

Whistler's Fog and the Aesthetics of Place

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Abstract: The concept of place has usually been understood as either a phenomenological, epistemological, or ethical category. An understanding of place as aesthetic or rhetorical, on the other hand, tends to focus on the widely varied uses of the concept. First, I sketch out the wide range of uses of place, that have been drawn from writings on the concept. These uses are not definitions of place, but rather functions that the term performs. Place stands in for other ideas, and allows access to different aspects of human experience. Second, I will draw from this range of uses some ideas about the aesthetics of place, that is, the ways in which the picture that has been painted of the state of place research produces some surprising results. Finally, I will try to address some objections to or limitations of the idea of place.

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till art had invented them. (Oscar Wilde)¹

[T]here was no fog in London before Whistler painted it. (Ernst Gombrich)²

Is place an aesthetic concept? In much of the vast writing on the nature of place³, the concept has largely been viewed as either ontological, epistemological, or ethical. Most phenomenologists (and a great deal of writing on place is phenomenological) view it as ontological, even giving it a kind of priority over the more metaphysical “space” in human experience (as does, for instance, Edward Casey). Those who think of place in symbolic or structural terms tend to make it epistemological. It is a kind of knowledge (or site of knowledge), and knowledge of place means knowledge of the symbolic

structures in which shared meaning is encoded. And, its ethical status is pervasive - it stands as a kind of original good, a rough analogue of Rousseau's "nature", for many writers. Attending to place means attending to what is good, wholesome, life-affirming, or correct.

These are useful approaches. But what difference would it make if place was aesthetic, or if we aestheticized place? Primarily, it would mean that representation becomes the central issue for place. As with Whistler's London fog, there is no fog without its representations. The metaphysical question of the existence of fog is beside the point; Wilde is arguing that fog did not "fit" into the mental canvas of London until someone put it into the literal canvas. Fog came to mean something in London, and as such is made available aesthetically rather than metaphysically. The same seems to be true of place, at several levels. Places are made available inasmuch as they are included in meaningful discourse the way that the London fog was included. But also, the concept of place itself has become meaningful in recent years across a wide range of disciplines, and as such has been "painted" in to our intellectual canvas. It has become meaningful. I am interested in both senses.

I have been avoiding making the bald claim that "place is an aesthetic concept". That claim itself is one of certitude and exclusion, metaphysical by nature. I am more interested in a way of painting the landscape of place-use. Like Whistler, I want to make certain aspects of place available, even as I believe the concept of place makes certain aspects of human experience available, and as some places themselves are made available in their representations. There is no point in speculating about place apart from its representations; yet, place is also not simply reducible to concepts. This is something Henri Lefebvre understood in his discussion of space - place (to use a word he avoids) is not just

perceived or physical space, nor is it the representations of space (conceptualized space); it is representational space, "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols."⁴ But Lefebvre stopped short of considering the range of uses of place as generative.

What must be realized, to have an aesthetics of place, is that the idea of place is as much a window on its intentions of use as it is a descriptor of an aspect of human experience. The concept does work, it accomplishes something, and that accomplishment is different for different people. Indeed, the term is so malleable, yet so fecund, that it is pressed into service for a wide variety of reasons, some of them contradictory to each other (or even internally contradictory). If our goal is to determine the meaning of place in some metaphysical manner, to nail down just what it is we are talking about before we go out and ask what qualifies as a place, we will be frustrated. "Place" suffers not from too few meanings, but from far too many. Rather than sifting through those meanings to find the most relevant to a particular occasion, I am more interested in thinking about what this overdetermination might suggest for the pictures of place that scholars and writers are trying to paint. In short, I am more interested in the place of place, in the range of its uses, and in the ways that those uses, taken together, produce interesting and unexpected results. It is remarkable that very little has been done on its range of uses and what that range implies, despite the thousands of papers and books that have been published on the idea of place or which use the idea as a significant conceptual tool. Most writers either simply take a stand on the version of place they are using (or, more often, simply make unspoken assumptions about it), or regard the profusion of versions of place as something to be simplified or overcome. I would like to argue that this profusion is a strength of the idea, and that taking it seriously makes for a rich canvas

and a wide-ranging palette.

