

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The Maze Below, The Journey Above: Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance* and the Conversation of Silence

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What can we learn from an attempt to refuse conversation and its connected demonstration of the link between form and content in fiction? On the surface—a colloquialism which will take on a new dimension as this essay progresses—Hernan Diaz's 2017 novel *In the Distance* is a journey narrative and a Western. Both generic categories are geographically laden and directional in nature, as a journey needs a starting point and a destination, and as is implied in the very title of 'Western' which denotes certain formal expectations and geographical boundaries. What the novel also offers is a particularly geographic examination of the twinned concepts of conversation and silence, and paired communicatory elements such as echoes and aurality. These communicative facets culminate in the novel's formally intriguing 'burrowing' segment, within which the intersection of curious geography, conversation, and silence is most pronounced. Although the protagonist ultimately fails to remove himself from conversation, i.e. human society, his attempt to do so establishes an intriguing concept of space and place that is created by a character's attempted refusal of the human elements of both.

In Diaz's debut novel, Håkan Söderström and his brother Linus immigrate to New York from Sweden in the nineteenth century, but they are separated upon arrival and never

reunite. Håkan, accidentally rerouted to San Francisco, spends the rest of the book trying to get back east to find his brother, and in his repeated failures to make this reverse ‘go West’ journey, keeps company with an array of individuals and communities: prospectors, businesspeople, a naturalist, and lawmen number among the characters he meets, each embroiled in their own search for wealth, power, knowledge, and other satisfactions. The novel’s frame narrative takes the shape of a circle from a bird’s eye view, as it begins with an older Håkan narrating his life story aboard a sailing ship bound for Alaska, and it ends in the same place, with our protagonist stating his intention to walk across the ice and return to Sweden.

The simplicity of the novel’s surface arc—a man trying to find his brother—belies the depth of its generic and intertextual conversations. Neil Campbell analyzes the way Diaz ‘worlds’ the Western, calling the book a ‘postwestern and postexceptionalist novel that reverses, breaks, stretches, and questions our expectations of the genre while still holding on to its elements’ (Campbell 2019: 103). Campbell’s argument also pays attention to directionality in the novel, noticing the ‘confused spatial spiral’ that Håkan is stuck in as he attempts to extricate himself from various sticky situations in order to reunite with his brother (Campbell 2019: 113). Pieter Vermeulen affirms other genre-based conversations in the novel, particularly the climate novel as a genre (with Håkan’s goal of walking across the ice from Alaska to Sweden geographically a current impossibility thanks to climate change). The very title of his piece, ‘Frankenstein’s Monster Goes West,’ attests to this intertextuality, as Håkan resembles the creature from Mary Shelley’s novel in proportion, and his introduction in the novel anticipates the mythic name that he has taken on in mid-nineteenth century America—the Hawk who wears the mountain lion coat. Vermeulen traces the reemergence of Victor Frankenstein in the novel’s naturalist John Lorimer as well, dubbing him ‘a benign and restrained version of Victor Frankenstein’ and ‘a collaborative provider of care, whose practice is enriched by the insights of an Indigenous healer’ (Vermeulen 2023: 149). The latter statement in particular gives life to the conversationalist aspect of the novel, with this example demonstrating that ‘knowledge’ comes not from a single, isolated intelligence, but rather from interaction. Beyond these intertextual appearances, I find a looser connection to Cormac McCarthy’s own ‘anti-Western’ *Blood Meridian* (Kollin 2001: 561): Håkan’s immense build and pale skin, which the novel frequently comments on, might invoke Judge Holden (while our Swede’s wandering aligns him with the Kid, though decidedly sans his appetite for violence).

And so the aboveground wandering in the novel is matched by its range of intertextual readings, mapped onto both the route that Håkan takes and the characters he interacts with. But there is also a subterranean level where conversation takes on a different edge, found in a section that is becoming known as the burrowing, or maze, section. Toward the novel’s end, Håkan’s reputation for violence (unwarranted, as he is usually defending himself or others when he uses his prodigious strength to kill), as well as his bounty, has been growing, and he evades execution thanks to a deputy named Asa who helps him escape the clutches of one sheriff. Living and traveling westward together, Håkan and his companion fall in love; but, as happens with most tender relations in the novel, the two are cruelly separated when Asa is killed by their pursuers. The scene of his death is heavily aural:

The hoofbeats, the screams, and the shots grew louder, and one echo resounded over the other so that it became impossible to tell where the sounds came from and in what order they had been produced—cause and consequence, past and future were overturned and scrambled in the reverberations’ (Diaz 2017: 200).

What follows is the apotheosis of what Håkan had been practicing in miniature throughout the story: his total withdrawal from society. This time, his self-imposed isolation takes on a formal dimension as well as a geographic one. Diaz writes of his burrowing into the ground in a way that makes good on the threat of ‘past and future’ becoming overturned.

