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This Place

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This Place

Abstract

This is a film review of *This Place*(2022), directed by V.T. Nayani.

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Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and from 2012 to 2018 he was the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Together with John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on the Star Wars franchise by scholars of religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***This Place* (2022), dir. V.T. Nayani**
Trailer: <https://youtu.be/9BWEYkRY1do>

This Place is an exceptionally thoughtful love story about two women from different worlds, struggling with different family issues. It's a story about home, forgiveness, identity, violence, and trauma. It may also be the most Toronto film I've ever seen. The title has several meanings, but one of them is certainly a reference to the city where the women meet and slowly get to know (and fall for) one another. When Malai (who is Tamil) comes out to her brother Ahrun near the end, she tells him the name of the woman she loves is Kawenniióhstha. He says he's never heard that name before. Malai explains that she's Mohawk and Iranian. Ahrun pauses, then replies: "this shit only happens here."

As someone who has enjoyed living in and around Toronto almost my entire life, I must confess that it is difficult for me to be unbiased about a movie so immersed in the fabric of this city. I've washed my clothes in laundromats much like the one where the protagonists initially cross paths. When Kawenniióhstha moves to the city, her apartment

over a store looks a lot like my first Toronto apartment above a jerk chicken restaurant. The Glad Day bookstore is an institution here. At one point a character stands in front of a window at night, and looking behind them down to the street we see a streetcar pull up, stop to let passengers on and off, and continue on its way. It's a small moment that felt incredibly grounded. Its quiet, real-time quality also called to mind the famously touching ending of another movie about a family working to create a new home, *Big Night* (1996), in which Secondo silently cooks an omelette for his brother.

My objectivity is also compromised by the deep *kindness* evident in the film. I was constantly moved by the ways in which characters look out for one another, offer support, welcome people into their homes and lives, and forgive. Malai is nervous about coming out to her brother, for instance, but when she does he barely bats an eye. There's a lovely scene in which Malai drops by to see her friend Dwayne, surprising him with the dumplings he likes; such a Toronto gesture! Dwayne mentions that his dad has asked him to come over and help with something, and Malai remarks how nice it is that he is always thinking of ways for the two of them to spend time together. "It really is the small things," she says. Which, in many ways, is the ethos of the film. It's about small gestures of kindness that constitute living in the world in a good way. When Malai leaves, she and Dwayne say "I love you" to one another.

One reason these gestures are so powerful is that much of the characters' lives involve pain, loss, violence, and hate. Malai's traumatized father hurts his children for years and ends up alone in the hospital, dying, hoping for some re-connection before it's too late. Kawenniióhstha's mother returns to Kahnawake in 1990 to help defend her home from further colonial invasion, a reference to the armed standoff at that time between the

Canadian military and the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk). In doing so she has to leave her partner, a refugee from Iran. He cannot understand why she would run towards a war, when he worked so hard to escape from one. Years later when talking about Canada to Kawenniióhstha, he says: “this country has given and taken so much.”

As that conversation makes clear, one critical connection between the immigrant and Indigenous characters in *This Place* is the idea of *home*. The Tamil and Iranian families are far from their roots, part of a global diaspora, struggling with identity and tradition and racism. The Indigenous families are differently diasporic. Although they live still, broadly speaking, in their own country, colonial efforts have separated them from their traditional lands, cultures, and languages. In addition to the spatial diaspora caused by separation from a physical home, Nêhiyaw (Cree) scholar Neal McLeod talks about the “ideological” diaspora faced by Indigenous peoples, the alienation from their stories, “from the voices and echoes of the ancestors.”¹

At one point, Malai is talking with her brother about the various challenges of being so disconnected from their homeland in different ways. And Ahrun says that “maybe home is a relative thing for people like us, maybe you make home where you can.” In some ways this is what *This Place* itself feels like: an attempt to create the kind of home that the filmmaker wants to live in. It’s a home, again, filled with kindness. It’s a home that acknowledges the existence of racism and violence and homophobia, but never includes it. The film does not shy away from addressing the true awfulness of the world, and of Toronto. But it also does a wonderful job of imagining, and showing us, a better place.

¹ Neal McLeod, “Coming Home through Stories,” in *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*, edited by Armand Garnet Ruffo (Penticton, BC: Theytus, 2001), 19.