My goal here is straightforward. First, I will sketch out the wide range of uses of place, that have been drawn from writings on the concept. These uses are not definitions of place, but rather functions that the term performs (although, depending on how much of a pragmatist one is, charting uses might be functionally equivalent to definitions). Place stands in for other ideas, and allows access to different aspects of human experience. This first section is not intended as a literature overview, so while in some cases I will make specific citations to identify the sources, in other cases the uses will be widespread enough that I expect the use will be readily recognizable. Second, I will draw from this range of uses some ideas about the aesthetics of place, that is, the ways in which the picture that has been painted of the state of place research produces some surprising results. Finally, I will try to address some objections to or limitations of the idea of place. I am hoping that, as with Whistler's (and Wilde's) London fog, the meaningful construction of place will be made available. I also hope that those who go out to use the concept of place as a theoretical tool or phenomenological lens will themselves be able to paint pictures that construct place in a new and meaningful way (without, of course, just making everything more foggy).

A. Seeing Fog: A Survey of Uses of Place

I have divided 21 uses of place into three categories. Categorizing is a form of spatialization (mapping, to be precise), and I am not unaware of the irony of using a spatial approach to think about place. "Place and particularity" addresses the pervasive sense of place, which is to try to identify some

specific experience, object, or feature as key to determining place. Related to this is the general impulse to resist conceptual universalization. “Place and relation or context” deals mainly with subject/object relations. “Place and meaning” groups together senses of place that try to connect human significance with geography or origin. Each category is necessarily loose, and is meant only to provide an initial conceptual mapping. Of course, each of the 21 uses of place contain within them shades of difference (in some cases, the variations are vast and nuanced), and so each use is itself a category.

1. Place and Particularity

a. Place as Spatial Location: Place is sometimes thought of as the coordinates on a map, or in modernist modes of understanding space, place becomes secondary to and derivative of space. Finding one’s place on a global positioning system, for instance, means the prior identification of abstract lines of longitude and latitude. In this use place, then, becomes evidence of a prior discourse about space. Some, however, argue that place is at least equal to space (that is, place does not “follow” space by being an inference of it), and perhaps (e.g., Edward Casey) place is even prior to space.

b. Place as the Immediate, Concrete, or Present: Place often refers to what is near me or those with whom I identify (and as such, is also a relational notion of place). To talk about place can mean to talk about the directly experienced or sensed, the empirically available. Some writers of place emphasize that place is prior to conceptualization or language. Place can be understood not just as the immediate, but as the present, the lens through which all else is seen and the ordering principle for time and space.

c. Place as Exclusivity: Ancient and mediaeval thinkers regarded place as a claim on a part of space, usually defined by a material object. Objects always exist in a place, and part of that existence means that they have exclusive claim on whatever place they are in. For Descartes the fundamental feature of one of the two primary substances is that it is extended, which means that it takes up space and denies other objects claim on that space while it is there. It does mean that place is associated with what is not (and perhaps cannot be) thought, since thought requires universals. And yet, as Aristotle recognized, place is not an integral part of the object, since it is abandoned the minute the object moves in space.

d. Place as the Unique: The term “genius loci” evolved from referring to nymphs, dryads, and other place-related spirits, and eventually became the “spirit of the place”, that is, the unique features of a place that call forth a response. Even without this reification of place, one might argue that a fundamental use of the concept of place is to designate the features of something that are utterly like nothing else, that past the fact that it takes up a specific space, it also has other characteristics unlike any other place. Much romantic work on place imagined this uniqueness, and geomantic techniques such as feng shui or ley lines also assume that the uniqueness of place is available given the proper training and intuitive insight.

e. Place as Static, Fixed, Unchanging, Permanent: For Aristotle (*Physics* IV), place was static, where things were “at rest.” Motion could be explained as the striving of things to their natural place of rest. More recently, people use the term to refer to what resists change, particularly modernization.

