

A Man With no Home

A Comparative Geography of the Many Places of Cameron Miller

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The Spiel

The question "where are you from" has long been a troublesome one for me. When asked, a variety of clarifying questions flood through my head: Do they mean where I was born? Where I learned to read? Where I hit puberty? Where I went to school? Or the other place I went to school? Or the other *other* place I went to school? Where my parents are from? That last one has its own list of annoying sub-questions. So to save both myself and my unfortunate conversation partner the trouble, I skip straight to "the spiel". Basically my entire life story. Which they then follow up with yet another question - "your parents in the military or something?" The answer is "something". Besides my helicopter-flying, Vietnam-vet great uncle, the family history would be quite the short story if told from a first person military perspective - and that great-uncle might say the same while grumbling about his draft-dodging relatives. No, direct involvement in the armed forces has little to do with my presence in the many geographies I've found myself in over the years.

To understand "where I'm from", I'll have to start the story well before I was "from" anywhere at all - we'll have to start at the beginning.

It all began 13.8 billion years ago with a thing called the Big Bang. Afterwards, several dozen important events took place, many of which have been documented in great detail across a variety of texts, so I shan't go over them again here. The most closely related causal forces leading to my existence in time

and space began in the 1,974th year of the Common Era. One half of the story, belonging to my father, began in the state of Louisiana, the other, much more interesting half, belonging to my mother, began in Battambang, Cambodia. A year after, the Khmer Rouge, a brutal communist insurgency, took control of the country. The global politics of the Cold War were playing out right in the family rice fields. My mother and her family were lucky enough to survive until 1979, when the Vietnamese army invaded the new Democratic Kampuchea. Suddenly, things became even more complicated. Vietnamese communists squared off against Cambodian. The US tried to disrupt Vietnam without aiding the Khmer Rouge. China wanted to halt the advance of the Russia-aligned communists. It's all very confusing, and I'll discuss this further, later. But with the chaos of the war, my family was able to escape to Thailand in the early 80's. Luckily, Battambang is located in Western Cambodia, closer to the Thai border, which they were able to cross.

For the next 7 years they would be in Thai refugee camps, until, through another lucky stroke, they received a letter from my Great Uncle. He had left the country much earlier than my mom. The letter informed them that he had made it to Australia, and had already made the arrangements for everyone to join him and his family. It was time to make a new home.

And that they did. To the younger siblings, in particular (my mom was one of six), Australia must be considered as much if not more of a home than Cambodia ever was. It was here that my mom went through high school, where, through the school's pen pal program, she came to know a dorky teenager across the Pacific who would later become her husband and my dad. Cue "aaaawws".

Several years later, the two got married, my mom moved to Louisiana, and they had me, and not to long after, my sister. This is where my Geography begins - Louisiana. I couldn't tell you much about it,

though, as we moved away when I was two. From there we moved to Washington, then several years later to Colorado, then a few years later we went back and forth between Washington and Australia a little bit, and after a year in Australia we returned to Seattle, which we've stayed in ever since. That leaves out a lot of details, but that's basically "the spiel" that most anyone who knows me for more than two weeks will hear. Next, I dissect the political geographies of two separate parts of my life.

