

RESEARCH ARTICLE**"Foreigners for the Rest of Our Lives": The Unnamed City, Non-Place, and Diasporic Belonging in Aysegül Savaş's *The Anthropologists***

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Article Received: 15/04/2026; Article Accepted: 27/05/2026; Published Online: 29/05/2026

Abstract:

Aysegül Savaş's *The Anthropologists* (2024) makes a formal choice that is also a theoretical proposition. Its city has no name and its diasporic subjects have no stable identity anchored in origin or destination. This paper argues that this deliberate refusal of nomination is the novel's central argument about the nature of belonging in late modernity. It draws on Marc Augé's concept of the non-place in which is the anonymous and interchangeable spaces that characterize super modernity. The paper reads Savaş's unnamed European city as a non-place in which the diasporic subject is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, unmoored from the historical and relational markers that conventional notions of home require. The paper further applies Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space to the novel's domestic register. It argues that Savaş relocates the postcolonial in-between from the grand narratives of cultural conflict to the intimate scale of apartment viewings and park walks. It is a domestication of the third space that constitutes the novel's original contribution to postcolonial literary imagination. Doreen Massey's theory of place as process provides the paper's final theoretical lever. It illuminates how Asya and Manu's accumulated habits and relations convert non-place into something that, without ever being named, becomes irreplaceably theirs.

Keywords: non-place, diasporic belonging, third space, cultural hybridity, place as process**I. Introduction:**

The *Anthropologists* is a novel of deliberate uneventfulness. At its centre is Asya, a young woman narrating the quiet texture of her daily life with her partner Manu in a city that is not her own. The novel offers a sustained attention to the absolute ordinariness of a life being lived. In that ordinariness, Savaş finds everything. Asya and Manu have both left behind the countries of their birth and the social worlds in which they were known. In the unnamed city they now inhabit together, they must construct from scratch the relational fabric that most people inherit from the friendships to the small ceremonies of neighbourly life that give a place its texture and a self its continuity. Their friendships in this new city are hard-won. Each relationship carries within it the awareness that the

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people who compose their social world are themselves transient and themselves capable of leaving at any moment. The anxiety of belonging, the desire for more connection and more community runs beneath the novel's surface like an underground current.

In *The Anthropologists* (2024), Aysegül Savaş makes a series of deliberate omissions. The city in which her protagonists Asya and Manu have chosen to build their life together has no name. The countries they have come from have no name. All their ethnicities and their family histories are present as felt absences. They are the omissions of a writer who has understood that context is precisely what her subjects do not have. Asya and Manu exist, as Asya puts it, in a condition they have chosen to embrace: "We accepted, children that we were, that we would remain foreigners for the rest of our lives, wherever we lived, and we were delighted by the prospect." (Savas 9) That delight is unusual in the literature of diaspora, which has more commonly been a literature of loss. Savaş's novel insists that the life being built in the unnamed city is simply and fully- a life.

This paper takes Savaş's formal choices seriously as theoretical propositions. It argues that the unnamed city is the novel's most significant literary and intellectual gesture. It is a refusal of nomination that enacts, at the level of form, the novel's argument about the nature of diasporic belonging in late modernity. To read *The Anthropologists* through the theoretical frameworks this paper brings to bear - Marc Augé's concept of the non-place, Homi Bhabha's third space, and Doreen Massey's theory of place as process, is to discover a novel that is a sustained meditation on what it means to belong somewhere when somewhere refuses to stay still and refuses to be anything other than the ongoing work of two people making a life together.

Augé, writing in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1992), distinguishes between places, "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or Non-Places concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Auge 77-78) Places are spaces that are historical and concerned with identity. Non-places are the anonymous and interchangeable spaces of transit and supermodernity that proliferate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Airports, motorways, and hotel rooms are Augé's exemplary non-places. These are spaces in which the individual is addressed as a passenger and a user. Savaş's unnamed shares with Augé's non-places the quality of anonymity of being unable to anchor identity in the way that a named, historically specific place can. The paper's first move is to read the unnamed city as a non-place in Augé's sense, and to ask what it means for two people to attempt to build a home in a space that structurally resists the accumulation of identity that homemaking requires.