“The idea of place as we once knew it has changed in that the emphasis now lies not in permanent structures but those things (ex roads) that allow for an increasingly globalized world to move.”⁵

f. Place as Chaotic, Complex, Impermanent: Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams* argues that “Place is collectively made up of the conglomeration of many different elements within this locale.”⁶ It is not easily graspable, and indeed may run ahead of our ability to conceptualize it. Place disrupts the orderliness of space by saying that some places (even this particular place) must be taken seriously; it is not interchangeable with another. As well, place can also resist the tendency to homogenize culture. The chaos, then, can be a creative one, in which difference is maintained.

g. Place as Embodiment: Embodiment is more than just physicality, it is the recognition that the place we are in is made possible by the specific sensory way we understand the world. This sense of place can be representational as well as literal – one’s body can code or represent one’s place in a social order or hierarchy. This might be intentional (through modification, clothing, etc.) or unintentional/unreflective. This makes “virtual” space ambiguous as a place, and is consequently the focus of much discussion. A good example is Nancy Mairs autobiographical account of her life from inside “the bonehouse” or the body as a place from where her story can be told.⁷

2. Place and Relation or Context

a. Place as the Local: Place often refers to what is near me or those with whom I identify. Rather than

referring to a discrete “thing”, place may be thought of as a continuum, with “closer” and “further”. The local also comes with metaphorical implications – it is not simply proximity, but emotional or meaningful nearness. Lucy Lippard, in *The Lure of the Local*⁸, does not see the local as just proximity, but about the aspects of the proximate which endure, for good reasons, and which speak of intimate human relations rather than bureaucratic or technological relations.

b. Place as Nature or Landscape: There is an almost Rousseauian sense of authenticity and primordality which is tied to Nature, which makes all other places derivative, and in many cases, alienating. Some writers regard nature as the quintessential place, the place which draws out a “truer” self or subjectivity. Wilderness is sometimes seen in this way, as a necessary place for the true human self (e.g., Thoreau). Landscape is nature viewed or nature experienced. It could be considered to be place created, as a landscape painter makes nature into a place.

c. Place as Relation: Locke thought of place as the relation (distance and attachment) between discrete objects – a “chessboard on a ship” is in the same place, even though the ship is moving.⁹ Similarly, place may designate the continuity of relationships between people, even though the social space of those people may change. The relation may be rhizomatic, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest; that is, the place may in fact not be geographically anchored, but may be a range of activity. Or, it may be a mutual reference point, which would suggest that the place is not something that a single person could lay claim to.

Place is also the context of social relations, reciprocity, and/or symbolic constructions. In some cases place has been a term of resistance, preferring the layered, complex, heterogenous, and multi-perspectival over the monocultural. Phenomenologically, place may be thought of as “between” subject and object.

d. Place as Mediation: It is the “common-place” in communitarian politics, the place of the meeting of both people and minds. Place “provides the spaces essential to association and mediation and it represents a city to its inhabitants.”¹⁰ Place is, for some, equivalent to culture (as opposed to nature).

e. Place as a Term of Opposition: Place is often oppositional, sometimes to disciplinary methods or structures (perceived as alienating or as insufficiently able to access human meaning), or modernity (perceived as overly concerned with structural components at the expense of individual experience), or even post-modernity (perceived as too willing to frolic in the free-play of signifiers, and not sufficiently interested in anything that might matter to someone). It is disruptive of received ways of understanding the world or even of other places. Place resists the homogenization of culture. “New spaces of resistance are being opened up, where our ‘place’ (in all its meanings) is considered fundamentally important to our perspective, our location in the world, and our right and ability to challenge dominant discourses of power.”¹¹

f. Place as Other: For some thinkers, places must resist total subsumption under the self. Place must

bear a sense of foreignness. Place must not be immediately or intuitively known (and thus be completely brought into or identified with the self), but rather it should let itself be shown forth. It stands at a distance from the self.¹²

