

Walls and Borders: The Range of Place

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Apparently, the wall was something of an engineering miracle even prior to the events that exposed it to the light of day. People used to go down to the basement where part of it was visible, and marvel at its ability to resist 3500 pounds per square inch of pressure over 3300 feet. When it was called upon to bear even more it rose to the challenge, anthropomorphically speaking . Now it is being compared to the Liberty Bell,¹ a physical object that symbolizes a signature and defining (albeit vastly different) event.

This wall, built to hold back the Hudson River from flooding the basement of the World Trade Center, was once the foundation and physical site of a place, but has now itself become a place. It has transformed from site to situation. It is being written retrospectively as a humble and unglamorous object (the “bathtub”) that rose to be a noble, even heroic place, one which because of the “miracle” of superior engineering stood when everything else fell. This object which newly defines a place has become the classic American story of triumph over insurmountable odds. It has become personified, narrativized, and valorized - it “held” against the onslaught like a defender protecting a city, saving the lives of people who were rushing out of the building. It is a place of memory, although precisely what is being remembered depends on who faces the wall. It is the Wailing Wall. It is being incorporated into the new design for the site by the architects and the memorial planners, an unlikely remembrance to and representation of horrific events. It is the hypostatization of a narrative of siege, another quintessentially American story about the triumph (if only moral) of the inside over the outside. It is the Alamo, it is *Independence Day*, it is homeland security. Less literally but no less viscerally than Maya Ying Lin’s Vietnam

Memorial, it has already been inscribed with the names of those who were lost. At worst it has become a commodified tourist attraction (how long will it be before you can get little models of the wall for your very own, to put beside your brick from the Berlin wall?), and at best it is the localization and focal point of shared meaning, a place which makes identity available to be shared.

It is not so much the essential nature of this or any other place that has me interested, but rather the passing in and out of being of a place. Places are in flux, sliding in and out of existence, and our discourse about place is also in flux, sliding between disciplines and uses. This movement is neither obvious nor expected, as place usually suggests stability and permanence. As a philosopher, my initial tendency is to think about place in the abstract, by trying to make it static and external. We have a long history of this - Aristotle thought that place was a kind of “skin” that wrapped itself around every physical thing, but which is shed when the thing moves. Almost no one after Aristotle accepted his version of place, but it at least provided the starting point. Locke established a modern sense of place (it is a relation - a chessboard remains in the same place, even if it sits on a moving ship, since its relation to the ship is constant).² Yet, philosophers (at least before Heidegger) have been very slow to recognize that place has something to do with human meaning, and slower still to recognize that it might have implications for the discipline of philosophy itself. And so, the transitions of place, the ways in which non-places become places and vice versa, the edges of physicality and our ideas about the physical, the border between experience and our reflections and representations about experience, are all much harder to talk about. The transformation of the World Trade Center site as a place is an interesting case in point of transition. The transition is philosophically

interesting, but that has as much to say about the transformation of philosophy as it does about the transformation of places.

The fact that places are in flux, and our reflective practices must necessarily also be in flux to do these places justice, suggests to me that part of the task of reflection on place is relatively undeveloped. There is a great deal of work on place across dozens of disciplines. Some writers have addressed the range of this work within their own areas (in sociology, Thomas Gieryn's article³ is noteworthy), and others have noted the resurgence of place and space as a useful analytic term (e.g., Herbert Gans⁴). But to understand the currents of place-talk, and the ways that the flux in understanding place mirrors the flux of places themselves, it is necessary to try to capture the range of place-work at its broadest. With this in mind, I set to work on a website, called *Research on Place and Space* (see the end of this essay for more on this website).

It would be tempting to view the website as little more than an extended and somewhat obsessive literature search, but that was not my intent as I collected references and links. My interest was in how scholars actually attended to the idea of place from their own disciplinary perspectives. These references became a map that charted out the range of uses of a constellation of related concepts and terms. The purpose of the map was to try to correlate uses and methodological approaches with the concerns that scholars and others have in using place. There was a time when people tended to regard place as external to subjectivity and discourse, as something that causes us to be a particular way or do particular things, or as something that is the product of our consciousness. I begin from a different conviction, that place exists at the border of the concrete, barely articulable geographical points and the words we use about them. So, to consider how place has been conceived and represented is integral to the creation of place itself.