The Anthropologists has received considerable critical attention since its publication, appearing on Barack Obama's list of favourite books of 2024. It was longlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was named a best book of the year by publications including *The New Yorker*, *Time*, and *Vulture*. Kyla Walker, writing in *Electric Literature*, describes it as "a breathtaking excavation of the wonders and intricacies involved in making a modern life in a new city, of feeling both young and adult, and of growing up while settling down." Yet, its critical reception has focused

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predominantly on its qualities as a love story and an immigrant narrative, and has not yet subjected its formal choices, particularly its systematic refusal of nomination to sustained literary theoretical analysis. This paper attempts to fill that gap, and in doing so to demonstrate that *The Anthropologists* is a theoretically serious novel, whose formal decisions constitute an argument about diaspora and the nature of place that deserves to be read as carefully as any work of cultural theory.

II. Augé's Non-Place and the Anthropology of Supermodernity

Marc Augé published *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* in 1992, at a moment when the proliferation of globalised spaces like airports, motorways and hotel chains had begun to reshape the texture of everyday experience in ways. The existing anthropological and geographical frameworks were ill-equipped to describe this. Augé's intervention was to name this new spatial condition and to theorise its consequences for the individual subject. His distinction between place and non-place is the conceptual foundation on which this paper's reading of Savaş's unnamed city rests. It requires careful elaboration before it can be applied.

For Augé, a place is a space that is simultaneously relational and concerned with identity. A village square or a national monument are places in Augé's sense because they accumulate history and situate the individual within a web of social relations. They anchor identity by providing a stable answer to the question of where one is from and where one belongs. A place is cultural and mnemonic. It is a site where the past is sedimented into the present and where individual identity is confirmed and recognised by the community that shares the space. Augé's place is what most people mean when they say home.

A non-place, by contrast, is a space of transit and interchangeability. It is a space that has been designed whether deliberately or by the logic of global capital to be the same everywhere. The airport departure lounge does not care where you are from. The motorway service station does not remember you. The international hotel room is indistinguishable from every other international hotel room in every other city in every other country. In non-places, the individual is addressed as a user or a consumer. They are bearers of certain rights and obligations that are specified in the contracts one signs and the cards one swipes. Non-places produce a characteristic form of solitude which is the solitude of the interchangeable, of being one among millions of identical users of identical spaces.

Savaş's unnamed city inhabits precisely this palimpsest. It has neighbourhoods and cafés and parks, "a café down the street, with a red lacquered façade and marble tables" (Savaş 19), a park that "received outsiders without judgment" (14). It has an elderly neighbour upstairs, a friend named Ravi, wine bars where Asya and Manu linger long into the evening. It has the texture of a place and yet the city's systematic unnamedness gives it a quality that aligns it with Augé's non-place. Because of its unnamedness, the generic European city that could be Paris or Amsterdam or any other city in which two young people from unnamed countries might find themselves building an unnamed life.

Augé's framework illuminates something else in the novel that has received insufficient critical attention like the figure of Asya as documentary filmmaker.

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For the documentary, I considered places that I could get to know with time, places that received outsiders without judgment (Savas 14)

Asya spends her days in the unnamed city's park, gathering footage of the people who use it such as their habits and their ways of occupying public space. Her project is anthropological. She is studying the customs and practices of a community of which she is both observer and participant. This double position, insider and outsider simultaneously, native and foreigner at once is precisely the position of the anthropologist in Augé's sense. Augé's anthropologist of supermodernity is someone who studies non-places from within them, who attempts to read the texture of a world that structurally resists the kind of deep and embedded observation that classical anthropology required. Asya's documentary practice enacts this methodological condition. She can only observe the unnamed city from the position of the interested foreigner, the delighted outsider who finds in the park's daily life a version of the belonging she herself is seeking.

The park sequences are among the novel's most formally distinctive passages. They interrupt the domestic narrative of Asya and Manu's apartment hunting and social life with a series of voices. As Asya herself articulates it,

During my interviews at the park, I was mesmerized by the routines of strangers: I wanted to ask questions that burrowed deeper into the fabric of a single day. As I continued filming, I was also beginning to articulate a feeling I'd had, dormant, for a long time. Everyone, it seemed to me, had something truly weird about them, something unique and bizarre. This uniqueness was most apparent in everyday acts, in the banal rather than the extraordinary (Savas 32)

This is Augé's anthropologist of supermodernity practising her method from within the non-place she is studying. Asya can only observe the unnamed city from the position of the interested foreigner and the delighted outsider who finds in the park's daily life a version of the belonging she herself is seeking. There are park regulars of varying ages and backgrounds who speak briefly about their relationship to the space and to their lives. These voices appear and disappear like the people one passes in a public space, briefly vivid and then gone. In Augé's terms, they are users of a non-place. They are people who share a space without sharing a community and who occupy the same ground without accumulating the shared history that would make the park a place in Augé's full sense. Asya finds in them something precious, that is a version of the urban community she is trying to construct and a set of lives being lived in the same unnamed space as her own. The park, for Asya, is the site where non-place begins tentatively and always incompletely to become something more.

