Do Not Disturb

In 1969, Pat O'Rooley remained in their seat in the airport lounge despite the persistent announcements that their flight had commenced boarding. The decision was a deliberate one, rooted in the search for fluidity. In the airport, Pat experienced gender amnesia, slipping between pronouns, and in every brief encounter with other passengers they would find themself looking for clues as to whether they were male or female. No conclusion was made. Free from the binary essentialism and other social narratives that invade place, Pat decided to remain 'in transit'.

> Being at an airport is wellbeing. Anxiety is in sight but I'm out of its reach. It's the wind beyond the plate glass walls… Obviously I'm going somewhere or I wouldn't be at an airport. Avaunt, anxiety. Do not disturb. No distractions in mid-enterprise. I am IN TRANSIT. (Brophy, [1969] 2025: 23)

I often make use of the hospitality offered by hotels. Even if I am not travelling for a purpose and have no destination in mind. Even if I don't intend to explore a new city, or visit a relative who resides across the country, I enjoy frequenting hotels. On one occasion, I have even stayed in a hotel around the corner from where I live.

When the owner greeted me at the door, clearly confused by the size of my luggage (too large for a one-night stay), she asked if I had travelled far. If I had given her the truthful answer, which was that I had taken an approximate four-minute walk, she surely would have seemed even more baffled. Most people don't stay at hotels in their hometown because hotel stays are always accompanied by a purpose. Business people reside in hotels (usually in chains such as a Travelodge or Premier Inn) when they travel out of town for important meetings. Tourists, too, use the hotel as a site in which to rest, but it is never their actual destination. I had decided to be vague with my answer, I replied: "not too far". She didn't say much to this and led me to my room, gestured to where the information booklet was on the desk and asked if I wanted a cup of tea before she departed. I realised I had made a mistake. You see, I hadn't checked into a generic hotel or an even a more impersonal Airbnb, this was a Bed & Breakfast.

I had never stayed in a traditional B&B before, a decision likely due to my age (27) and the prevalence of Airbnbs that came hand-in-hand with the ever-expanding internet. Also, it seemed as though the owner didn't receive many young guests. Judging by their TripAdvisor page, it was more popular with slightly older couples – who remarked upon the owner's splendid hospitality and her lovely gardens. I didn't

ask for a tour of the gardens, and it wasn't offered to me – I suppose because she wasn't sure if I would be interested. In fact, I was relieved the owner didn't later return with the offer of a tour, since I spent my time in the room photographing myself as a fictional woman. The reason my bag was so large was because I had brought my camera and tripod, along with a wig, and clothes I had bought from a charity shop.

During my stay, I realised that B&Bs could not be considered a *non-place*, not in the same way that the chain hotel might. The service was too personal and is played out on a much more intimate scale, as opposed to the hotel which tends toward avoiding unnecessary interaction. At a hotel, the encounters are always brief and usually limited to checking-in and checking-out. Even the maids work as ghosts – invisible, aside from deliberate signs left to signify they were there: a towel swan on top of a freshly made bed. As I moved quietly around the room, careful to miss the creaky floorboards which might give away my performance, and cautious of any footsteps that may be approaching the door, I realised I longed for the typical 'Do Not Disturb' sign that I could hang on the bedroom door to ensure complete privacy.

Photographing myself in hotel rooms, accompanied by a suitcase of clothes that had never belonged to me, has become a practice of mine over the last three years. I have found it to be cathartic to indulge in the hotel's offering of anonymity. In fact, many artistic practices by women occur in what might be considered non-places: in airports, motorways, supermarkets and hotel rooms – some of the examples given by French anthropologist, Marc Augé, in his essay *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995).

In contrast to place, non-places are devoid of cultural and historical significance. Monuments to human practice are swept away in an effort of efficiency. The non-place is concerned with time and functionality in the transit of nameless crowds, and so they specialise in processes of resetting. Hotel rooms offer room for desire precisely because they are temporary spaces. The past is excluded because the non-place speaks only in the present-tense. Augé remarks on the overabundance of timetables in airports which ensure itineraries are maintained, the current events which are replayed repeatedly through the re-reading of newspapers in aircrafts or waiting rooms, and the radio playing continuously in service stations – all of which materialise the present moment.

> Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no other history than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing on its motives, its

> words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present. (Augé, 1995: 105)

Upon entering a non-place, a person is relieved from their usual stimulus. Who they were yesterday and who they will be tomorrow is no longer of concern. Subjected to the present and the generic communal messages, they can be free from the burden of identity; it is only on checking out that their self is handed back to them. Hotels demand performance: having you adhere to a certain tone and volume of speech, or ensuring you want to make yourself up before going down to breakfast. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel de Certeau sought to analyse the production and organisation of everyday spaces (into places) and the unconscious 'tactics' of individuals within them. Such ideas and investigations feed into those of Augé, who concludes that in the presence of institutional control, space is created through practice. Identity loss, when temporary, allows for play, which is effective in combating the social construction of the body.

Like Brophy, Augé considered that gender may be dismantled within non-places (1995: 105), but he did not consider the non-place through the experience of gender. For women and historically othered bodies – for those who have struggled to fit within the narrow spatial productions of place, which is so often made for and by those who hold the primary gaze – non-places offer space. They are for those excluded from 'proper' place. For tourists abroad, the anonymity of hotel chains and supermarkets might provide refuge from the feeling of being a stranger.

So, you are here, in this corridor – or perhaps it would more readily be described as a foyer or a mezzanine. Regardless, you are *here*, in this non-place. You are no longer moving towards a destination – not to a classroom nor out of the main doors to the street, not downstairs either – instead you have chosen to remain suspended. It doesn't matter where you were going because right now, you are here – a visitor, a voyeur, a critic. Stay for a while – linger for longer than one should in a corridor. Decide, like Brophy, to remain in transit. For those who hurry you along, tell them: *I have mislaid my identity. Do Not Disturb.*