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Anthropology Book Forum

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Being Everywhere and Dreaming about Possible Places: An Interview on Danya Fast's *The Best Place*

Introduction: In the Wake of *The Best Place*

In the summer of 2024, I returned to Toronto to trace the daily movements of Somali Canadians experiencing homelessness and a history of substance use. As I became interested in developing methods that attended to spatial histories and invitations to life stories offered through Somali Canadian movements, I encountered Dr. Danya Fast's *The Best Place*.

The Best Place is an ethnography that explores how youth in Vancouver dream of a place amid systemic exclusion, overdose risks, and housing precarity. Fast offers a compelling example of the possibilities that emerge when ethnography and public health interventions take communities' dreams and imaginations of place seriously. In the fall of 2024, I was fortunate to interview Fast to explore themes of place, field sites, writing, dreams, and the anthropology of the future. What follows is a glimpse into our conversation.

The Interview

Hannah: I'd like to begin with how you organized *The Best Place*. I appreciate how your ethnography begins in a particular setting (e.g., a shelter) and moves towards this concept of 'everywhereness,' highlighting the multiple ways youth experience place in Vancouver. What did you want readers to take away from the structure of the book?

Danya Fast: The chapters in the book reflect where I began, in downtown Vancouver, and how I was drawn into the evolving possibilities of places for young people. From the outset, I was compelled to write in moments when young people refused assumptions about belonging to “street youth community” tied to a specific inner-city neighborhood. It took me some time to realize how their mobility could be read as a refusal of confinement—within poverty management and public health infrastructures, as well as assumptions about Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighborhood as the “proper” place for those experiencing addiction.

Instead, my young interlocutors had big dreams and their geographic mobility through the city continually ruptured bounded notions of who they were, where they belonged, and what they were reaching for. I hope the book’s structure shows that I was catching on to what young people were telling me from the outset: “I’m everywhere. I’m not in one place.” I also made the decision to end with this sense of ‘everywhereness’ to underscore how those who have died from overdose have their names etched in graffiti across city buildings and remain present in the lives of those who live on.

Hannah: As you cataloged the rhythms of these youths' lives during fieldwork that spans more than a decade, how did the meaning of the book change?

Danya Fast: My writing is increasingly inspired by my work with young drug users and family member activists in Vancouver who are fighting for change. Currently, six people a day are dying of overdoses in the province of British Columbia, where Vancouver is located. We've lost over 150 young people under the age of 19 to overdose. If we expand the age range to include youth up to 29, the number rises into the thousands.

We're involved in this life-or-death fight for the kinds of support and care that young people need to keep themselves and those they love alive. By the time I completed writing this book, I was much more involved in political advocacy alongside youth drug user activists than I had been when I began researching and writing *The Best Place*. I was more critically considering the place of my book within the political landscape and loss of life I was witnessing.

Hannah: Another political move I see your book making is it articulates young people's big city dreams beyond the language of resistance and submission. I wonder how do you theorize an alternative to being that isn't defined by the grammar of resistance?

Danya Fast: I wanted to foreground these youths' dreams and desires in the city, which engaged with yet also existed outside of grammars of control and resistance. At the same time, I am aware that people may read my work and argue that these youth's dreams are a form of resistance.

What I really wanted to explore was that, even as life became more dire, and it became clear that youth might not realize their dreams of place in the city, dreaming was still a way of generating an affective sense of forward momentum. For example, I remember those final, heartbreaking moments with Terry – the last time I saw him before his death – when he was so unwell and yet still dreaming about having a girlfriend who understood him.

Part of my theoretical and methodological aim for this book was to stay close to how young people's articulations of their big city dreams constitute a meaningful way of being in this world—one oriented toward moving forward, and that is far more complex than resisting regimes of oppression.

Hannah: The way you describe dreams prompts me to consider the possibilities these youth envision, which leads me to my final question: How does *The Best Place* contribute to discussions on the anthropology of the future? Questions of future in your ethnography dawned on me as I read your emotional last chapter which featured Patty's photography of the beach that showed "everything that she loved about the city" (p.179). I could not help but notice how the water in Patty's image was flowing—with what I assumed to be different tempos of currents—toward a horizon, perhaps beyond the mountains pictured. As a reader I found this image epitomized youths' forward movements which also unfold through the uncertainty, the highs and the lows of ordinary life, friendship, and substance use. I'd like to know how your focus on this idea of forward movement opens up your thinking about the temporalities of the future.

Danya Fast: I think about what these young people's desires to move forward can teach us about how to live in troubled and uncertain times, where many of us may feel like we're sinking into

stagnation. My book explores how the interventions intended to ameliorate trouble and uncertainty can also create forms of stagnation that actually prevent communities from moving towards imagined futures. However, perhaps it also gestures to how communal care can generate a sense of momentum and futurity. We don't think about this enough in policy and practice. We're so focused on saving lives. And I, as much as anyone, don't want to see more young people die. But what my interlocutors have told me is that staying alive is not enough. They frequently described a desire for a sense of forward momentum — and if they couldn't find it in school or work or homemaking or services, they would look for it in substances, crime, and volatile romantic relationships. I think these young people offer crucial insights into the kinds of cities we want to create—namely, places where everyone can have a sense of being part of something rife with potential and forward momentum.

An Unending: The Now and Unfixed Futures

As dusk settled in for me, and our conversation dwindled into a lingering closure, Dr. Fast and I sat with the ways drug ethnographies contextualize the future. We thought about the futures that become plausible through the ways communities stay in a moment, relinquish concerns of a future anticipated, and reach into what stretches beyond current affairs.

References

Fast, D. (2023). *The best place: Addiction, intervention, and living and dying young in Vancouver*. Rutgers University Press.

Danya Fast: Dr. Danya Fast is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine (Division of Social Medicine) at UBC and a Faculty Associate of the Department of Anthropology. She is also an Investigator at British Columbia Children's Hospital Research Institute and Foundry. Her research focuses on the relationship between health and place among young people who use drugs in the margins of the city.

Hannah Ali: Hannah Ali is a PhD candidate in Medical and Cultural Anthropology at Cornell University. Her doctoral project explores the various ways Somali Canadians draw on religious and cultural repertoires while enduring Toronto’s drug toxicity crisis. More broadly, Hannah’s research interests include art-based methods (such as play), care, psychoanalysis health, and religious constructions of healing within the Somali diaspora.



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