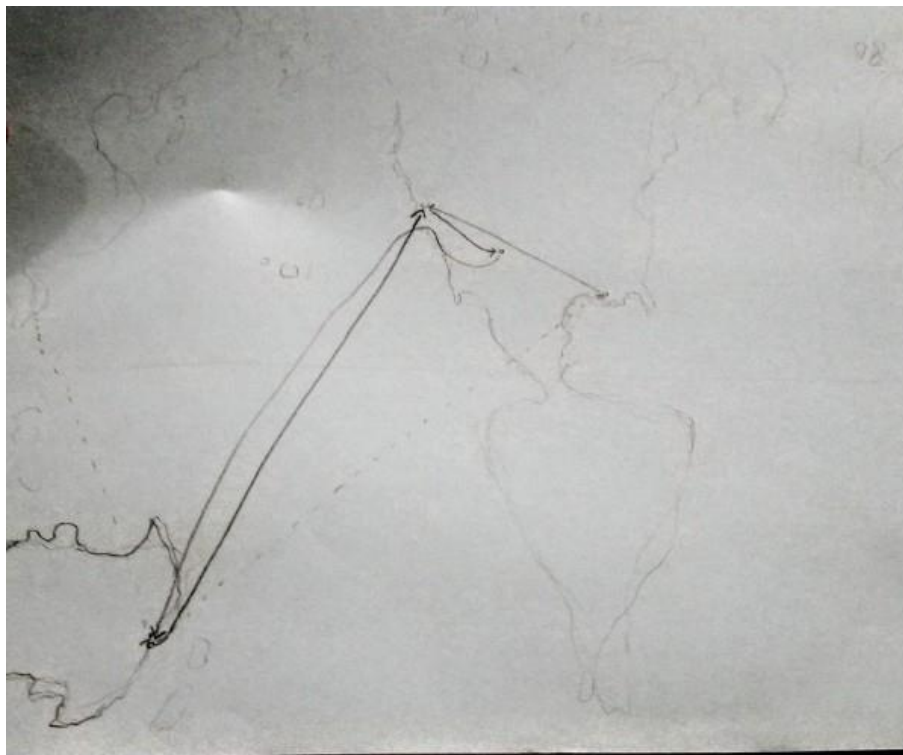


Figure 1. A blurry map of my migrations. The dotted line marks my mom's movement, and the solid line marks mine.

A Tale of Two (Types of) Cities

So after attending ten schools across three states in two different countries, it can be difficult for me to talk Geography sometimes. But I suppose you can split my life into two parts. Part 1 (just over half my life, at time of writing) largely took place across various American suburbs. Part 2, starting with living on the urban periphery in Australia and culminating with our move to Seattle, has been a story of big-city-living.

Although they aren't the only I've lived in, there are two main suburbs I've lived in during Part 1. The first was a community called Riverview in Kent, Washington, where I lived from grades K-3, and the second was a community called The Meadows in Castle Rock, Colorado, where I lived from grades 4-7. So I lived in both for about the same amount of time, both were located roughly 45 minutes south of the largest cities in the state (Seattle and Denver, respectively), as the car flies, and both are nearly indistinguishable from one another in their architectural styles, if they can be called styles.

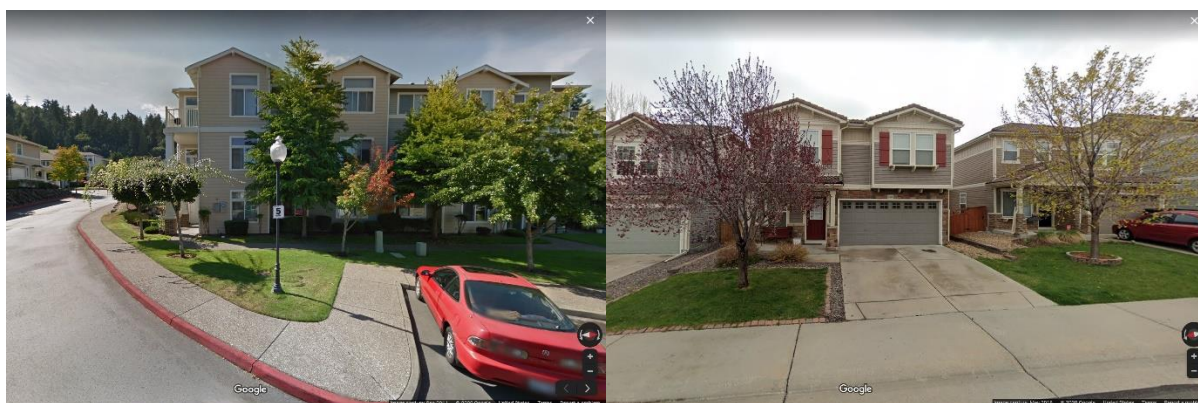


Figure 2. Our condo in Kent, to the left. Figure 3. To the right, our house in Castle Rock. Images from Google Maps Street View.