This tension between the non-place and the place-in-the-making is, as the following sections will argue, the novel's central dynamic. Augé's framework names the condition Asya and Manu inhabit. But it does not account for what they do within that condition, the rituals and the love by which they begin to convert the unnamed city's anonymity into something that feels like something for which a new word might be needed. That word, this paper will argue, is to be found in the gap between Augé's non-place and Bhabha's third space. It is the gap in which Savaş's novel does its most original theoretical work.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**III. Bhabha's Third Space and the Diasporic In-Between**

If Augé names the spatial condition that Asya and Manu inhabit, Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space names what they do within it. Bhabha's concept which was developed most fully in *The Location of Culture* (1994), begins with a critique of the idea that cultures are self-contained and internally coherent systems that encounter each other from positions of stable identity. For Bhabha, cultural identity is something produced in the act of speaking, in the moment of cultural encounter and negotiation. The third space is the site of that production. Bhabha describes the third space as,

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 37)

It is the space of enunciation between cultures in which neither culture is primary, in which the signs of culture are appropriated, translated and read anew. It is a space of ambivalence and of the perpetually unresolved. Bhabha insists that it is the condition of cultural vitality.

Bhabha's third space has most commonly been applied to the grand narratives of colonial and postcolonial encounter. It has been applied to the interactions between coloniser and colonised and between the language of empire and the languages it suppressed and transformed. The third space is necessarily a space of tension, of cultural meanings being contested at high political stakes. Savaş brings the third space down from these heights to the level of the intimate. Savaş shows that the diasporic in-between is the condition of two young people from unnamed countries trying to decide whether the light in a particular apartment is good enough or whether the life they are building together in an unnamed city is the life they want.

This domestication of the third space is Savaş's most original theoretical gesture, and it is one that Bhabha's framework, applied at this scale, helps to illuminate in new ways. Asya and Manu occupy series of overlapping ones. As Asya observes, "For most of the people we were acquainted with, Manu and I were nothing much more than our countries of origin, our accents, our work. And I yearned for a specific existence" (Savaş 37) There is the third space between their two unnamed home cultures. It is the space produced by their different origins and their different relationships to the unnamed city they now share. There is the third space between their home cultures and the adopted city. It is the space opened up by the apartment viewings. Each of which presents a possible version of the life they might become.

Stuart Hall in his *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* states "identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (Hall 222) Asya and Manu's identity in the unnamed city is not fixed or given but continuously produced through their daily practices and representations of self. The apartment viewings are among the novel's most theoretically suggestive sequences. Each apartment Asya and Manu visit is a potential identity. It is a set of spatial arrangements that would produce a particular kind of life. The apartment with the high ceilings and the light that falls across the floor in a certain way at a certain time of day

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is an existential decision. To choose an apartment is to choose a version of oneself. The apartment viewings enact the condition of third space subjectivity.

This provisional quality of diasporic identity is captured most precisely in the novel's treatment of Asya and Manu's social world. Their circle in the unnamed city is small. They have two close friends, Ravi and Lena, and a more peripheral couple, Sharon and Paul, whose elaborate brunches for the expatriate community represent everything Asya and Manu are not. Sharon and Paul have resolved their diasporic condition by converting it into a lifestyle. They make their expatriate identity into a fixed and socially legible thing. Their brunches are rituals of collective self-definition. Asya herself acknowledges the ambivalence this produces, "I had no difficulty playing along with Sharon and Paul's social exuberance." (Savas 87) and yet she is simultaneously repelled by the inauthenticity of what their gatherings represent. They are occasions on which the expatriate community confirms itself as a community by displaying the markers of cosmopolitan taste and international mobility. Asya is drawn to these occasions and repelled by them simultaneously.

