

Who Is Allowed to Remain?

On Presence, Belonging and the Conditions of a Shared World

A bench in a railway station can hold several forms of waiting.

A traveller places a suitcase beside it and looks towards the departure board. A cleaner sits down for a few minutes. Two young people remain there without luggage, speaking quietly and looking at their phones. Later, someone lies across the same bench with a coat pulled over their face.

What each person does is almost the same. They occupy the bench and, for a time, do not move on.

Yet their presence is not read in the same way.

The suitcase explains the traveller. The uniform connects the cleaner to the work of the station. The young people may be waiting for someone, passing time or avoiding somewhere else. The sleeping figure is more likely to be understood as a problem.

Perhaps that person has missed the last train. Perhaps there is nowhere private to go. The station does not know. Most people passing through do not know either. Still, the body is quickly given a meaning.

The bench appears to ask only that people fit upon its surface. The surrounding order asks for more: a recognisable reason for remaining.

Public space is often described as belonging to everyone. The sentence expresses an important promise, but not a complete reality. People enter shared spaces under different presumptions. Some are assumed to belong to the situation. Others are expected to explain why they are there.

This distinction begins before anyone breaks a rule. Clothing, age, language, posture, possessions and company can make one form of presence appear ordinary and another provisional. The same action may be understood as rest, work, leisure, waiting, obstruction or threat.

Not everyone must do the same thing to appear out of place.

A railway station makes this especially visible because it is organised around movement. Trains arrive and depart. Signs direct passengers towards platforms, exits and connections. Corridors separate one flow from another. Even waiting belongs to this movement. It is an interval whose meaning lies partly in what will happen next.

The traveller may remain on the bench for an hour because the suitcase points towards a departure. Stillness is accepted because it remains legible as part of a journey.

Someone without luggage, a ticket or an obvious destination occupies that same time differently. Their presence does not offer the same visible promise that they will soon continue elsewhere.

The station permits remaining most readily when remaining can be understood as preparation for leaving.

This expectation is not written on the bench, but it is present in the organisation of the place. Seating, lighting, cameras, toilets, opening hours, ticket barriers and commercial areas all influence what kinds of presence can continue there. A café allows someone to sit, but

connects the duration to a purchase. A waiting room offers shelter, but may require a valid ticket. An armrest dividing a bench provides support for one body while preventing another from lying down.

Architecture does not have to name the people it excludes. It can determine how a body may remain.

The consequences are not equal. A person who tires easily needs more places to sit than someone able to move continuously. A parent caring for a small child depends on toilets and shelter differently from a commuter passing quickly through. Someone without a private room must carry out ordinary parts of life—resting, washing, storing possessions, sleeping—within spaces that were not designed to receive them.

What appears to be an improper use of public space may be a private necessity without a private place.

There are real conflicts. People can obstruct entrances, intimidate others or make a space difficult to use. Travellers, employees, businesses, demonstrators and those seeking shelter may make competing claims on the same place.

A shared world needs order because it contains more than one freedom.

The difficulty lies in what that order chooses to regulate.

Keeping a doorway clear is not the same as treating a person near it as an obstruction. Responding to threatening conduct is not the same as treating appearance as evidence that a threat already exists. Limiting an action is different from removing from view the people through whom an unresolved social condition has become visible.

A city can make disorder less visible without making life more secure.

A divided bench may prevent someone from sleeping there. It does not create a place to sleep. Moving people away from a commercial street may change its appearance. It does not resolve the poverty, dependency or illness that made their presence uncomfortable to others.

The appearance of order and the existence of a shared world are not the same.

Time makes these differences sharper.

Five minutes on a bench rarely require explanation. Two hours may attract attention. A night changes the meaning again. The same body and the same action are interpreted differently as the duration grows.

But duration does not always produce familiarity.

A traveller may belong completely to the situation for twenty minutes, although everyone expects that person to leave. Another person may live in a city for decades and still be spoken of as though their presence were temporary.

Children can be born into a society and continue to be asked where they are really from. Work, friendships, taxes, language and daily participation accumulate, yet belonging remains conditional. Their actual lives have become local while the public imagination continues to place them elsewhere.

Repeated use can turn an unofficial path into part of a city plan. Repeated human presence does not always become part of the accepted image of the place.