I've written about these suburbs before, in response to James Howard Kunstler's book *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993). Describing my own experience with growing up in the "Nowhere" he describes, I said,

"I spent the first half [of my life] in middle-class suburbs, filled with their shiny new cookie cutter houses in the place of true character. Growing up, and having learned more about planning, geography, and architecture, I've grown to sort of resent my upbringing there, perhaps slightly unfairly. Sure, they lacked the elements that make up a healthy public life, and perhaps if I had stayed in these neighborhoods past adolescence these shortcomings would have been a larger drain, but to a kid who didn't know any better, that was as much or as little as I'd ever need in life. I had no pocket change or desire for shops or restaurants as a 6th grader. The bike ride to my brand-new school was enjoyable enough. And my neighborhood left a few remnants of the rural Colorado grasslands they paved over, giving me ample space to run around with friends. That neighborhood was a little nicer than the other one I spent a large part of my youth in, perhaps it's an example that's slightly closer in spirit to the older (but still flawed) suburbs Kunstler describes,

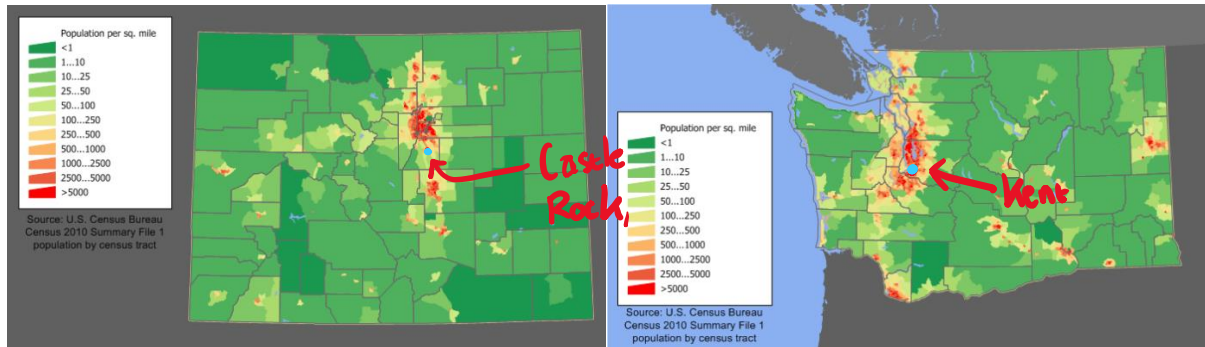
meshing the rural and urban landscapes, but this time with a little less architectural character and a little more asphalt. In any case, it was not a terrible place for a child but I'm glad we left when we did. Even back then, I started to notice a sense of claustrophobia as our neighborhood nearly completed filling in all the empty lots I used to play in." (Miller 2019)

What was ultimately lacking in both of these neighborhoods was networks. I described being able to bike to my elementary school, but beyond the immediate area, the only place a young carless lad could go was wherever the school bus went. The nearest shop in Castle Rock was the outlet mall, which, by foot, must have been a 30-45 minute walk or so. We only made the trip that way once, when my parents were at work and my uncle was visiting from Australia. A bus would have been preferable, but you'd sooner ride on bigfoot in a suburb like this. There was a free shuttle service actually, under a bus called Front Range Express (FREX). I was under the impression it just ran from the aforementioned outlet mall to Denver, but it seems that it did have some service through the small downtown. However, like other small towns in the region, Castle Rock was forced to cutback public services due to financial problems during the recession (Illescas, 2009). The previous form of distributional politics broke down amidst the crisis. The service that replaced the FREX doesn't seem to go through the town any longer.

A quick "walk" through the town on Google street view also reveals surprisingly well kept sidewalks running through places that very few people would ever have reason to walk through, again including that walk from my house to the aforementioned outlets. A surprising network, perhaps designed by someone with some foresight that the rest of the city's planning lacked.