This ambivalence is itself a third space experience. Asya cannot fully belong to Sharon and Paul's expatriate community because she recognises its inauthenticity. She recognises its conversion of diasporic dislocation into social capital. She cannot fully reject it either, because the longing for community that the brunches address is real. She occupies precisely the position that Bhabha describes. She is neither inside nor outside. She is negotiating the terms of her participation from a position of irresolvable ambivalence. This is the condition of the third space subject; someone for whom belonging is always a process of negotiation.

Ravi represents a different possibility. As Asya and Manu's closest friend in the unnamed city, Ravi occupies a social position that is both inside and outside the expatriate world. He is present at Sharon and Paul's brunches but not defined by them. He is connected to Asya and Manu's more intimate domestic world but also capable of independent existence within it. Ravi's announced departure from the unnamed city is one of the novel's most quietly devastating plot developments. Manu articulates what both feel, "He's like family, Manu said. I keep thinking he didn't consider us. It was so easy for him to just leave" and Asya reflects, "I felt so sorry, then, just like I did on Manu's birthday. For our life together—the smallness of it, however large" (Savas 124) It threatens the social fabric that Asya and Manu have woven around themselves. His leaving exposes how fragile the third space is. It reveals how dependent he is on particular people and particular habits of gathering.

It is this effort, the daily work of sustaining a life in the in-between that the following section examines through Doreen Massey's theory of place as process. Bhabha names the condition. Massey illuminates the practice by which the condition is made livable.

IV. Ritual, Routine, and the Making of Place

Doreen Massey's theory of place, developed most fully in *For Space* (2005) and *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), begins with a critique of the dominant geographical and cultural tendency to understand place as bounded and internally coherent. It is the stable and rooted counterpart to the

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mobility and fluidity of space. For Massey, this understanding of place is both theoretically inadequate and politically dangerous. It is theoretically inadequate because places are always the product of intersecting social relations and capital and culture that extend far beyond any local boundary. It is politically dangerous because the nostalgia for fixed, bounded place, for the idea of a community with a stable, homogeneous identity rooted in a particular soil underwrites precisely the kinds of nationalist and exclusionary politics that the contemporary world can least afford.

Against this, Massey proposes what she calls a global sense of place. It is an understanding of place as an ongoing achievement, continuously made and remade through the intersecting social relations and human activities that pass through it. Place, in Massey's sense, is a verb is something one does, continuously and collaboratively, in the company of others. A place is made, and it is made again and again, through the accumulation of practices, habits, and encounters that constitute the texture of a shared life.

This conception of place maps onto *The Anthropologists* with remarkable precision. Asya and Manu are making the unnamed city theirs by accumulating practice. Their weekly dinners with their elderly upstairs neighbour, "From then on, Tereza would ring the doorbell weekly, with or without an excuse, and we'd invite her in for tea." (Savas 22), their visits to the park where Asya gathers her documentary footage. Their evenings with Ravi, drinking wine and talking too long. Their apartment viewings, each of which is an act of imagination. It is a projection of a possible life into a possible space. They are, in Massey's terms, the acts by which place is made. They are the practices through which an anonymous, unnamed city begins to acquire the texture of a home.

The figure of Tereza, the elderly neighbour, is particularly significant in this context. She is one of the novel's most quietly important characters. She is a native whose presence in their lives creates a bridge between their provisional belonging and something older and more rooted. Their ritual of bringing her dinner and maintaining the small ceremonies of neighbourly relation, is an act of place-making in Massey's sense. It connects Asya and Manu to the social fabric of the building, the street and the neighbourhood in a way that their status as foreigners would not otherwise permit. The elderly neighbour makes them participants in a local social world, and that participation is a form of belonging.

Massey's framework also illuminates the novel's treatment of ritual more broadly. One of the most striking features of *The Anthropologists* is its attention to the rituals that Asya and Manu develop and maintain. They are the particular ways they spend their evenings, the particular routes they walk, and the particular conversations they have with their friends. These rituals are invented and sustained only by the will and affection of the two people who practise them. Asya and Manu make their own identity and the rituals are the medium through which that making happens.

Asya is acutely aware of this. Her documentary project like the park footage, the voices of the unnamed city's inhabitants is itself a ritual of place-making and a practice of sustained attention to the texture of the city. As she puts it, "For the documentary, I considered places that I could get to know with time, places that received outsiders without judgment" (Savas 14) It gradually

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converts it from an anonymous backdrop into a specific environment. To film a place is to claim it perceptually. Asya's camera names the city's particulars, its light and its people, in the only language available. In Massey's terms, Asya's documentary practice is an act of place-making. It is a contribution to the ongoing collaborative achievement by which the unnamed city becomes, incrementally and partially, hers.