Some forms of presence are allowed to become ordinary. Others remain permanently noticeable.

People are not encountered only as individuals. A suitcase, uniform, head covering, accent or address may place someone within a category before anything personal becomes known. The person appears as traveller, employee, migrant, believer, protester or problem.

Categories help us navigate social life. We recognise activities and situations because experience has taught us to do so. A category becomes dangerous when it moves from orientation to judgement, determining which intentions seem plausible and which actions are treated as evidence of something larger.

Those assumed to belong are more often permitted to remain individuals. Their behaviour may be generous, selfish, disruptive or kind without becoming evidence about everyone considered similar to them.

Others carry a heavier burden. An individual action is read as a cultural trait. A disagreement becomes a failure of integration. Visible difference is treated as a statement even when no statement was intended.

The majority rarely experiences itself in the same way. Its language is the language of administration. Its holidays shape the calendar. Its habits enter schools, workplaces and public institutions as ordinary conduct. What has been formed historically appears simply normal.

Minorities appear cultural. Majorities appear neutral.

Shared language, institutions, rituals and memories give continuity to a society. They allow people to understand one another without renegotiating every gesture from the beginning. They also shape the point from which difference becomes visible.

Integration is often imagined as movement towards this point.

Legal residence, physical presence, social belonging and political participation are not the same. A person may have the right to live somewhere and still be treated as a guest. They may work, raise children and care for others while remaining outside the imagined “we” through which the society describes itself.

Belonging cannot place every inherited practice beyond examination. Families, religious communities and cultural groups can offer language, solidarity and protection. They can also restrict their members, punish departure or demand loyalty at the cost of individual freedom.

No culture possesses ethical immunity. This applies to minority cultures and to a majority culture whose assumptions have acquired the appearance of neutrality.

A common world cannot require people to become culturally unrecognisable before their presence is accepted. Nor can it allow any identity to become a complete authority over its members or over everyone else.

A person should be able to belong without disappearing into the majority. They should also be able to change their relation to their own origin without losing every claim to belonging.

This calls for a form of continuity that is not the same as permanence.

A person changes across a life. Language, relationships and convictions change. Someone may leave a profession, a religion or a political belief that once seemed inseparable from who they were.

Continuity is not sameness. It is the ability to remain in relation to a life that has changed.

That relation makes responsibility possible. We do not need to remain exactly as we were when we made a promise. Change cannot simply erase our connection to the person who made it. We remain answerable because we can still recognise the earlier action as ours.

People need continuity not because they should avoid change, but because change requires somewhere from which to begin.

Language, memory, familiar places and relationships allow experience to accumulate. They make it possible to recognise what has been lost, what has been learned and what is being altered. A person who must reinvent every source of orientation each morning is not radically free. They have been deprived of the conditions within which freedom can acquire direction.

The forms that provide support can also demand too much.

A family may preserve continuity by expecting each generation to repeat the same roles. A nation may transform historical familiarity into a test that newcomers can never fully pass. A religious community may treat departure as betrayal.

The fact that something gives orientation does not give it a right to remain unchanged.

Continuity supports freedom only while people can enter into a relation with it: continue it, reinterpret it, criticise it or leave it.

The right to remain is therefore connected to the right to go.

A community that guarantees belonging only on the condition that no one changes is not preserving identity. It is enforcing conformity. Leaving, however, should not require the destruction of every relation that came before. A person may reject an expectation without erasing their history. They may leave a religion while retaining language, family relationships and memory. They may criticise a country without ceasing to belong to it.

A secure form of belonging can survive distance and disagreement.

Belonging must also be able to begin.

Someone who arrives will not immediately share every memory, habit or reference through which an established community recognises itself. Work, friendship, language, care and conflict can gradually connect a person to the life of a place.

Time alone does not create belonging. Participation must be allowed to matter.

If newcomers are expected to adapt to an order they can never influence, integration remains a permanent examination. They may be permitted to live within the society without becoming part of the subject that says "we".

Their presence is accepted as long as it continues to point towards something else: adaptation, gratitude, invisibility or eventual departure.

A shared world is not created merely by allowing different people to use the same space. Their presence must also be capable of changing what the space becomes.

Public space makes this visible because different purposes and histories meet there.

