

“The Opposite of Homelessness”: Homemaking and Wilful Dislocation in Esther Kinsky’s *Am Fluß (River)*

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Introduction:

Situated at the nexus between fiction, history- and place-writing, Esther Kinsky’s fictional memoir *Am Fluß* (2015; *River*, 2017) is a tale of protracted leave-taking.¹ It follows the story of an unnamed narrator, who, after a long period of residence in central London, decides to uproot and re-plant herself in a provisional existence in Hackney. More than just a temporary stepping out of her life, this move is described in terms of an excision which leaves her uncertain whether a “serviceable domestic order of any kind” (18) can ever be re-established. The narrator resides in a flat near Stamford Hill and the Hackney Marshes from April to August, drifting in and out of place and place-based relations. Surrounded by her boxes and suitcases, she tries to temporarily “lay [her] life aside” (18) and use her time to explore the Lea riverscape so that, by the end of the book, she is ready to move on to a new life in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, this Hackney sojourn can be seen as a way of getting out of place by temporarily getting into a new place. Filling her life and her new flat with loose connections to people, objects and place, the narrator deliberately carves out a different relationship to her place-world – a kind of a getting-into-place which manages to remain on the cusp -- which helps to facilitate her departure. On the other, by extracting herself from her home and trying to get to know this new place, the narrator is able to tap into her own personal history of movement and beginnings-in-place which had been temporarily suspended when she settled in central London. Rather than a form of homelessness then, her deliberate dislocation enacts a productive form of being *towards* place in a way that seems open to new impulses, experiences, and locations; this gives her the courage to move on.

¹ Helga Druxes describes this as an autobiographical novel. She reads the novel through Kinsky’s generational position (born 1956) and examines how she engages with the residue of the Holocaust in her memory work. See: Helga Druxes, “Transgenerational Holocaust Memory in Anne Weber’s *Ahnen* and Esther Kinsky’s *Am Fluß*,” *Feminist German Studies* 43 (2018), 125-50. Esther Kinsky, *Am Fluß* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2015) ebook. Esther Kinsky, *River*, translated by Iain Galbraith (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017). For the purposes of brevity and in the interest of accessibility, I will only cite the English translation here. References will be given in the main body in parentheses.

Getting into (and out of) Place²

When she moves to Hackney, the narrator tries to unlock place by walking around, looking, reflecting, and photographing things. Observing the shops opposite her flat, she gains insights into daily routines, encounters, and rhythms. Her form of looking is both accidental and deliberate. While staring out the window to observe the shifting light, her glance, for example, falls on Greengrocer Katz, the shop worker Jackie and the Croat who runs a Bosnian charity shop, and their customers. This distracted glance is rooted in the here and now. It takes in what Edward Casey calls the “all-around” all-at-once.³ Agile and flexible, it is a form of seeing which does not linger or dwell. Instead, it moves across surfaces, revealing orientational cues. This allows the narrator to get her bearings. She gains an impression of the situations that unfold before her window, even if her glance does not try to fix or fossilise them. This visual spectacle presents her with an insight into what Casey calls the “in-lines as well as the outlines of a place” (53). But despite her knowledge of these placemarks, she still remains outside, in the role of observer. While shopping in Stoller’s Kosher Egg Store, for example, the narrator’s outsider status is reinforced. In this encounter, Mrs Stoller functions as a gatekeeper: “[s]he had sat at this counter for long enough, and had seen enough heads and legs above and below the advertising banner stuck across the window and the door, to know that I did not belong with the grey fish-balls in aspic, or the oversweet borscht with ‘Tastes like Bubbe’s’ on its label” (154).

By taking her out of the flat and into other situations, the glance and its orbit bring the narrator out into the world in a way which distracts her from the immediate past. The fact that this is not accidental becomes clear through her attempts to deliberately memorise the local horizon so that she knows “every detail [she] saw in the yard, the garden, and the section of the street that is visible between two houses” (19). More than just a way of orienting herself, this active internalisation of place (a kind of rote learning) seems to intentionally try to overwrite her previous place-world. Bombarding herself with new information and impressions, she inserts this as a mnemonic buffer between

² Edward Casey uses these terms to describe the relationship between people and place. For Casey, to be in the world means to be in place. His work concentrates on the lived experience of place and the micro-practices that connect the self to place. See Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³ Edward Casey, *The World at a Glance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 11.

the present and the past. This is compounded by her walks along the river Lea. While walking through these peopleless scapes, she happens across objects that seem out of place in the natural environment. Seemingly banal, these objects (for example, rubbish) often appear to her shorn of relations, but by pondering, photographing, and then sometimes bringing them (or their photograph) and other souvenirs (such as feathers and stones) back to her temporary residence, she rescues them back into relationality. Stored on top of her boxes, these mementos of her experiences in the now bring the outside in⁴ and they take the place of other life trinkets that would evoke the past.

