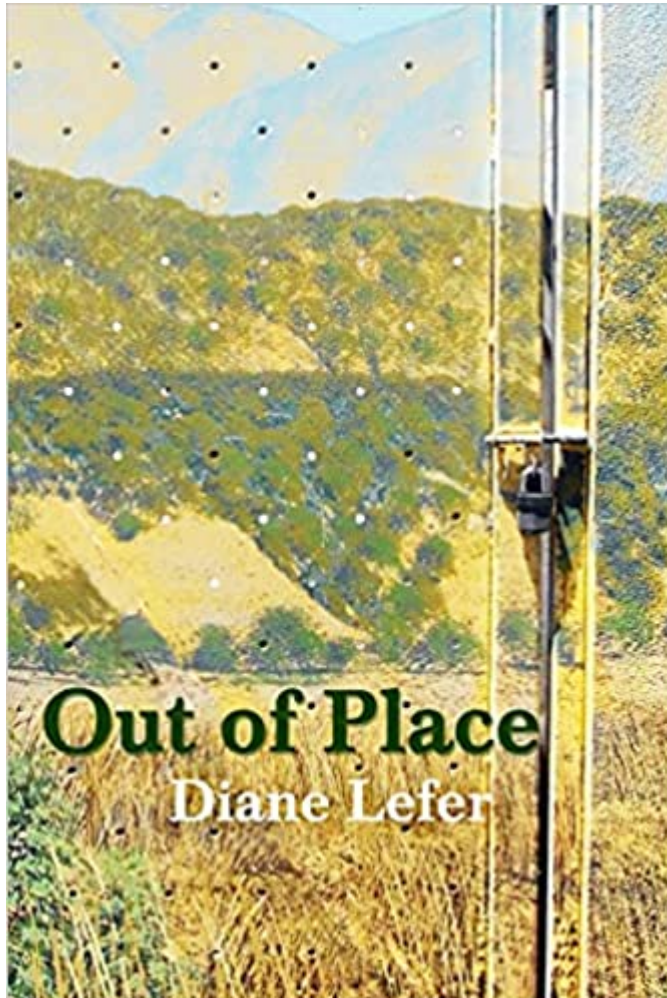


# New Review from M.C. Armstrong: Diane Lefer's 'Out of Place'

I can't stop thinking about Dawit Tesfaye, an FBI agent in Diane Lefer's excellent new novel, *Out of Place*. Shortly after 9/11 and the launch of the Global War on Terror, Tesfaye, along with his partner, Daniel Chen, are sent by the Bureau to investigate a laboratory in the Mojave called the Desert Haven Institute. Like many of the scientists he interviews at DHI, Tesfaye does not quite fit into the simple monolithic identity categories that suddenly demarcate the cultural landscape of what many now have taken to calling The Forever War. Like Dr. Emine Albaz, a Turkish Jew who "abused her security clearance regarding US nuclear technology" and just happened to be married to a "jihadi captured on the Afghan-Pakistan border," Tesfaye challenges the reader to care about someone who is not white or a young adult. More than this, and unlike Albaz, Tesfaye is not a suspect in the War on Terror but is instead part of a new movement within the national security state that simultaneously employs diversity while deploying these diverse forces all over the planet to snuff out a predominantly non-white bogeyman. *Out of Place* may well be the most profound fictional meditation I've encountered on the emerging phenomenon some call "intersectional imperialism."



One of the great pleasures in *Out of Place* is traveling all over the world with Lefer's characters and savoring granular renderings of Iran, India, Mexico, and that cosmopolitan state where so many countries converge: California. *Out of Place*, far from a narrow treatise on race and terror, is also a thoughtful story about science and cosmopolitanism and people like Albaz who actually think about concepts like cosmopolitanism: "Careful now," the scientist says to herself. "[S]he was not a rootless cosmopolitan—that old slur against Jews. She was a cosmopolitan who loved her roots." Lefer, reminiscent of authors like Don DeLillo and Michel Houellebecq, affords her characters a fully imagined adult life, replete with interests in science, politics, music, philosophy and sex. One is tempted to describe *Out of Place* as a novel of ideas.