Movement, work, commerce, rest, protest and care encounter structures that were built before the people currently using them arrived.

A demonstration brings the tension into the open. It interrupts ordinary movement and may inconvenience people who did not choose the interruption. But physical presence is itself part of political expression. A claim that remains private or invisible may never enter public life.

A city that permits presence only when it leaves existing routines undisturbed is not fully shared. It is efficiently administered.

Protest does not gain unlimited authority by declaring itself political. It remains responsible for the rights and vulnerabilities of others. A democratic order nevertheless has to allow conflict to become visible. Otherwise the existing use of the city is protected simply because it is already there.

The same problem appears when political language turns a legal or social conflict into an image of particular people.

Appearance begins to carry information it cannot contain.

A body, style of dress or language becomes evidence before conduct, rights or circumstances have been examined. A social problem is condensed into a visible type, and the visibility of that type is then offered as proof that the problem exists.

The unease behind this can be genuine. Rapid change, unfamiliar languages, visible poverty or altered social practices can produce a loss of orientation. Dismissing that feeling as ignorance does not explain it.

But fear is not a reliable account of its own cause.

It may arise from direct experience, repeated images, economic insecurity, unfamiliarity or a real conflict over behaviour. Understanding the fear matters. Treating the people associated with it as proof that the fear is justified does not.

A shared order must distinguish between discomfort with difference and harm caused by conduct.

Otherwise, identity becomes evidence.

Photography enters this question from another direction.

A photograph can show that a person stood near a barrier, sat on a bench or remained at the edge of a moving crowd. The spatial relation is real. The barrier exists. The person occupied that position.

The image does not automatically know whether the person is travelling, working, observing, controlling, belonging or being kept outside.

Context makes some interpretations more available than others. It does not complete the life within the frame.

The photograph creates a new context of its own. Framing, distance, timing and sequence determine which relations become visible and which disappear. A figure may become central or incidental. A surrounding structure may gain weight while the person's individuality recedes.

Photography can reveal how a place has positioned someone. It can also make that position appear more complete than it was.

The person is not identical with the position the image gives them.

The responsibility of the photographer begins there. Not with the impossible task of removing every interpretation, but with recognising that visibility is already a form of arrangement. A photograph may examine how quickly a body becomes legible within a place. It should remain cautious about confusing that legibility with knowledge.

Photography and public space pursue the same question without one explaining the other.

A doorway distinguishes inside from outside. A marked route separates intended movement from deviation. A bench gives stillness a recognised location. A frame establishes what can be seen together.

Neither arrangement is neutral. Neither is complete.

People depart from the forms prepared for them. They remain where only passage was expected. They take another route. They use a space differently from the purpose for which it was designed. Sometimes the deviation is later accepted and incorporated. Sometimes it is blocked. Sometimes the people themselves are treated as the deviation.

A democratic city should not be imagined as a place without boundaries. It should be a place in which boundaries can be justified, disputed and changed.

That requires more than tolerating different people beneath an existing order. Those who remain must be able to take responsibility within it and participate in its revision.

The question is not only who may stay.

It is who may help decide what staying requires.

The bench in the station remains a small version of this larger problem.

The traveller eventually stands and walks towards the platform. The cleaner returns to work. The young people leave without anyone learning why they were there. The sleeping figure may be woken and told to move on.

Each response can be explained through the purpose and rules of the station. Some explanations may be necessary. Yet the scene also reveals what the surrounding order has assumed.

It assumes that most people possess another place in which to sleep. It recognises waiting most easily when the wait points towards an accepted destination. It allows some people to appear as individuals and reads others as signs of a larger problem. It welcomes forms of presence that promise not to remain for too long.

A human being needs more than permission to occupy a surface.

People remain because relationships require duration. Care, trust and responsibility cannot develop if every presence is treated as temporary.

Without some place, relationship or society in which remaining is genuinely possible, a person is repeatedly returned to the beginning.

The need for continuity creates no right to make one identity permanent for everyone else.

Who may remain without becoming unrecognisable?

And who may help decide the conditions under which remaining becomes possible?

The bench remains after each person has left. It appears to have offered the same surface to every body.

A shared world does not begin when everyone is offered the same surface.

It begins when those who remain can take part in deciding what the place will become.