To study place philosophically is to study it hermeneutically, at least to some extent, because we must simultaneously attend to the concept of place and the discourse about the concept while recognizing that such attention contributes to the discourse itself, and changes the places themselves even as we speak about them. To the extent that our disciplines are places (they are, after all, “home”), we construct their range and limits as we engage concepts like place. We are implicated, whether we like it or not, by our inquiry into place, and our disciplinary home is a different place when we have thought about what place means.

The World Trade Center wall is a good example of the interaction between geography and discourse. It emerges as a place not because it did not exist before, or because it was hidden from view, but because a particular mode of reflection brought it into being. The previous major terrorist attack on American soil, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, became a different kind of place, one where both symbolic and hermeneutic meaning functioned differently than the World Trade Center. Even the simultaneous attack on the Pentagon was understood differently, and the Pentagon has not become the place that the World Trade Center has. There is no equivalent of the bathtub at the Pentagon.

A few things became apparent as the place website grew. First, place serves as an analytic tool and an object of study in an unexpectedly wide variety of disciplines. Neither the tool nor the object of study always has a comfortable place within those disciplines. Second, there is a surprising lack of conversation across disciplinary boundaries about place, apart from the use of a few seminal thinkers. Third, despite the relative lack of conversation, there are approaches to place which can be categorized and which seem to be applicable across many disciplines. And fourth, the uses of the concept of place vary widely⁵, but there are motivations

for those uses that seem to be shared in several disciplines, and which speak to the recent growing interest in the concept. Let me comment on each of these observations.

First, on the use of place as an analytic tool and object of study. The lack of clarity (or perhaps more accurately, the multiple senses) of the concept of place itself has led some to be skeptical of its value as a useful tool. Despite that skepticism, the concept has found a home in disciplines where one would expect to find it (geography, architecture, planning) and in those where one might not expect it (computer science, accounting⁶, music, nursing). To see its wide application, one must admit terms other than “place” as inhabiting a similar theoretical space, terms such as “place attachment”, “sense of place”, “home”, “range”, “territory”, “displacement” and even “space”. Some writers make definite distinctions between place and these other terms, while some use the terms interchangeably.

It becomes clear that place is both an object of study and a theoretical category. As an object of study, researchers assume that it gives access to otherwise unavailable features of human experience. Place tends to resist theoretical reductionism, which for some is its chief virtue, and for others its chief limitation. Its analytic capabilities rely on this resistance to reductionism as well. To use the concept of place is to admit that the world cannot be understood in solely causal terms (despite writers such as Gans who tend to emphasize the causal connections between space and society⁷). Thus, the emergence of place as an analytic tool corresponds to the skepticism in some disciplines (particularly in the social sciences) to explanations that rely on causation alone. Dilthey’s problematic distinction between explanation and understanding is perhaps still of some use - to explain means to assume that the object of inquiry behaves as mechanisms do, and to inquire about those mechanisms does not implicate

the inquirer in the study. Understanding, on the other hand, requires that the inquiry implicate the inquirer, and it also requires a suspension of the belief that the social world is exhaustively made available through positivistic social science.

Despite the vast amount of work on place, I found that there has been, until recently, little conversation across disciplinary boundaries about the concept of place. Certain seminal thinkers such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Casey, and Henri Lefebvre seem to be reasonably well known, but for the most part the work on place draws from sources close to home (whatever that home may be). It is as if place has to be discovered anew in each discipline that uses it.

There are some significant implications to this relative lack of conversation. First, it means that if one wanted to understand place and its implications for identity (one of the major uses of the concept), a much more interdisciplinary approach would seem to be overdue. Second, understanding the place of place in a discipline sheds light on its current state, its aspirations and fears. There is a kind of ecology of concepts here, and the nature of this one tells us something of the intellectual ecosystem in which it exists. While there are limits to the metaphor, it nevertheless seems true to regard concepts themselves have places, alongside their function of helping to establish places through their representation of the geographical and social world. A concept such as “place” marks an intellectual life-world, and tells us something about the world which it marks as surely as a bird’s song or a wolf’s droppings tell us something about the life of the animal.