As I mention in the previous excerpt, Castle Rock was situated in what might be considered a more natural area than Kent. Here are two maps created by Wikipedia user JimIrwin from the US Census data. I've labeled my two suburbs on them, and the area surrounding Kent is much more densely

populated. My experience reflects this as well. Driving North to Seattle will have a lot more built environment to see, while the drive from Castle Rock to Denver will reveal much more open fields, sometimes with grazing cattle. At least that was true when I lived there a decade ago, and when this data was collected.



Figures 4 and 5. Population density of Colorado and Washington, respectively.

The transition between suburban and urban started after Castle Rock. We spent some time in Seattle, then Australia, then Seattle again, and then Seattle again, and then finally back to Seattle. Although we did spend some time in what I would consider an Australian suburb, when we stayed with my grandparents for a while, the suburbs surrounding Sydney are very different than any I've been to before. Sydney is an incredibly dense area, and a drive to downtown from our suburb Hinchinbrook would not reveal a single field of cattle. No, it was buildings and roads as far as the eye can see. And if we wanted to, we didn't even have to drive, we could take the train!

During this period, it was the first time in my life we could actually walk to the grocery store. That was an entirely new spatial relationship to me, as it's one that's pretty rare in the American suburbs I've lived in. The nearest houses to my Castle Rock Safeway must have been a 20 minute walk one way, at the least. In Seattle, I live 10 minutes from a Safeway, and in Australia we lived 5 from a Woolworth's and later a Cole's.

Instead of taking a big yellow school bus, all of a sudden I was thrown into the busy world of public transit. Living in Seattle, I can actually get to places now, despite still lacking a car. For example, it was a mere 20 minute bus ride from my house in Lower Queen Anne to my high school halfway across town in Ballard. That's the kind of incredibly small relative distances you can only get while living in the center of a dense urban area.

Back to the Past: Geopolitics and International Conflict in Cambodia

The more I read about Cambodian history around the time of my mother's childhood, the more confused and the more sad I get. It's filled with nothing but double-crossings, changing allegiances, backroom dealings, atrocities, and deceptions from all involved - and many are involved. Some familiar characters show up, as well - including John McCain's dad, John McCain, not to be confused with John McCain's grandfather, John McCain, and Hun Sen, the current despot that appears at the end of the chapter I will describe here.

Cambodia inhabits one of the most prolific shatterbelts, as Cohen (2008) would call it. Southeast Asia became a place of devastating hot conflict in the earlier part of the Cold War. The following map puts Cambodia in a scale that almost makes it seem insignificant, set alongside the regional powers that dwarf it in both physical size and perhaps perceived importance. Few pay Cambodia much heed - the chapter I summarize, and the genocide that occurred in it, had maybe a paragraph or two in my high school US history book, which took a backseat to the more obvious involvement in Vietnam.

