

DRAWING THE BOUNDARY THROUGH THE CENTRE: REFLECTIONS ON TORONTO'S G20 SUMMIT FROM AN URBAN PERIPHERY

✿ INES TACCONE

ABSTRACT

As I conducted research on Toronto's waterfront, a place that sits on the urban periphery, the G20 Summit of 2010 came to pass, producing multiple, complex experiences of place that shaped the city in unsettling ways. Urban residents and visitors alike witnessed mechanisms of control, collective activity and individual practices shift in manipulations of space and place. In the frantic unfolding of a global event, I remained embedded in the boundary as it splintered, shifted, overlapped and passed through the downtown core. Here, I note the changes that took place at the water's edge, and describe how boundaries overlap, shape and are shaped by the centre in the unfolding of events.

I stood in the middle of a once congested downtown, Toronto street that was now so overrun by spectators, activists, scattered residents, smoke and police officers that I could no longer recognize my whereabouts. The smell of a torched police vehicle drifted across a mass of people pressed against a barricade who, for reasons unknown, suddenly turned and went running, arms flail-

ing down the street in a panic-stricken stampede. Fortunately, I found myself at the back of the crowd, giving me a much-needed head start to the nearest intersection. I was, however, the slowest runner imaginable—to the point where I may as well have laid down in the middle of the road. There is no greater sense of defeat than to see those hauling backpacks and camera equipment not only sprint past but leave you behind, while the sound of the mob moves closer. Still I dashed across the intersection, and just as I could see a place of safety, an employee from a nearby shop, mouth full and sandwich in hand, charged passed me crying out that she just wanted to eat her lunch, causing me to give up in laughter as one of my group members tripped and fell flat on his face.ⁱ

Over the summer of 2010, I conducted research on Toronto's inner harbour area, a place on the border, where the city meets Lake Ontario. Given that waterfront development has accommodated recreational public activities, as well as work and residential life, the harbour front area currently attracts tens of thousands of people on any given summer weekend. Today, visitors to the water's edge find festivals, parks, marinas, markets, lake activities, an island airport, tourist attractions, art scenes, lounge chairs, promenades, condominiums, industrial zones and workspaces alike. These are not uncommon sights, as this form of waterfront revitalization has become a common global occurrence (Desfor et al. 2011).

Although a designed milieu is often understood as a pre-given entity, even as a space of control in a Foucauldian sense, it is also one that is in constant transition. Michel de Certeau (1984:91-114) has conceptualized this difference in terms of the "concept city" versus the city that is used and constantly transformed in practice. The use of urban space is akin to a speech act, entailing invention and "unlimited diversity," as de Certeau put it (1984: 97-99). It accumulates stories within a city of mobility through practices of walking (de Certeau 1984:91-110), and in acts of "making do" (de Certeau 1984:29-42). When approached in this manner, the city becomes a highly complex and confusing pro-

cess with no one course of action (see de Certeau 1984:99). In another sense, it becomes eventful. Edward Casey (1996:42-44) has described places in terms of “elasticity”— or fluctuating events with “porous” boundaries that are both spatial and temporal.ⁱⁱ They are entities that contain multiple interconnected and conflicting meanings, relations, voices and many locations in a politicized, historicized and contextualized manner (Rodman 2003). Each moment fluctuates between multiple relations, experiences and events; and as events unfold, these experiences and relations (which can be powerful, passive, collaborative and rebellious all at once) construct space and place in many ways, and on many levels. It is in experience that we are ‘placed’ within fluctuating events, and as such, I too, as a spectator walking along the sidelines, experienced and contributed to the unfolding of a global event, and in accordance, the making of place and its extended whereabouts from within and between moving boundaries.

Over the course of my fieldwork, the G20 Summit came to pass in Toronto, and it was here for the first time that I experienced the centre and the edge connect, overlap and move through each other in the passing of events. As has been the case for G8 and G20 summits elsewhere, barricades, fences and great security measures have been employed to protect the world leaders and surrounding vicinity. Toronto proved to be no exception. I noted the changes taking place at the waterfront— an increased presence of police, garbage cans removed, and fences set up in certain areas. On the day of the event, I noticed that the lawn furniture was missing, and very few visitors mingled about the harbourfront grounds. It was then I recognized that the centre had already been drawn to the edge, Toronto’s harbour.

On the Saturday of the G20 Summit in Toronto, a day of major demonstrations, it was obvious that the waterfront was not its usual self. With the sound of helicopters, rather than planes, passing overhead and an eerie silence projecting from the direction of the downtown core, I found myself following the fences from the street adjacent to the water into the centre.

Just the day prior, I could not decide whether I should at-

tempt to access my field site during the Saturday event. I had already assessed the effects the security measures had on the waterfront— emptied, garbage cans replaced with plastic bags taped to poles, a presence of police in riot gear at a place that attracts an abundance of surrounding residents, tourists and pedestrians alike. I had experienced the zigzagging of a barricaded city that held what looked like strong, steel chain link fences so thick and tightly ‘linked’ that I could not so much as put my finger between the spaces for fear of not getting it back. These slabs of steel, bolted to cement, ran every which way across the central part of Toronto in no consistent form, at least not as experienced by a pedestrian on ground level. I wore a white hat and t-shirt; a friend, who tagged along with me, wore strapped on sandals and held a camera. We carried no bags. We played the part of innocence perfectly. Yet, within three to four metres in every direction I could feel the eyes of a visible presence following my every move. After nervously climbing the stairs to the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, I collected a wonderful view of the fortified city down to the waterfront. This view included security personnel, possibly snipers, on top of the same buildings I once referred to as Christmas trees—a reminder of how much the office lights looked like bulbs on trees when I used to walk around this same area with apple cider during holiday evenings. After seeing the city and waterfront in this state, I felt it was enough. Yet a few days later, there I was in the middle of the demonstrations experiencing the city in ways I had never imagined: I found myself standing in a randomly dispersed chaotic mess, knees skinned, light-headed from exhaustion and encountering the place I once called home from the centre of an ordinarily traffic-ridden street.