3. Place and Meaning

a. Place as the Personally or Communally Significant: Place points to “what we are loyal to”, “what we care about”, or “what matters.” This sense of meaning may be expressed as subjectivity (vs. objectivity) or habit(us) (vs. space as the reflexive or known). It may point to a personal sense of freedom, over against a “spatialization” which locks a person into external causes. Places, for many, are tied to the stories that can be told about them, or that they evoke. So, place may in some cases be the site (or more properly, situation) of personal meaning, or for others the cause of personal meaning, or for others the precondition of personal meaning.

Given this sense, it may even be possible to have place without space:

“Using the example of LambdaMOO, the online environment, they explore the possibility of a place without a space. The LambdaMOO has meanings for its users – sometimes quite rich and deep ones. Yet it did not exist physically in space – it took “place” only in the outputs of a computer. This was a place without a space.”¹³

This significance may or may not be recognized, or may or may not be created by the subject.

Many people speak of a “sense of place”, which suggests that some can recognize or feel the “placeness” of (a) place, that is, its significance as a place rather than as an interchangeable aspect of

space.

b. Place as Identity: Many uses of “place” are really about personal, community, regional, or national identity. This identity can be understood either as accruing from place in a relatively linear or causal manner, or more commonly that the construction of place is also the construction of self, so that place and identity need to be approached dialectically or reciprocally. Regionalism, in particular, has been a popular way of linking place and identity, as regions seem less constructed by mechanisms of state formation and more by the practices of people. The sense of identity is reinforced by considering the “liminal” or borderline “places”, the events in a person’s life of transition or change or movement from one role to another. There is disruption here, a contradiction between the identity maintained and the identity exchanged. On the other hand, for some place means indigeneity.¹⁴

c. Place as Home: Home is in-habited, the lived place made livable (and expressed as livable) by the habits we bring. There is a reciprocal relationship between ourselves and the places that we “dwell”. In other words, just as we transform our environment into “home” at the same time our environment serves to create us as well.¹⁵

True place, then, has some features of “home” to it, for some people, and the extent to which we are “un-homed” (*unheimlich*, to use a Heideggerian term) is the extent to which we are also “displaced”. We must, to use another of Heidegger’s terms, dwell, and find what it means to dwell.¹⁶

d. Place as Feeling or Mood: For some, place is “feeling measured in one’s muscles and bones.”

Place may cause this feeling, or may simply be indicated by this feeling, but in either case place is attached to a long or short term psychological state. It might be that one simply has a feeling about place, and there is no further definition. For instance, in Paul Gruchow’s *The Necessity of Empty Places*¹⁷, place as a concept is never really explored but rather the reader gets the feel of place as experiential. Place may be an immediate, pre-conceptual experience, and its knowledge then is intuitive rather than discursive.

Place may also evoke feeling, a subtly different understanding than place being feeling. “Place attachment”, for instance, designates the feelings people have about their places.

And, finally, place might communicate or represent feeling. Writers and cinematographers have long known that a well-represented place can be a character in the story. For example, we are prepared to understand narrative difference through the visual differences between the forests of Rivendell, Lothlorien and Fangorn Forest in the movie adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*. The place, even without action or dialogue, tells some of the story, or at least prepares us for the kind of action or life that is possible in these places.

e. Place as the Social or Intentional: Place is not only geographical location, but also what happens.