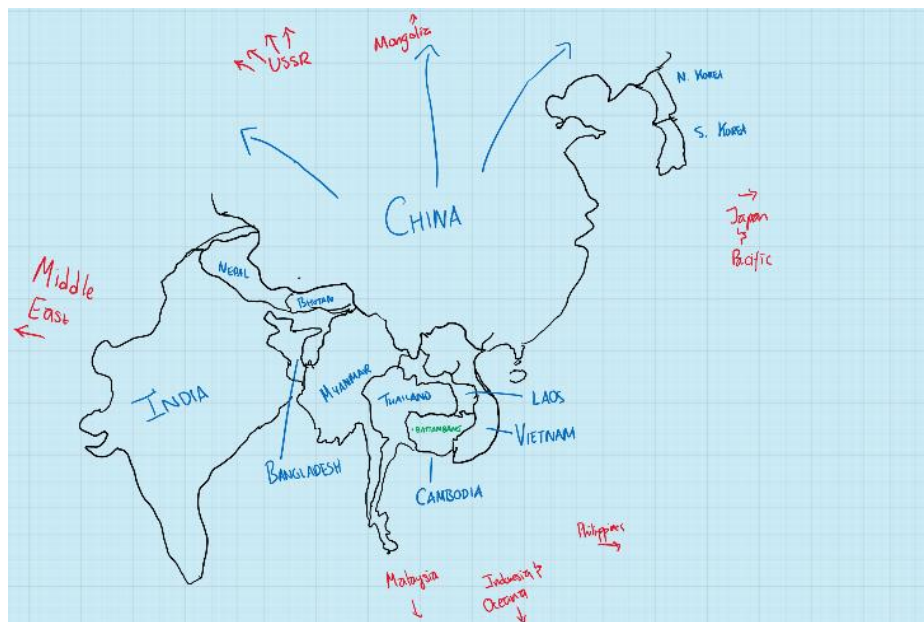


Figure 6. The Asian Shatterbelts. My mother's home marked in green.

Post-colonial liberation, what was then the Kingdom of Cambodia was ruled by prince Sihanouk. Amidst the political turmoil of the time, he originally committed to neutrality, stating "I had chosen not to be with either the Americans or the communists, because I considered that there were two dangers, American imperialism and Asian communism (Lipsman et al., 1983: 144)." Cambodia also had a seat at Belgrade in 1961, where the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries had its official beginning (*History and Evolution of Non-Aligned Movement*, 2012). The movement was dedicated to finding a way to exist outside of the bipolar world the Cold War theories describe. The countries involved were met with varying levels of success, and in the case of Cambodia, it was only a matter of time before players were forced to pick sides.

Sihanouk was, at first, friendly to North Vietnam, but favored neutrality more and more as time went on (Mosyakov, 2000). That is, until Sihanouk was removed from power. Anti-Vietnamese tensions were rising in Cambodia, and when the prince left briefly to France, the national assembly took advantage of the situation to put Lon Nol into power. This "obliged" the prince to now choose between the

Imperialists and Communists, in order to restore his power. He chose to ally with North Vietnam, and his former political rivals, the Khmer Rouge.

In some ways, the fears of Domino Theory were being realized. Surrounded by communists on all sides, the Cambodian domino, too, eventually fell, as the capital Phnom Penh was taken by the now royally-legitimized Khmer Rouge and their North Vietnamese allies. Finally, the dream of a unified, contiguous Indochina state was becoming a reality (Mosyakov, 2000).

Or at least, that's how the Vietnamese saw it. Cambodia was not quite on the same page. The relationship between the two states was a shaky one. Vietnam saw Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge and their new state of Democratic Kampuchea, as someone who could either be controlled or replaced. Pol Pot saw the Vietnamese as allies of convenience who could be tricked into aiding his rise to power. One notable ill mark in the two's relationship was after the Paris Peace Accords ended the Vietnam War, and Vietnamese forces were required to pull out of Cambodia. This was sold as a "betrayal" by the Khmer Rouge.

The relationship between the communist granddaddy, the USSR, and Kampuchea was very limited. It was mostly mediated by Vietnam, but they either greatly misunderstood or greatly miscommunicated the reality of their control over Cambodia (Mosyakov, 2000). It took years for communications to reveal to the USSR that Vietnam had little to no control over the happenings of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge found much closer ties with China, becoming another piece in the Russia-China schism (Cohen, 2008). Mosyakov's research finds that the Chinese embassy in Hanoi would know things about Cambodia before Hanoi itself. Aggressions started to ramp up, and eventually war broke out between Vietnam

and Cambodia once again, this time the Khmer Rouge were enemies with their former allies. Han Sen led his forces into the country as my mother and her family left it, and there he stayed into modernity.

This complicated history can be tough to reconcile with the theories (and this is without getting into the debates about the countless variations of Marxist politics found in Russia, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and elsewhere). The terms "First World", "Second World", and "Third World" initially referred to the Capitalist West, the Communist East, and the non-aligned who had yet to be claimed, respectively (Prashad, 2007). With the Russia-China schism, does that put Cambodia in...the Second and a Half World?