The tension between this incremental place-making and the structural anonymity of the non-place is never fully resolved in the novel. This irresolution is, the paper argues, the most honest thing about it. Massey's places are never finished. They are always in process and always vulnerable to disruption by the social relations and flows of people that pass through them. This is precisely the vulnerability that Ravi's departure exposes. The place that Asya and Manu have made in the unnamed city is real. It has texture and the accumulated weight of shared experience. It is sustained by particular people and particular practices, and when those people leave or those practices are interrupted, the place must be made again with whatever remains. This a description of the human condition and Savaş renders it with the particular quality that reviewers have consistently identified in her prose. It is the warmth and a refusal to mistake difficulty for tragedy.

What emerges from Massey's framework, applied to *The Anthropologists*, is a portrait of belonging that is something in between and beyond the rooted, historical belonging of the native and the rootless. It is a belonging made of practice, sustained by love, and always, necessarily, incomplete. It is this third kind of belonging that is something more like the ongoing and precarious work of making a life.

VI. Conclusion

Aysegül Savaş began *The Anthropologists* with a question she has described in interviews as fundamentally personal. As she puts it, "How do I write a happy book? How do I intimate some sort of joy of daily life into its structure?" (Walker). The answer she found was the anthropological gaze: the disciplined attention to the ordinary that transforms the unremarkable into the luminous without pretending that it is anything other than what it is. The unnamed city, the apartment viewings, and the dinners with the elderly neighbour upstairs are ordinary things. Savaş insists on their ordinariness even as she insists on their sufficiency. The argument proceeds in three movements, corresponding to the three theoretical frameworks the paper has brought to bear on the novel.

The first movement, through Augé, established the unnamed city as a non-place in the structural sense. It is a space that cannot anchor identity through history or the accumulated weight of native belonging. The deliberate refusal of nomination that characterises the novel's geography is a theoretical proposition. The contemporary diasporic subject inhabits a world that any account of diasporic belonging must begin by acknowledging this resistance.

The second movement, through Bhabha, argued that the unnamed city is not only a non-place but a third space. It is a site of cultural enunciation between the unnamed homelands and the unnamed adopted city. The identity is perpetually produced through negotiation and the ongoing work of cultural translation. Savaş's use of the third space is distinctive. She brings Bhabha's grand theoretical

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category down to the level of the domestic, showing that the diasporic in-between is enacted in the small, daily decisions about how to live and with whom. This domestication of the third space is the novel's most original contribution to the postcolonial literary imagination.

The third movement, through Massey, illuminated what Asya and Manu actually do within the non-place and the third space they inhabit. They are the practices and relations by which they convert the anonymous city into something that, without ever being named, becomes irreplaceably theirs. Massey's understanding of place as process is an ongoing achievement. It provides the most precise account of the novel's central activity. It is the daily and joyful work of making a home in a space. The elderly neighbour, the park footage and the apartment viewings are acts of place-making in Massey's sense. They are contributions to the ongoing collaborative achievement by which the unnamed city becomes, a home.

These three movements together illuminate a novel that is, at its deepest level, about the possibility of joy under conditions that the dominant traditions of both literary culture and cultural theory have tended to read as conditions of loss. The inhabitant of non-places, in Augé's account, is defined by the anonymity and interchangeability of the spaces she moves through. The third space subject, in Bhabha's formulation, is defined by the ambivalence and irresolution of her cultural in-between.

For scholarship in English and literature studies, *The Anthropologists* represents a significant and undertheorized contribution to the contemporary literature of diaspora and displacement. Its formal innovations like the unnamed city, the unnamed homelands and the anthropological section titles have received appreciative critical attention. This paper has argued that these innovations are theoretically motivated and theoretically productive. Reading the novel through Augé, Bhabha and Massey recovers a dimension of the text that its considerable popular reception has not yet addressed. *The Anthropologists* is a serious and original contribution to the ongoing theoretical conversation about what it means to be at home in a world that offers fewer and fewer fixed places to belong.

Savaş's answer to that question is as simple and as difficult as the novel itself. You find someone, you make rituals and you stay. What it needs or what it has always needed is the ongoing and irreplaceable work of two people choosing, every day, to make it together.

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