One geographical point may be several places; one place may have several locations. Places may “quote” or refer to other places (“little Italy”, “Chinatown”). Place also seems to be inextricably linked to social roles, and with the shattering of these traditional roles comes the profound sense of

“placelessness”.¹⁸

f. Place as Symbolic Order: Place is space invested with symbolic meaning. Michel de Certeau refers to space as “practiced place”, or place that has had the meaning of practices imposed upon it. A street is a place that becomes a space when people walk on it and use it.¹⁹ Place is culture – the earth is “terra incognita”, empty space, until culture (or in some cases, a particular culture) places its imprint. Culture may be the difference between the “place” of animals, which we call their habitat, and the place of humans, and to the extent that we are willing to see symbolic order in the animal world (through bio- or zoo-semiotics), we may also speak of them as having place. Other planets are “no-place” until they at least can be described, and perhaps until there is a human imprint that leaves an indication of symbolic order. To this extent, the moon is a place in a way that Pluto is not.

g. Place as Time: The ways in which place becomes time is extensive. Place can imply recovery of the past, experience of the present, and anticipation of the future. Place often evokes references to the passing of time, to the difference that the place represents in different times, and to the necessity of memory in establishing a place. It can encode time in a fairly static or controlled form, as in a monument or memorial, or in a more fluid form, such as that made available in tradition. It can take the form of nostalgia or romanticism (the place marks a particular past time, one that was preferable in some way). History may be encoded in place: “Place is significant in that, for the Apache, history is conceptualized spatially.”²⁰ “For the Foy, place is the more tangible expression of temporality which can be expressed

through poetic images.’²¹

h. Place as Transcendence or Mythology: Place has been experienced as a voice, a healer, and a mystical guide. Among some religious thinkers, place becomes immanence or incarnation, the spirit made flesh dwelling among us. “Place is significant in that God made entry into time and space (the combination of which constitutes place) with His incarnation into Christ.”²² And groups such as the Pintupi in Australia hold that the songlines, discernable to those who have the proper relationship to the land, stretch not only over geography but through time, back to the creation of the world.²³

B. Sketching Fog: Notes about the Uses of Place

Place is paradoxical in its uses. Writers want to have place do contradictory work – hardly anyone means to limit their application of the notion of place to only one of the senses I have listed here. This is not a bad thing; in fact, place is characterized by what I will call a “productive paradoxicality” – the tendency to try to capture place using senses which are mutually contradictory, or which are mutually circular (i.e., one requires the other to be true first). Ultimately, place tries to approximate something which is both internal and external, both causal and caused, both held as deeply felt “content” and as structuring “form”. So, it should not be a surprise that applications of place end up working on the edges of concepts, rather than at the core of them.

Some of the paradoxes of place become evident as soon as we start to compare items on the list of uses of place. In many uses, it is clear that place serves to access or express an aspect of subject

experience that has been lost. Many of the uses of place stand as indictments of existing modes of investigation of subjectivity, and existing social conditions. Yet, even these resisting uses are paradoxical:

- If the loss of subjectivity is described by a loss of individuality (a dissipated spatialization), then place becomes the place of the individual, the solid rock on which one stands. If, on the other hand, the loss of subjectivity is the loss of community and connection (that is, the alienation and meaninglessness of hyper-individuality), then place becomes the small-scale human connections that bring back meaning.
- If the threat is the oversimplification of life, then place is the chaotic and complex; if it is the overcomplexification of life, then place is the simple.
- Many writers equate place with rootedness, yet some versions of place are rhizomatic (to use Deleuze and Guattari's contrast), that is, one "dwells by moving" rather than by remaining static.
- Place, for some, is mediation, the "in-between" space between self and world, between individuals; for others, place is the poles that make connection possible.
- For some, nature is a place, indeed, the quintessential place; for others, it is (as the poet Don McKay put it), "otherwise than place". Place is "nature to which history has happened", and as such is not nature anymore.
- Place is for some people that which is closest to us; for others, it is the "other". On one hand it can be that which is intuitive and immediate; on the other, it can be that which is foreign and in

need of disciplined investigation.

- And, if place is identity, that suggests a kind of centrality, a “home” for the self; but if place is in transition, it finds itself un-homed, liminal, always at the edge, *homo viator*. There is an anticipation of a home that one has never had, and a definition of self in terms of that imagined place. Place, then, lies not behind but in front.