The past surfaces in two different ways. It spills out in real terms when the narrator is rooting through her boxes to find objects that become necessary as time passes. It also appears as she walks along the riverscape. In this English waterscape she rediscovers “bits and pieces of [her] childhood, found snippets cut from other landscapes and group photographs, unexpectedly come here to roost” (22). Stumbling across these memories “between willows under a tall sky, in reflections of impoverished housing estates on the town side of the river, amongst a scatter of cows on a meadow (22-3), the narrator entangles the past and the present. These reappearing memories add layers that thicken her relationship to place. Particularly interesting for our purposes are the memories of her experiences of arriving and trying to orient herself in new places. Each of these new beginnings is accompanied by anxiety. In Canada, she was disoriented by in inability to identify the direction of the river; she lost her way in Tel Aviv’s streets and often tried to enter the wrong flat in her building. Even in London, her inability to deal with the wind marked her out as foreign, but through walking she managed to slowly acquire place “casting my eyes with ever increasing dedication upon the unremarkable things that lay unheeded by the wayside, things lost and not found, things left behind, unclaimed, thrown aside, going to rack and ruin, beyond retrieval or recognition” (70). Although this acquisition of place is later exposed as delusional, this tactic also marks her approach to the Lea in the present – the difference here is that she is no longer trying to belong in place.

⁴ Throughout this text, rivers and waterscapes act as a narrative hinge connecting different people, places and times. Rivers inspire, but they also give shape to the narrative which quickens up, slows down and doubles back on itself in places. Picking up objects and depositing them elsewhere, the narrator’s engagement with these stranded odds and ends resembles fluvial processes.

Sukkot, the feast of tabernacles or feast of booths

Living in an area largely populated by observant Jews (the proximity to belief reawakens childhood memories) and immigrants, the narrator watches as the community prepares for Sukkot. The festival of Sukkot commemorates the search for shelter and a conceptual home.⁵ People build a sukkah, a liminal ritual structure which provides temporary shelter (also referred to as a tabernacle or booth) where they reside for 7 days (8 in the diaspora) in preparation for this autumnal holiday.⁶ By annually re-staging a transitional period of wandering and tapping into the collective memory of flight, believers uphold an imaginary of home that re-perspectivises earthly dwellings. Flagging up the impermanence of the material world, this ritual is a reminder that the spiritual home is the only real home. Observing this from a distance, the narrator notes: “There was something about this festival I especially liked, with its rehearsed atmosphere of provisional arrangements and make-believe fragility of dwellings. It was the opposite of homelessness” (80).

This paper argues that the narrator’s sojourn in Hackney can be seen as an extended and secular form of Sukkot. It builds on Mimi Levy Lipis’ reading of Sukkot as a hybrid place of belonging that brings together “the tendency of those in a diaspora to look backward, creating ties to distant places through memories, as well as the liberating powers of diaspora, being freed from a monolithic connection to a single place”.⁷ Residing in Hackney, the narrator recalls her own biography of wandering, as well as the anxiety and uncertainty of being out-of-place. Remembering the strategies needed to negotiate place, she learns to trust processes of orientation and uncovers the natural environment, and in particular waterscapes, as a transcendent if ephemeral imaginary of home: “all that had accompanied me in the past months evaporated like a cloud succumbing to sunlight, and this effulgence, which broke over all I could see, transformed the marshland beyond

⁵ According to Berlinger, the central tenets of this festival are hospitality and social belonging. This is manifest in the custom of welcoming outsiders into one’s sukkah for food during the festival. See Gabrielle Anna Berlinger, *Framing Sukkot: Tradition and Transformation in Jewish Vernacular Architecture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017). See also: Miriam Lipis, “A Hybrid Place of Belonging. Constructing and Siting the Sukkah,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. by Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch and Alexandra Nocke (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 27-42.

⁶ The construction guidelines for a sukkah say that it must have at least two and a half walls and a thatched roof through which the heavens are visible.

⁷ Mimi Levy Lipis, *Symbolic Houses in Judaism: How Objects and Metaphors Construct Hybrid Places of Belonging* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 107.

the river Lea and the Lea itself into a shoreline that could barely be distinguished from the sea, and which, as it rose and fell like the surf, let all that was built on it founder” (358-9).