Despite the relative lack of interdisciplinary conversation and the vast range of work, discourse about place does seem to settle into a small collection of approaches. I have categorized them in the following manner⁸:

1. **Phenomenological and Hermeneutical:** A vast amount of work on place takes this form; Edward Casey's work is only the best known. Its roots are in Heidegger's notion of "dwelling", in Bachalard's *The Poetics of Space* (a book that is really about place), and in Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment. The benefit of phenomenological work on place is that it does not tend either towards idealizing place or materializing it. Place neither simply exists as an abstract idea, nor as stuff "out there" apart from experience. Approaching place phenomenologically and hermeneutically means to recognize that the experience of place brings out something significant about both the world and the one experiencing it.

2. **Symbolic and Structural:** Symbolic approaches to place find the meaning of place in the "external" world of symbolic production. Working out the threads of symbolic place is complex, in part because the symbolic and the failure or exhaustion of the symbolic or symbolized (Marc Augé's "non-places", Foucault's "heterotopias", Baudrillard's "simulacra"⁹) are so closely intertwined. Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu provide the most useful versions of symbolic place. For de Certeau, place is stable and obeys laws, while space "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities... space is a practiced place."¹⁰

Bourdieu's shifting idea of "habitus" can also be seen as a version of symbolic place.

3. **Social Constructivist and Marxian:** A host of writers follow the lead of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and David Harvey's work¹¹ in regarding the idea of place as the result of social forces. Social constructivism is split on the usefulness of place. Some, such as Edward Soja (*Thirdspace*¹²) bring Lefebvre and Foucault together to try to show the interstitial places where particular groups find life. Others (like Harvey sometimes) see the emergence of place

talk as a kind of appeal to an inchoate social or psychological “force” that somehow makes up for the deficiencies in existing modes of social explanation. Some Marxian writers, for instance, are likely to take the “production of space” seriously, but see the phenomenological idea of “place” (or related terms, such as “sense of place” or “home”) as an obfuscation. And, a psychological/determinist version of place without the history of production would simply amount to an alienated account of human existence, a superstructure without a base.

4. **Psychological and Determinist:** A popular understanding of place is as an element, component, or cause of identity formation. It is perhaps unfair to label this determinist tendency as “psychological”, because that gives a disciplinary label to an approach which might imply that psychology in general treats place in this manner. This is not the case - the full range of approaches to place can be found within the writings of psychologists¹³. However, the subtitle of a work like Winifred Gallagher’s *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions*¹⁴ suggests a linear causal view of place, a kind of environmental determinism, which can be found among some psychological work, as well as work from other disciplines and in the popular press. The usefulness of this approach to place is that it is clear on the connection between subjectivity and environment, that in some way subjectivity is made possible by the environment in which it is located.

It is clear as the range of writing on place is assembled, that very few people hold to a single approach. These are heuristic categories, nodes of usage and theoretical temperament which both exhibit intellectual commitments as well as the struggle to make sense of an inherently elusive idea. But they are not models, or at least do not tend to be used as models of place. They are, rather, discourses about place, and ones which do not always translate easily or

exist comfortably along the borders. The assumptions do not always cohere - a phenomenologist may well assume that the meaning of place lies in what our places bring out of us, while a symbolic thinker may assume that the meaning is coded in the intersubjectively available aspects of place. A social constructivist may (though not necessarily) be inclined to regard place as a potentially obfuscating concept and thus in need of deconstruction, while others may see it as giving light to something fundamentally true or meaningful about human experience. The point is that these nodes exist in a kind of productive tension, and like place itself, the discourse about place must come to terms with that tension.¹⁵

Finally, why is the idea of place enjoying such recent interest? Those who press the concept into service rarely reflect on that question, but we might be able to draw some threads from the work currently being done.