Contrasts and tensions, indeed, paradoxes, could be multiplied. The wide variation of uses becomes apparent as one looks at writers on place, and their attempts to identify exactly what it is that they are dealing with. Definitions abound. For example, it is not always clear whether place is the cause of subjectivity, or the effect. For some, this question is simply ignored; yet, one or the other is assumed as a person either talks about the effects of the place on the person, or the way that a person might be discovered or uncovered through the place(s) they find significant.

And, there is another tension, if we imagine that place is an aesthetic production. Arjun

Appandurai explains:

...the problem of space in anthropology, [which is] the problem of place, that is, the problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer. Such named locations, which often come to be identified with the groups that inhabit them, constitute the landscape of anthropology, in which the privileged locus is the often unnamed location of the ethnographer. Ethnography thus reflects the circumstantial encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntarily localized “other.”²⁴

Appandurai points to yet another paradox of place, that we are both inside and outside of

place, both our own place and the place of the subject of research. There is a “circumstantial encounter” in which one party has control over place (i.e., has become voluntarily displaced), while the other must remain in place for the research to have any meaning. If it is the place that the ethnographer is researching, not simply the artifacts or customs and rituals, then the subject must maintain some access to that place and not “move around.”

Appandurai raises a couple of very interesting issues. One is the issue of control, not over space but place, that is necessary for research to happen. There is a requirement of displacement for the researcher, and a requirement (or assumption) of emplacement for the subject. The other is the idea of the place of the research itself. What is the place of “place” in anthropology? The place of place in a discipline, and the ability of the discipline to reflect on its own place in relation to other disciplines and to its objects of study is as much about place as is the tie that someone might feel to a literal place. There are identities at stake, habits, insiders and outsiders, and even forms of materiality that make the intellectual place what it is.

Even the reflection on the rhetoric of place, then, is an aesthetic production. It is not just the scientific “reading” of an external given. This means that our talk about place must not just map the kinds of places there are out there, the way that we might classify paintings according to the kinds of subject matter they portray. Much more interesting (to continue the analogy) is what the act of painting itself uncovers. How were the choices made for framing the place, for including (for example) the fog of London? What made that significant? It is the same question as Appandurai’s, for it asks about the place of the researcher/painter, not just the place that is being depicted. And yet, that place is not

available to us without considering the kind of place London is, with fog or without.

What do we make of these tensions? It would be tempting to say that the tensions just reflect the different preoccupations of different writers, and are really of no consequence. Place is a concept that focusses the hopes of many people, and we should expect that these hopes are different. That is probably true, yet I think there is more here. I think that part of the appeal of place is precisely the tensions which it makes possible. There is productive paradoxicality here.

And it is this productive paradoxicality that is best understood as aesthetic, in the sense that it makes possible the rhetorical and persuasive representation of place. The place that is captured and described in every detail is also the place that is lost. Only in the paradoxical tensions can we hope to make available the place which is before us. It is, perhaps, like other paradoxes that have been part of Western thought; for example:

"God is an infinite sphere whose circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere."²⁵

Perhaps it is not God for whom the circumference is everywhere and the centre is nowhere, but lived place. If everything is at the circumference, everything is at the boundary. Another implication of thinking of different versions of place in productive tension is that place becomes an edge, boundary, or threshold. It is at the edge of methodological approaches and different or competing uses. The difficulty of defining place attests to its being "on the edge" of essences. It is at the border of the subjective and objective, which is probably why phenomenology has been so interested in place. Space is bounded, while place is boundary. Places become available when the edges become apparent – geographical edges, temporal edges. Paul Virilio applies this circumference/center quotation in a very different

manner. He speaks of the globalized, digitally connected world as “a sort of omnipolitan periphery whose centre will be nowhere and circumference everywhere.”²⁶ In a certain sense, this is the opposite of place, but it suggests the productive paradoxicality of the situation, that is, that place can both be about edges, but also about the end of edges.