To answer this question, perhaps we can look to the US response. The role of the United States in Cambodia has its own complicated and disputed history, so I won't go into much detail about here. In short: the number one political priority was to prevent the empowerment of the North Vietnamese. Just how far they were willing to tolerate the Khmer Rouge is the part that's less clear, but whatever definition they chose for Pol Pot and his ilk seemed to fall outside the confines of the Second World and the political behaviors it implicates.

This shadowy history has shaped my mother's life, and by extension, mine. Cambodia is not a really a home to me, counter to this essay's prompt. I don't speak the language, I know little more about it than what I've shared here. Nevertheless, it is an irreplaceable part of me. And I find it interesting that, largely through chance, my mom's current home (the US) ended up being one who's fate was intrinsically intertwined with her first (Cambodia). But I suppose that's not an uncommon story for a nation as influential and with as many immigrants as the US. In any case, it's fascinating that only a

generation up I can trace my lineage to the very real battlegrounds of Cold War geopolitics. And I can only hope that my future children will not be able to write as interesting an essay about *me*.

An Identity

Before discussing my main topic here, I'd like to take a brief aside into the realm of gender. A couple weeks ago, I was on the internet, and one user was asking another about their experience coming out as either transgender or non-binary. Unfortunately I forget which exactly (and I understand that non-binary is sometimes but not always included under the trans umbrella ("Trevor Support Center Glossary", Accessed 3/13/20)) - but the point is that they had a much different relationship with gender than the inquisitive user had, or had been exposed to. "How did you know you were a different gender?" they asked. "I just *knew*," the other replied. There was nothing specific that could be absolutely pinned down as to belonging to a different gender, yet still, the identity made more sense to them than any other.

While the answer is perfectly acceptable to me, I had resigned myself to not being able to fully comprehend this sense of *knowing* you belong to another gender. As someone who was born and continues to identify as a man, it's not something that I really ever think about.

The inquisitive user, however, did not seem to find much satisfaction in the vagueness of this answer.

When thinking about it again, more recently, I begun to formulate an analogy. It was originally meant to help me parse this explanation better, and convey it to others if the situation ever arose, but it just so happens to relate to nationalism and this class, so seemed a convenient jumping off point for my essay.

What does it mean to be an American? I identify as one. Just like with my gender, I just happened to be born this way and it stuck. Yet, birth is not the only deciding factor. My mother is also an American, even with the long and arduous journey through Cambodia and Australia I described; we can throw out genetics from our definition, so long as we avoid some particularly unsavory nationalist theorems.

What about when we left the country to live in Australia - did I suddenly become not-American? Did my mother revert to being an Australian (similarly, you could ask all these questions about her migration to Australia the first time)? Did I suddenly become even more American upon returning to the country, like Superman regaining his powers after exposure to a dose of Kryptonite? Did I become more or less American when I lived in a suburb or a city?

My answer to all of these questions would be an assured "no". Perhaps others would answer differently. In addition, I cannot pin down my apparent American-ness to an ideology - me and my mother have fairly different political ideologies, for example, and as much as people may stake a claim to the "true" American belief system, the fact that President Trump polls about 50/50 in approval shows there is far from a broad consensus ("How Popular Is Donald Trump?," 2020) - nor can we isolate a religion, nor a language - which both my mother and I, and the country at large differ greatly in as well. There's not a single part of me that I can pin down as being uniquely American, yet a part of me the identity remains. I could no more remove the "American" part of myself than I could remove the "masculine", despite lacking anything close to a working definition for either. While I claim the heritage of a Cambodian, to call myself one seems disingenuous - as I described earlier, I have very tenuous claims to whatever defines *that* nebulous identity. Perhaps, too, some feel they cannot claim the gender they have "heritage" to.

So that analogy perhaps helped me understand how one can *know* their gender, but really did so by raising a dozen other questions about nationalism. It seems like this identity is, by its very nature, unknowable, yet integral. As I said at the start of this essay, I struggle to put into words where exactly I'm from, and while I would hesitate to call myself a Louisianan, Coloradan, and perhaps even a Washingtonian, the label of American fits easily. It's obviously geographically based, but that's all I can say for sure.