When I arrived in the downtown on Saturday morning, the streets were mostly clear of any debris, especially when approaching the locked-down Metro Toronto Convention Centre and its surrounding area. Few cars were parked, trash receptacles were expectedly missing, and there were no signs of traffic. Before noon, there were almost no demonstrations or pedestri-

ans. What began as a morning walk to the city's periphery—the waterfront— through an urban centre so devoid of people that I was inclined to call it an apocalyptic wasteland, I later found myself drawn right back into the downtown centre where the demonstrators had also arrived. Not only did the barricades work to connect the downtown to the waterfront, but so did people. I, for one, walked along the streets due to a temporarily shut down section of the subway line. On ground level, people made their voices heard, police emitted a feeling of hostility towards those literally parading in a marching band, and spectators crowded the sidewalks to catch a glimpse of the commotion.

Demonstrations moved down the streets en masse as I ran about taking orders from police. For the most part, the atmosphere was rather cooperative. I found myself to be much more at ease when holding my cell phone around the officers—a mark of mere interest and not protest. The streets, however, went from silent to chaotic in the time it took for me to turn my head. The boundaries and masses travelled from one street to another with the movement of police officers, cars, buses, bikes, smoke, fire, buildings, gates, horses, shouts, and in the crowds.

I predicted that the day would be unforgettable as I drove into Toronto on the morning of the major demonstrations. It was the most easygoing and enjoyable drive into the city that I have ever had the opportunity to experience. No traffic, no accidents, no problems. This is in sharp contrast to the 12-dollar, one-way ride, and three modes of transportation I had relied upon to take me approximately 30 kilometers to the waterfront from just outside of Toronto. It was a day filled with unusual circumstances indeed.

With cars on fire, police mounted on top of horses in riot gear, and as we raised an eyebrow at the sight of officers striking their shields with their batons, there I was having the time of my life! I moved back and forth for the duration of the day while photographing helicopters, and chatting with random spectators. I was surprised to calmly ask directions from armour-laden police officers, and yet remained unfazed when pushed out of

public corridors. I explored parts of the underground city by following fire routes, climbed into normally inaccessible areas, followed a marching band, jumped railings, interacted with dancing street performers, and ran from the black bloc. The crowds were loud and at times chaotic, but I encountered little panic. Although bruised and tired, as a spectator, I had the freedom to explore the city like never before. I became an intricate part to the making of an event—yelling in the streets, and working out my experience, followed by a mid-afternoon coffee and donut as the demonstrations continued just beyond the doors of the coffee shop.

With the passing of Saturday's events came extreme police measures, when both spectators and demonstrators were arrested and harassed. Images of "Fortress Toronto" and wire cages invaded the Internet leading up to and after the event. People spoke against the loss of civic rights on the one hand, while others complained about protesters' failure to submit to authorities for a limited period of time on the other (see Grant 2010, Toronto Star 2010, Weinstein 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ There were activists, journalists and pedestrians—many of whom were university students—who were blocked up, put away and made to realize that we could lose everything.

I never discovered what made the people up against the barricade turn in a mad dash. It may have been the pop I heard that startled the crowd; it may have been arbitrary mass panic. The news reports were never quite accurate or informative, and the footage shot from above seemed to be used interchangeably between different places and times. Still, after running in a futile frenzy and finally stopping to help up a fallen comrade, I realized that the way to survive a stampede does not depend on one's ability to be faster or stronger than everyone else. As I stood there watching the crowd leave me behind, it occurred to me that I had more reason to laugh than to worry. We had plenty of places to go, room to move and many more options to the making of place than one based solely on being trampled.^{iv}

With the passing of a global event, complete with its secur-

ing of a place, the waterfront's passage through the city became evident. On the day of the Toronto protests, I witnessed the boundaries to my field site draw over the centre of the city and back with the allure of quiet contempt. I had the opportunity to experience the making of place, and in accordance, the making of events at every moving boundary.

NOTES

- i This is in recognition of Clifford Geertz, in *Interpretations of Culture*, 1973 (see p.13 and pp. 414-415), although, it is quite obvious that I never caught up to the crowd, nor did I find my 'place' within it.
- ii See also Edward Casey's, *Getting back into place: Toward a renewed understanding of the place-world* (2009) for a more detailed philosophical account concerning place.
- iii The documentary *You Should Have Stayed at Home*, The Fifth Estate (Weinstein 2011), showcases live footage and interviews with people who were detained by police during the G20 demonstrations. In much of the film, interviewees describe why they attended the demonstrations in the first place, as well as their perceptions before and during their experiences.
- iv A class action lawsuit concerning the force deployed by police during the summit has recently been granted approval to seek certification (Small 2011). This is yet another example of how space and place—including the meanings, relationships and events that emerge—continue to fluctuate

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