

It isn't nowhere to them

By [Julie Clawson](#)

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I was watching one of those competitive cooking shows the other night with my six year old daughter Emma. The challenge in that particular episode involved taking the chefs out to (as they called it) “the middle of nowhere” and having them butcher a pig and cook it over a fire they built from wood they gathered. I found the whole thing to be amusing, but Emma was visibly confused by what they had said. She asked me, “How can they be in the middle of nowhere? Someone must know where they are. They had to get there somehow, so there must be roads and towns nearby. I bet the people who live there know where it is; it isn’t nowhere to them.”

It is in our nature to trivialize the other. To redefine what is precious to others according to our point of view. So what is home to someone becomes nowhere under a certain gaze. It is this tendency to redefine the other or the space of the other in light of our own image or interests that shaped the entire westward expansion of the American nation. If the land was redefined as wilderness or frontier – a wild space that needed to be tamed by those with the science and skills to do so – as opposed to being someone else’s home, then it was not only permissible but our duty to claim that nowhere as our own.

The same story plays out in the religious realm. Call a place or a group of people godforsaken or simply in need of receiving (and incapable of giving) ministry and their identity changes. I’ve been reading recently of the history of Hispanic churches in Texas where this dynamic was in evidence. The studies I read demonstrated that the denominations that started mission churches in what was then Mexico did their best to Anglicize those they converted. The Mexicans (who when the border shifted became Mexican-Americans) were expected to accept hymns, liturgies, and preaching styles in an imposed cultural idiom.

They were barred from attending seminary and therefore from serving in leadership in those denominations - in the eyes of the traditional denominations their identity as other was as needy inferior. Outsiders defined their somewhere as a religious nowhere in need of being shaped and formed in an Anglo image. It is no wonder then that many Mexicans eventually rejected traditional denominational churches and flocked to fundamentalist churches that didn't strip them of their culture or their dignity, but instead provided space for such things like indigenous expressions of music, preaching training for laypeople, and the respect of communal self-definition in worship.

As such obviously racist and colonialist redefinitions of the other (slowly) become a mistake of the past, the urge to question the validity of the identity of the other remains strong. Instead of scorning the culture of the other however, it is now the very idea of culture and identity that gets scorned. In an age of identity politics where the voices from the margins are finally emerging as valid conversation partners, the latest redefining trend is to deny the very idea of identity. "It's not that you are inferior it is just that you are not actually who you think you are. Gay, female, black? - those are meaningless categories, so therefore there's no need to argue about the need to listen to something that doesn't actually exist."

Once again the other is being redefined as being nowhere.

But, as my six year old so astutely pointed out, it isn't nowhere to them.

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