This and identities like it are defined just as much by or even more so by what they *aren't*, rather than what they are. Dittmer (2010) discusses the different ways in which people experience and engage in nationalism. One such place is in the classroom. A US history class will often be framed as a series of conflicts with and exclusions of an *other* - Britain, Nazi Germany, Communism, Terrorisms, etc. These identities, too, have their own complexities, but are definitely separate from the American one.

Another relationship that is both perfectly clear and deeply ambiguous. For example, before WWII, the United States was heavily anti-Semitic (Zelizer E., 2018), and even after the war, when that perspective became hugely unpopular, you still might be able to find a few people who sustained that the U.S. should have allied with Hitler against the true enemy, Russia - a claim made by a public school teacher in rural Washington (Wolff, 2000). Is Nazism American? Decent people everywhere would say no. But in another horrifying timeline, perhaps the answer was flipped. For now we still live in the timeline where this is not the case. On the list of things that make up an American, I can come up with few things, but on the opposing list I can mark *Nazism - not American*.

But as modernists point out (Dittmer, 2010), national identity is not static. Few identities are. What of the American South? It was American, and then it wasn't, and then it was again. Is this like when I left

for Australia - was it actually American the whole time? Were the values it upheld part of the American identity - are they *still* part of the American identity?

Another changing identity: this year, the FBI marked domestic far-right extremists as one of the three most major threats to national security, citing anti-Semitism as one of many causes (Wray, 2020) - perhaps a return to those pre-war tensions, and a sign of darker transformations of national identity in the future. Although these extremists are people who likely subscribe to a more primordial version of nationalism - "the national identity hasn't changed, we're simply the only ones who haven't lost site of what a 'true American' is, and want to correct that," they might say, followed by "MAGA MAGA MAGA trigger libcucks deep state." Or something along those lines, I can assume. I can also assume this is a worldview whose holders wrestle far less at night with what their American identities mean to them, and where their place in the world lies. These ideologies don't become popular due to a lack of comfort, to be sure.

Through my migrations, through conflicts and history and geopolitics, through nationalism, I've begun to scratch at and around the surface of the age-old question: *who am I?* This is the real question I think is being asked by our prompt of describing the geographies of where we're from. The places we choose to discuss and the ways we choose to discuss them reveal just as much about ourselves as the actual places, even if we're not explicitly answering that question of *who am I* as I attempt to do here. This prompt has us describe, in geographic terms, our relationship to others. To those living around us, to those who have come before us, and to people in different parts of the globe. And as I've established here, and as we've discussed in a variety of different political and geographic theories, defining others is a huge part in defining the self.

Do I feel like I now have a better understanding of myself after this paper? No. But it will help me to continue to develop this understanding in the future, using a new language of geography. From now till the day I die I'm sure I'll be wondering about myself. Perhaps someday I'll have a more definite place to call home, but until then, my nebulous place in the world continues to offer more and more intriguing answers and questions.

Sources

Figures 2 and 3 from Google Street View.

Figures 4 and 5 from Wikipedia user JimIrwin. En.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:JimIrwin

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Data

Most of the numbers in the earlier parts are based on my own perception, so that perhaps brings in problems, but is suitable for talking relative distances.

It was difficult to find information on FREX, seeing as the service shut down. Besides the article I linked, there only existed a largely unsourced Wikipedia article, so it was difficult to gain a full understanding, especially since I never rode the bus myself and wouldn't know how it operated.

The hard data I'd say is fairly valid, seeing as it comes from the Census. I do have slightly reliability concerns, as I'm not entirely certain if the scales of the maps are the same, and that affects the perception of the data, however if they are different then they are not terribly so, and I think still accurate enough for my purposes.

With Cambodia, most of my historical research comes from a single article. It is a very thorough article with a lot of primary sources from the relevant governments, but would certainly benefit from bringing in more info.

Additionally, the article was translated from Russian, and although it was published in a Russian journal, it was apparently set aside before finding the same fate in the U.S. I'm guessing their review process is comparable to ours, so I don't have any reason to think this is major cause for concern, other than relating to possible translation issues.