***A Flat Place: Moving Through Empty Landscapes, Naming Complex Trauma*. Noreen Masud. Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2023. Pp. 256.**

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Growing up outside of Hobart, our teachers often told us that "if you flatten out Tasmania with a rolling pin, it would be bigger than the rest of Australia." Whether or not this is true, the fact that we believed it as children must give some sense of just how mountainous this small place, usually no more than a thoughtlessly drawn triangle at the bottom edge of the mainland, really is.

The ways that landscapes have shaped us are often invisible, only revealing themselves when we travel or are in some way confronted with difference, alternatives, and possibilities; I think of how even a short trip to a loud and busy city like Melbourne can be disorienting, or how the hot desert winds blowing into Adelaide felt alien compared to my familiar Antarctic ones, or how it wasn't until reading *A Flat Place* that I was confronted with the fact that, except when looking out to sea, I'd never really seen the horizon.

Tasmania is what Noreen Masud would call a typically geographically interesting place, somewhere that people flock to for the vistas, the hikes, the gourmet produce generated by the fertile land, the beauty and intrigue of an active, dramatic, and gothic environment. Ultimately, what makes these places interesting is their potential for narrative. Theirs is a dynamic landscape offering setups and payoffs, movement: a polyphony of voices in the form of forests, valleys, and rivers. An encounter with one of our many mountains, Masud writes, contains a story; a summit is something to reach, to strive for, and in the striving is the tragedy of failure or the glory of "human power, ambition, success."[1]

Flat places, by contrast, often resist the use of narrative as a means with which to traverse or understand them. These are the fields, plains, marshes, and bogs of the world, places where contour and landmarks and easy points with which to enter and exit don't exist. This would thus seem to be an odd subject matter for a memoir/travelogue, and yet Masud achieves something quite compelling here.

[1] Noreen Masud, *A Flat Place: Moving Through Empty Landscapes, Naming Complex Trauma* (Melville House Publishing, 2023), 16.

Framed around memories of her native Pakistan, Masud travels to a number of empty British landscapes, including Orkney, Newcastle Moor, Orford Ness, Morecambe Bay, and Ely, finding reflections on flatness, colonialism, diasporic alienation, familial abuse, and poetry, while making it clear that none of these topics, as with people and place, is ever wholly separate.

The book opens in and frequently returns to Masud's childhood in Pakistan. The memories of the cramped and bustling Lahore form a kind of frame narrative and thematic basecamp for her journeys later in life, as well as articulating the relationship between landscape and identity. Outside of the city of Lahore and beyond her troubled homelife within it, the deserts seem to stretch beyond time and causation. This is the kind of place where a "knot and gnarl" that may intrude onto the otherwise featureless landscape comes to mirror the same "moment" that can become embedded somewhere into a life and which "must have sent everything strange."[2] However, like our appraisal of these flat landscapes, what that contour is and where it lies, how it is shaping us, are never presented as easily as *for us* or *on our terms*. Masud's unpacking of this complex trauma from her childhood occurs throughout each chapter's confrontation with a different flat landscape, ones which similarly have no clear focal point, no singular event which contextualises the world around it.

In the chapter on Ely in Cambridgeshire, Masud elucidates just such a phenomenon and its problems for our traditional notions of orientation and narrativization. With no landmark to govern a concept of importance and so no hierarchy, Masud is left to stand in whatever place she wants, there being no "right or wrong way to look."[3] This is of course a double-edged sword and renders these landscapes as both freeing and alienating, and so perhaps indifferent to human travellers.

Masud reflects on this by questioning the uneasy divide between nature and culture apparent in the contrast between the flat Ely and the more imposing, but anthropically ergonomic cathedrals and towns of Cambridgeshire. A compelling discussion in its own right, Masud's musings accord with broader trends in

[2] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 8, 20.

[3] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 55.

philosophy and literary studies. The ecocritical philosopher Timothy Morton, for example, has argued not just that there is no causal divide between Nature and non-Nature, as Masud also intimates, but that the very idea of Nature itself is a human narrativizing of the nonhuman world.[4] Other thinkers such as Graham Harman and Jane Bennett have taken this anti-anthropocentrism to the realm of ontology and thus to fundamental ideas of space and time which, given the subsequent discussions of temporality and nonhuman companionship, might be read as theoretical interlocutors to Masud's personal account.[5]

Masud finds herself faced with the very question of time's relationship to a landscape when visiting Orford Ness, and with the ways that the past may haunt and define the cartography of a place. A former site of military testing activity, Orford Ness's reputation is predicated on this violence and remains (metaphorically?) possessed by the ghosts of these past government priorities, just as places like Pakistan, or indeed Tasmania, still carry the complex trauma of conquest and colonialism. As with complex trauma, even this human intervention in a landscape can refuse easy narrativization by people and again demonstrates how much of our lives are bound by certain times and scales. Masud's line "the war lasted thirteen days. About three million people died" still refuses to fit into my small-town brain.[6]

The parallels between complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD) and flat landscapes are drawn quite starkly here. Yet Masud's exploration is a rich and complicated unpacking of not just her own life, but also that of her father (the man responsible for much of her trauma) and indeed the history of her homeland itself, hearkening back to the same militarisation whose remnants and echoes she physically moves through. This relationship should be familiar to any reader living on any colonised land. I was reminded of just how many of Tasmania's picturesque historic and World Heritage landmarks are sites of brutal torture and

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[4] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

[5] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican Books, 2018); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

[6] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 76.

subjugation, redressed now as either unspoilt wilderness or chances for macabre, gothic voyeurism.