1. Place can stand as a term of resistance or opposition:

a. **Place can resist modernist and abstractive accounts of life.** Place can provide a traditional recovery of non-instrumental value. The place becomes that for which all else is done. It is not a means, but an end. The continued public interest in neo-romantic art, such as Thomas Kinkade's highly nostalgic paintings, is just such a traditional recovery. But place can also look forward instead of backward, toward communitarian or capability¹⁶ based social theories which allow moral or traditional considerations of human good to have weight instead of solely relying on instrumental reason.

b. **Place can resist postmodern dilutions or deferrals of meaning.** Many of those using the concept of place do so because of a frustration with critical strategies which have been good at uncovering the presumed entitlements of modernist accounts of the world, but then have had

little to offer in its place. Some theorists have started to use the idea of place not as a nostalgic or obfuscating idea, but as one which recognizes the critical successes of postmodernism, as well as its inability to propose viable alternatives.

c. **Place can resist the anomic effects of globalization.** Much work on place is done by those who want to recognize that physical location, history, and identity matters. In an increasingly homogenized world, place celebrates difference. And, place resists a central assumption of globalization, that we are transcending place and particularity altogether. Knowledge and human experience is still rooted, and the simultaneously comforting and disorienting fact that one can eat the same McDonald's hamburger in any one of a hundred countries does not diminish this.

2. **Place tends to break down distinctions:**

a. **Place breaks down the distinction between the disciplinary tendencies to explain the world and the artistic need to express.** Place attempts to get behind the anthropological distinction (from Marvin Harris and Kenneth Pike) between the emic and the etic. Those involved in place research tend to want explanations which do not distinguish between knowledge available to members of a group and knowledge available to those outside of the group. While the concept of place continues to be an analytic tool (with the practice of analyzing place attachment and sense of place, for instance), and it also has an expressive function for those from a place (a tendency which dominates artistic and literary uses of the term), many of those who use place want it to accomplish something other than explanation or expression alone.

b. **Place is also used by those who wish to break down the scholar/activist distinction.** Part of the impetus to research place comes from the recognition that many are dis-

placed, either due to their forcible removal from a place (e.g., a refugee situation), or from the demise of the place itself. One cannot easily research the nature of place without becoming implicated by it. For this reason, there is a great deal of work being done on marginal places, of (for example) gays and lesbians, the disabled, racialized places, gendered places, and so forth, as well as dis-placement situations such as diasporas. In these cases place functions as a creative moment, allowing those who have their place articulated to act positively upon this new understanding. Achille Mbembe's book *On the Postcolony*¹⁷, for example, attempts to explicate the world of those who find a way to make a creative and viable life for themselves, rather than simply outlining the evils of colonialism and its aftermath.

c. Place is also used to break down the researcher/researched distinction.

Arjun Appandurai points out that “ethnography ... reflects the circumstantial encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntarily localized ‘other.’”¹⁸ Rather than supposing that the place is simply the location of the “native”, accessible to the universal interrogation of the researcher, Appandurai urges that place be recognized as constituted between the researcher and researched. To the extent that it can be imagined in this way, place then becomes the location of dialogue and critique, the complete possession of neither. The person or culture that inhabits place becomes less of the fly caught in amber, and the researcher becomes less of the seer, unaffected by the particularities of those being studied.

3. Place recovers particularity, or exists at the edge of particularity and universality. To some extent, this is the opposite claim to the previous one. Place both breaks down distinctions, and through particularity it gives weight to distinctions. As humanism becomes a more questionable proposition, and universal statements about humans harder to come by, place has

become a way of resisting a reductionist postmodernism without necessarily simply being reactionary. To be sure, there is plenty of work (particularly artistic) which attempts to metonymically restore a universal “Community” by making nostalgic or imaginary images and accounts of communal life viable or persuasive. However, the notion that theory can grow from the ground up is central to the working out of place. Properly done, particularity need not entail the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, or the quixotic celebration of distinction without difference.

4. **For some, place re-enchants the world.** This is the resistance to reductionism I spoke about earlier. For many, place allows the world to both be known, and to retain what is most human for those who participate in it. It is significant that a great deal of work on place comes from those who acutely feel its loss and want to give form to that feeling. The loss speaks not only to the physical and environmental changes that happen increasingly rapidly, but also the banalization of peoples’ environments. When an urban development serves to close down the imagination and define human life primarily in terms of what can be marketed back to those who dwell there, that urban space has become banal. Multiple layered narratives (as opposed to multiple uses) for a space become difficult to imagine, and as a result the place loses its musicality. It may be beautiful, but it is not real.