Håkan comprehends Asa’s death in terms of conversations forced and rejected; he recounts how ‘his pain, intense and deafening as it was, came to him as a remote echo of someone else’s scream’ (Diaz 2017: 204). He also finds this moment is one where he can, ideally, cleanly reject communication, which up to this point has often failed him or left him in worse-off circumstances: ‘questions, accusations, threats, verdicts. Talk. He wanted no talk’ (Diaz 2017: 205). And, Diaz’s presentation of this refusal and his pain is itself a conversation between form and content. Håkan horizontal journey narrative, one where he had ‘walked in circles wider than nations,’ goes vertical (Diaz 2017: 206). He digs himself a burrow that over the years becomes an underground dwelling with chambers, channels, and chimneys, allowing him to stay largely subterranean and to try to avoid contact and capture. Indeed, he stays in this underground home for so long that one of the only ways he can tell that time passing is from his voice beginning to sound like an old man’s: the chronotope of the burrow becomes thick with changing audibility. Diaz does something similarly disorienting for the reader by copying sections of his own text and rewriting them. I, for one, thought there had been a printing error when I was reading a paragraph that had been copied almost word for word from an earlier one, including the line ‘These recurrent duties made every day resemble the last, and within each day, from sunup to sundown, there were few markers to divide time’ (Diaz 2017: 208). Form mirrors content here to its absolute limits, and these burrowing sections of the novel, repetitive and reclusive and full of Håkan’s grief, demonstrate the time-warping facets of his decision to dwell in silence, and to attempt to override Doreen Massey’s formulation of space as a ‘particular constellation of social relations’ (Massey 1994: 154).

Håkan, however, is unable to excuse himself from these social relations. When the bounty hunters encroach upon the cave, he registers them in nonhuman ways: ‘Those flailing arms sticking out of the upright trunks... . Those forward-facing eyes on that flat face with that beakless, snoutless hole for a mouth’ (Diaz 2017: 217). Having been in his isolated, frequently underground state, Håkan at first views the intruders as awkward, misshapen animals—he wanted so badly to be removed from the conversation of being human that he even translates the men’s gestures as ‘wasteful, obscene movements’ (Diaz 2017: 217). The anti-place of the burrow helps turn what would be a conversational interaction between two humans into a human/nonhuman scene, applied to both characters: Håkan may see these intruders as nonhuman, but his own, albeit temporary, loss of human sensibility aligns him with the nonhuman as well. Like Indranil Acharya and Ujjwal Kumar Panda’s formulation of

a human-animal encounter made possible due to overlapping territories of geography, this interaction becomes a site of ‘conflicting interest’ (Acharya and Panda 2022: 77). Håkan sought and created the geography of the burrow to escape any human contact, but he is once more pushed to the surface, and after he is chased from his life below ground, he essentially ceases to flee from humanity and continues his wandering life, eventually ending up where the framed narrative began as he prepares to walk across the ice back to Sweden.

Hernan Diaz’s formal experimentation in the burrowing chapters demonstrates what he called in an interview ‘[t]he physical enjoyment of language in its visual and aural dimensions’—at least, for the reader (Diaz 2021: 66). Håkan, who tried so hard to remove himself from any pleasure and any pain brought forth by language, burrows deep—but not deep enough. His attempt to reject conversation and connection speaks to Herman Beavers’ concept of the ‘tight-space’ he develops in his readings of Toni Morrison’s novels, where characters’ traumas (both individual and collective) prevent them from making connection as a result of a tightened space created around them. Attempting to escape this space ‘vertically,’ Beavers argues, leads to violence and isolation—but Morrison’s characters demonstrate ways of ‘eschewing verticality and opting for horizontal systems of collaboration and reconciliation that lead to more egalitarian and open forms of place-making’ (Beavers 2018: 6). There is some metaphorical sense to Beavers’ concept that appears somewhat literally in these sections of Diaz’s novel, where the decidedly traumatized Håkan goes horizontal under the ground, but where he also departs from any option of collaboration or reconciliation in his refusal to maintain conversation or interaction with humans during his period under the ground. Although Håkan’s created space is not precisely a cave, the reading of caves as liminal spaces and ‘anti-places,’ Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher’s term for a location that is ‘no longer space, but nor is it humanized place’ helps us consider what could have been the ultimate retreat from human conversation in Håkan’s ill-fated burrowing (Crane and Fletcher 2020: 161). And, within the scope of Diaz’s novel, attempts at human conversation seem doomed to fail and to lead to a geographical turn inward, reflected by the isolation and attempted refusal of human conversation Håkan imposes on himself. His burrow is a new anti-place, one the novel recognizes is alluring to those traumatized by the potentially unfavorable outcomes of human interaction, but one that is nevertheless unsustainable in the increasingly populated geography of the American West. East to West, circular wanderings, through and back a desert, wild to tamed; Diaz’s novel is topographically rich, and the movement from surface to subterranean offers a formally provocative meditation on silence, conversation, and language.

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