And perhaps it is, but that descriptor, like "cosmopolitan,"

often comes with a burden, the suggestion that in novels of ideas character does not count and place is a chore. Although Lefer's cast is large and her concern with caste sometimes trumps her fidelity to scene, I was moved by her empathy and dazzled by her ability to web together so many languages and voices, including those of scientists, musicians, programmers, and Zoroastrians. *Out of Place* is a novel that aims for both the heart and mind and I admire that ambition. But, to mix metaphors, it is walking in the shoes of Tesfaye, just after the attacks of 9/11, where I most powerfully feel the arrow of Lefer's compass.

Tesfaye is mixed. "He'd been born, he'd believed for years in what was now Eritrea, but it hadn't been a country then, and later he learned he'd been born in a refugee camp and there were so many stories, so many lies, he wasn't sure over which border, if any, or where." When I was traveling through Iraq as a journalist in 2008, I remember encountering a noteworthy number of Eritrean guards posted at the dangerous outskirts of "coalition" bases. Was this a coincidence, all of these black bodies guarding these predominantly white compounds? This is intersectional imperialism, the weaponization of identity politics by the foreign policy establishment, a term first defined by Alex Rubinstein. Connected to "seculo feminism," "rainbow capitalism," "woke imperialism" and the Intelligence Community's recent "digital facelift," intersectional imperialism is a term that is increasingly used in new media environments to caustically describe the contemporary Democratic Party and its strategic use of figures like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Pete Buttigieg to maintain an imperialist status quo. But as Lefer's return to the attacks of 9/11 reminds readers, this all began a long time ago. It was Cheney and Bush that sent Colin Powell to the United Nations to argue for the invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, as America's dominant political parties evolved their cynical use of diversity to combat the crisis of democracy, working-class immigrants like Tesfaye were forced, every day, to choose a

line of work in an increasingly globalized national economy. So how does the reader feel when Tesfaye does the bidding of a police organization whose home office still bears the name of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who sent the hit down on civil rights leaders like Fred Hampton?

Perhaps more than a bit torn.

Perhaps, like all of us, Tesfaye is not simply one thing. Lefer constantly challenges the reader's readiness to impose monoliths, binaries, and judgments. Maria del Rosario Saavaedra Castillo, one of the DHI scientists, in a conversation with a cartel boss named "El Chato" (who seems interested in repurposing Maria's research on parasites), describes how snakes can sometimes serve as a "paratenic host. Paratenic means being the intermediary in the life-cycle." Not only did I feel my vocabulary expand as I made my way through Lefer's book, but I also experienced a growing sense of awe at the symbolic unity she had achieved through all of these characters and the eleven government "files" she uses to structure her story. In many ways, Castillo, Chen, Albaz, Tesfaye, and all of the other figures who orbit around DHI are paratenic, particularly when it comes to the ways in which they are used by their host institutions and the people all around them.

In light of America's recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and the conversations about LGBTQ+ rights that emerged during the exodus, Lefer's novel seems timely. This is a book about the people who do not fit into the dominant narrative of The Forever War. A striking number of Lefer's characters are single or alienated from their spouses. The DHI, with its intersection of science and desert, seems to attract this lonely and roaming profile, the descendant spirit of nomads, bedouins, and pioneers. But Tesfaye is a noteworthy exception. His story is bound not just to the FBI, with its secure funding (in contrast to DHI), but also to a fellow Eritrean refugee named Gladys. "Glad," Tesfaye's wife, as her name

suggests, is grateful to be in America, away from the country that was not exactly a country, the place where, as a child she had received a clitorrectomy from a number of men who used "a broken bottle" for the task. Her husband "couldn't bring himself to enter her where she was scarred. They held each other at night. He caressed her with hands and lips and tongue, seeking anywhere on her body where she might feel pleasure." Even here, in the American home, far from the maps and territories of war, Lefer's character struggle, mindful, like their author, that the body is a country of its own.

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*Out of Place will be published September 13th, 2021 and is available [here](#) or wherever books are sold.*