5. **Place allows disciplines to reflect on themselves in a new way.** I alluded earlier to the notion that the investigation of place might have implications for philosophy itself. Philosophy must think about its intellectual place, its (as Derrida puts it) “debts and duties”. Disciplines tend to focus on their preferred methodologies and objects of reflection. Grappling with as complex an idea as place tends to press those methodologies to their limit, and tends to bring disciplines

back to the source of their material (the duties) as well as the place the discipline holds in relation to other disciplines (the debts).

This range of motivations for using place as a theoretical concept can all be written into the narrative of the retaining wall in the World Trade Center basement. As that wall has become a place, it has become both a focal point for human anguish and heroism, along with all the other noble and not-so-noble stories we might tell. It has given voice to a host of identities (New York, American, victim, hero, marginalized, etc.) There are many who would want to control the story by making it into a single narrative strand, to make it primarily or even solely a story about heroism or victimization, the triumph of the American spirit or the treachery of the other. And, the range of reasons for the emergence of this place is surely as broad as the ones I have sketched here, and probably broader. The easy understanding is that this place is a symbolic reference point, an identity marker which serves to distinguish “us” from “them.” It is almost a Shibboleth - if you understand why this is a place, you are part of “us”. And yet, the difficulties of constructing this place as a memorial point to other dynamics here. This is a memorial in a world in which symbolism is exhausted. The World Trade Center is faced with this problem, and it is significant that the call for memorial designs produced more entries than any other call of its kind.¹⁹ Giving narrative to this place has to deal with the tension between the need to communicate heroism, sorrow, death, and outrage, with the increasing difficulty of any symbol or place to do justice to these things.

The *Research on Place and Space* website is located at <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/> It is part web portal, part bibliography, and part

organizing tool. On it, you will find links to a few thousand books, articles, and sites on place and space. Where available, links are provided to publisher's pages on the books. Abstracts are also provided for articles, if the publisher has made them available. The resources on the site are divided according to disciplinary focus, as well as conceptual focus (for instance, there are subpages on landscape, gardens, wilderness, non-places, constructed places, home, utopias, embodiment, movement, tourism, globalization, and other concepts). I have also included all journals, centres, email lists, courses and programs, and bibliographies related to place. A search engine also is available, and I keep an updated conferences and CFP page as well.

ENDNOTES

1. Glenn Collins, "A Wall Once Unseen, Now Revered." *New York Times* June 23, 2003.
2. Probably the best overview of philosophical theories of place is Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place*. University of California Press, 1997.
3. Thomas Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology" *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 463-96.
4. Herbert Gans, "The Sociology of Space: A Use-Centered View" *City and Community* 1:4 (December 2002): 329-339.
5. For a sense of the range of those uses, see my "'Whistler's Fog and the Aesthetics of Place,'" Michael Benton, ed. *Rhetorics of Place*, forthcoming.
6. Ken McPhail, "Accounting as Space: Accounting and the Geo-Politics of Social Space." <http://www.law.gla.ac.uk/dbase/Accfin/Department/Library/Wp99/99-4.PDF>
7. Gans, "The Sociology of Space": 330.
8. The only paper I have found which classifies approaches to place in a manner which comes close to what I am doing here is Denise Lawrence and Setha Low's excellent survey of the concept of place in the anthropology of the built environment, "The Built Environment and Spatial Form" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 453-505. Not everyone would likely agree that all these categories refer to place. See, for example, Gieryn, "A Space for Place in

Sociology”.

9. Marc Augé. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso Books, 1995; Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27. See also Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 1997: 350-356.

10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1984: 117.

11. For example, see David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

12. Edward Soja, *Thirdspace*. Oxford: Blackwell: 1996.

13. A good example of another approach to place within psychology can be found in Ciarán Benson, *The Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds*. London: Routledge, 2001.

14. Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions*. Harper & Row, 1993. It is perhaps worth noting that Gallagher is a journalist, not a researcher in psychology.

15. See my “Whistler’s Fog and the Aesthetics of Place” for more on this.

16. I have in mind here the recent work by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

17. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.

18. Arjun Appandurai, “Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory” *Cultural Anthropology* 3:1 (1988): 16. See also his “Putting Hierarchy in its Place” in the same volume, 36-49.

19. To see the over 5000 submissions, go to <http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/>