The chapter on Morecambe Bay contains an interesting moment in which the reflections come not so much from the landscape itself, but from the other people within it. Earlier, Masud bemoans the interruption to the landscape caused by people, but in Morecambe Bay, which "didn't remind [her] of anything," she finds memories of her family and of Pakistan in the children running about the area. This time, these children themselves are the ghosts, the "reflections of [their parent's] own fears and memories and rages."[7] Though other people are a kind of interruption, throughout the book they form an integral part of the experience of these flat places and of the fraught topography of trauma itself; many of these excursion take place at the suggestion of Masud's friends and colleagues, some of whom accompany her, while familial relationships are at the heart of her cPTSD and her memories of Pakistan. As Masud writes, connections like these can become as confusing to navigate as any of these featureless landscapes, being that they are "both the source of terror and the cure for [complex trauma]."[8]

The problem of the other as a kind of unmappable landscape of its own is seen again in a later chapter set in the Orkney Isles. Accompanied by her mother to Scotland, Masud ends this chapter with a reflection on her cat. Again, these thoughts around nonhuman relationships are in dialogue with thinkers such as Morton, or even Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood, and including these perspectives may have provided an even deeper context for the uniqueness of Masud's contribution.[9] Acknowledging the slight silliness of expecting her cat to communicate its illness to her, Masud nonetheless, in realising their reciprocated love, is able to "get hold of an end [of rope]" and so begin not so much to untie,

[7] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 100–101.

[8] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 87.

[9] Donna Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016); Val Plumwood. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993).

but to orient again, whilst at the same time giving in to the welcoming flatness of the situation.[10]

In her keynote speech for the Australasian Modernist Studies Network conference in Hobart in 2024, Masud spoke about the idea of anticipation and longing within travel narratives and in relationships, exemplified in the postcards of Olive Schreiner. Masud argued that flat places, typically seen as edges or as the peripheries where more interesting landscapes give way to nothing, offer an opportunity to shed ourselves of the need for trajectories, giving us a literal disorientation. In withholding themselves and providing no knots and gnarls to look towards, their uncrossability provides an experience of wishing or longing that remains forever unfinished. In a flat place (and as it appears for Masud, the best human/nonhuman relationships) the joy is contained within the wishing or longing, rather than in the goal; the wishing may be enjoyed for its own sake, impervious to the potential for its failure to be actualised, like those mountains that are never conquered nor perished upon. The ubiquitous postcard phrase of "wish you were here" is an almost atemporal, flat ontology like that of Harman or Manuel DeLanda, in which a withdrawn, irreducible longing is felt and enjoyed for itself, not merely endured as a step towards a realisation it may never be able to fulfill.[11] This sentiment seems in line with much of *A Flat Place*, in which the human need for narratives (which, no matter the form, must contain a deictically-centred human speaker and audience who are positioned as the deliverer and receiver of descriptions of landscapes) gives way to a robustly unknowable non/a-human world, even when that world is shaped by humans. I was reminded again of Graham Harman's assertion that "there is no truth: not because nothing is real, but because reality is *so* real that any attempt to translate it into literal terms is doomed to failure."[12]

Flat places, like complex trauma, are difficult to narrativize; they resist sequence, trajectory, and the nice up-and-down flow characteristic of stories, if not all forms of meaning-making. What Masud allows us to find, begins with a humble acknowledgment of a flat place's mystery, where we are not positioned in the

[10] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 158.

[11] Manuel DeLanda. *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2002).

[12] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 192.

centre and so not in a place of dominance and control, but perhaps one of vulnerability. However, in being positioned this way, we are also presented with a kind of honesty. Lacking contours, and so lacking places to hide, flat landscapes present themselves freely, unvarnished and yet still mysterious in their indifference towards us. Coming to terms with this, especially in the face of family history, cPTSD, and its diffuse origins and effects, runs throughout Masud's text. Within these landscapes, too, however, is a kind of oblivion, in which such worries may be dissolved and where the potential for solace can exist.

Masud's vivid descriptions of these places, her experiences within them and the histories that shaped and continue to shape them are a necessary confrontation with human frailty, hubris, and tragedy, a confrontation with expanse and horizon, where a "wish you were here" becomes, through reading, an equally unrequited "wish I was there." For now, and perhaps forever, I'll have to settle for my mountains, Masud's words, and imagination.