Various other thinkers could be fruitfully explored in these terms. Liminality itself has a host of uses, including some explicitly related to space.²⁷ Foucault’s heterotopia²⁸ and Soja’s Thirdspace²⁹ are both examples of attempts to access edges. But perhaps most useful is Nicholas Entrikin’s *The Betweenness of Place*,³⁰ which argues that the edges of place, rather than the centre, defines the place in modernity. The primary edge is between particularizing and universalizing discourse about place, which comes with subjectifying and objectifying discourses.

C. The Dangers of Fog

The standard objection to aestheticism is that it introduces relativism. After all, if representation is integral to place, what kind of analytic tool could it possibly be? We could not use the concept to ground empirical research in any way. It seems that it becomes a concept more suited to literature than to either the social sciences or to philosophy.

One of the results of relativism is the inability to discuss place as anything other than an uninterpretable given. What can one say, for instance, to someone whose experience and representation of place is limited to nostalgic or romantic depictions (for example, the overwrought landscapes of Thomas Kinkadee)? Can one say no more than that this is not my experience? Are we left

with versions of place which are simply a matter of personal taste? Does my depiction of my place amount to the same thing as my choice of painting that I would hang on my wall?

To simply regard place as aesthetic in a simplistic manner opens the door to regarding one's own representations as seductive and irrefutable. There are plenty of examples of an aestheticized version of place serving as the pretext for aggressive nationalism. The Nazi "*Blut und Boden*" ideology is only the most extreme aestheticization of place that lent a mythological impetus to geographical entitlement. Equally troubling are the myths of geographical entitlement that undergird the reprehensible euphemism of "ethnic cleansing". We might also see other nationalist myths such as the myth of the Wild West in the United States, or some of the myths surrounding Zionism, as having constructed a pretext for geographical entitlement.

Even with increasing suspicion toward modernism, and the attempt to recover voices marginalized by its universalizing tendencies, place may not be up to the task of actually explicating those voices. Roberto Dainotto, for example, argues that place (understood in this case as "region") mystifies rather than uncovers marginalized identity even as it attempts to ground that identity after the failure of modernist concepts such as nationalism.³¹

Does place as an aesthetic concept ultimately fail, then, merely disguising latent desire or coercion? This is an ever present possibility, but I do not think it is a necessity. Heidegger, in "The Question Concerning Technology", quotes Holderlin as saying

But where danger is, grows

The saving power also.³²

It is significant that he also includes the line “...poetically dwells man upon this earth.” Heidegger is interested in place here, specifically (poetic) dwelling, and one need not necessarily subscribe to his version of dwelling to recognize that a concept like place may be a two-edged sword. If we suppose that our task is to define place in some essentialist manner, or turn it into a tool or methodological component in some overall disciplinary structure, we have tamed it. We can certainly use it that way, but what we have lost is its ability to give access to the less articulable aspects of human experience. Place, finally, shows us as we are, individually and collectively, as researchers and as inhabitants of a society.

The problem comes when we are not aware of what the concept of place is meant to accomplish. Is it serving to undergird colonizing impulses? Is it protecting tradition, with all the positive and negative implications that has? Is it demarcating the other (even literally, telling us who lives “on the other side of the tracks”). Is it constructing a future (or necessitating one), and whose future is it? Is it establishing a canon? Defining a methodology or object of study? Allowing commercial or corporate interests a point of access to a community? What does place do? It is only in finding the contradictory impulses and uses that we can move the pervasive concept of place from merely being another useful tool in the academic’s toolbox, and both allow it to challenge academic assumptions and give access to lifeworlds.

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ENDNOTES

1. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1997: 793. I would like to thank Keith Harder for useful discussion about aspects of this paper, including the title reference.
2. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton University Press, 1969: 324.
3. To get a sense of the sheer range of scholarship on place, see my Research on Place and Space website, at <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/>
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991: 39.
5. J. B. Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
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