on with the implications of a de-naturalizing conception of place, the link between identity and place is left untheorized and, therefore, ambiguous (Stepputat 1999: 418). This is unfortunate, for at least three reasons.

First, it goes against what I believe is the proper, in the sense of most productive, relationship between academic research and policy. The role of academic knowledge should be to reflect critically upon, not to confirm and legitimize, the taken for granted assumptions upon which policy making is often based. Uncritical acceptance of the priorities, concepts and categorizations of policy makers should not, therefore, be thought of as the equivalent, or necessary condition, of 'policy relevance'. On the contrary, and paradoxically, the academic study of human displacement is less likely to be 'relevant' to policy, the more closely it follows policy related categories and concepts in defining its subject matter and setting its research priorities (Turton 2003b).

Second, leaving the link between place and personhood ambiguous tacitly confirms the nationalist view of the world which was responsible for creating the so-called 'refugee problem' in the first place. Hannah Arendt, in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, writes that what was 'unprecedented' about the condition of European refugees at the end of the Second World War was 'not the loss of a home, but the impossibility of finding a new one ... This moreover ... was not a problem of space but of political organization' (1966: 293–294). It was a problem, that is, of the political organization of space according to the nation-state model, which takes for granted the isomorphism of people, culture and territory. Commenting on Arendt's use of the word 'home' in this passage, Nicholas Xenos notes that 'home here signifies a place in the world in so far as such a place makes ... action meaningful through shared understandings and a shared

interpretation of action' (1996: 243). He goes on to distinguish this meaning of home, which accords closely with Appadurai's 'neighbourhood', from 'homeland'. 'Homelands are places that are unchanging and to which one must return no matter how hostile they may be to the returnee.' Homes, by contrast, 'can be made and remade, if there is space for them' (*ibid.*).

The third reason why it is unfortunate not to emphasize the constructed nature of place in the study of displacement, is that this hampers understanding of what displacement means to the displaced—how it is experienced. For it is clear from the many studies we have of diasporic and transnational communities, as well as those I mentioned earlier by Colson, Hirschon, Malkki, Parkin, Rodgers and Hammond, that the experience of displacement is not only about the *loss* of a place, and the pain and bereavement this entails. It is also, and inevitably, about the struggle to *make* a place in the world, a place 'which makes action meaningful through shared understandings and a shared interpretation of action' (Xenos 1996: 243).

Here it is relevant to note Liisa Malkki's observation that *displacement* is the 'flip side' of *emplacement* (1995b: 517). To emphasize the horror and pain of the loss of home (in Arendt's sense) or 'neighbourhood' (in Appadurai's), and to say nothing—or little—about the work of producing home or neighbourhood, whether in a refugee camp, resettlement site, detention centre, city slum or middle class suburb, is to treat the displaced as fundamentally flawed human beings, as lacking what it takes to be social agents and historical subjects. It is to see them—as virtually everyone who writes about refugees urges us *not* to see them—as a category of 'passive victims' who exist to be assisted, managed, regimented and controlled—and for their own good. Above all, it makes it more difficult for us to identify with the suffering stranger, to see him or her as an ordinary person, a person like us, and therefore as a potential neighbour in *our* neighbourhood.

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