

Coming to Place

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EAP readers will find Janz’s website on *Research on Place and Space* especially useful; it shows the great range of academic and professional work on place and provides a host of references and website links. See a more complete description of this site in the box on the next page. janzb@mail.ucf.edu ©2004 Bruce Janz.

The recent movie *The Terminal*, starring Tom Hanks, raises an interesting question: Is it possible for a non-place to become a place? Marc Augé declared the airport terminal to be the quintessential non-place, the place which has exhausted its symbolic force.¹ All symbols point outside—the airport is, after all, a place of transit, a perennial deferral, not a place where people look for some sort of intrinsic meaning

And yet *The Terminal* suggests that, under the right conditions, even non-places can be places. Nothing is so symbolically or hermeneutically bankrupt that place cannot (re)establish itself. Furthermore, place itself is not stable. It comes and goes, emerges and recedes. While we often think of place in terms of stability or rootedness, we also must recognize that this stability is actually a useful fiction. Places are not only spatially particular but to some extent temporally particular as well.²

Place is not, however, simply arbitrary, and that is what interests me as a philosopher in the concept. Historically, philosophers have tended to focus on permanences and, preferably, universals. Even those who focus on particulars do not forget universals. Aristotle, for instance, paid attention to the physical as a means to reach the ideal world contained within. Husserl distilled experience to find its universal phenomenological core. In many cases, universality is what is left at the end of philosophical reflection. It is either the prerequisite or the goal of philosophical thought.

The Hermeneutical Circle of Place

Being a philosopher means feeling the tug of the universal. Being a philosopher *today* means understanding the problematic nature of that tug. For many, it is no more than a siren song, beautiful and nostalgic but ultimately futile, coercive, bound to overlook vast areas of human experience and probably evidence of white middle-class heterosexual male privilege. Universals, especially for philosophers who want to remain credible in contemporary cultural theory, are to be avoided at all costs.

In the case of place, my sense has always been that there is a gulf between those who deal only with the particularities of place and those who deal with place as a universal concept (that is, a concept that is applied to or generalized over the particulars, rather than derived from them). I have been uneasy with both of those options. Places cannot be irreducibly particular—they become available inasmuch as they are imagined in the context of (or in the absence of, nostalgia for, anticipation of, memory of) other places. But they also cannot be subsumed under some universal, as instances of a type. To suppose that we have understood a place when we are able to put it in a category (“tourist destination”, “home”, “suburb”, “atrium”, “memorial site”) is to miss what is human about a place. In some way, the particularities of place that are only available in human experience and the universals of place that make experience possible must be present at the same time. This is the hermeneutical circle of place.

Particular and Universal Together

This hermeneutical circle has been in my peripheral vision for most of my academic career, even though I did not start by thinking about place as a concept in its own right. My own interest did not begin with the intense attachment to a particular place that some feel, nor in the nostalgic yearning or loss of place that has led others into the field.

Rather, I began with the history of mysticism. My dissertation was on a German mystic named Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). Boehme had little or nothing to say directly about place, but he did have a great deal to say about paying attention to the life that animated and connected nature. I didn't come across the term *genius loci* until later, but it would have fit Boehme's mystical view of nature very well.

What was significant in his thought was that he posited the co-eternal nature of particulars with the divine life that suffused them. In other words, particulars were not pale reflections of a universal cause nor was the universal simply the particulars all added together. He was neither a traditional theist nor a pantheist. Instead, he held both in hand at the same time, refusing to reduce one to the other. He refused to solve the classical philosophical problem of the many and the one, and in that refusal he recognized that human life itself exists on borders and in tension.

He also recognized that there was a kind of motion through history, that this tension which described life did not remain the same at all times. The change over time was described in a fairly rudimentary manner, as a dialectic, but at least there was the possibility that the relationship created by the tension could shift over time.³ Boehme offered a model for taking universals seriously but never sacrificing particulars on their behalf, and taking particulars seriously but never seeing them as discrete, unrelated atoms.

Boehme's philosophy may seem a long way from the concept of place, but the foundations are laid here. Place lies between universality and particularity, reducible to neither. It exists as a tension. It exists between materiality and discourse, reducible to neither. And, like the airport terminal, that tension animates it, making it both stable and always at the edge of emergence or decadence.

Interdisciplinarity and Place

My next stop on the way to place was the concept of interdisciplinarity. For several years I was

the director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Liberal Arts (CIRLA), at Augustana University College, in Alberta Canada.⁴ This center's purpose was to promote interdisciplinary research and teaching, a requirement that made it imperative to think about what counted as interdisciplinarity.

Several of the center's staff, including myself, were rooted in hermeneutic philosophy, and it became clear that interdisciplinarity needed to be more than the application of different disciplines to the same problem, or the attempt to find a meta-discipline that could organize all other forms of knowledge, or the attempt to contain diverse methodologies within a single person.

What was needed was the actual encounter of disciplinary methods and assumptions with those of other disciplines. If left to itself, a discipline such as philosophy might imagine itself to be the queen of all other disciplines, but that hubris could not be maintained when those engaged in philosophy were brought into dialogue with other disciplines. Philosophy's blind spots become apparent, as well as its strengths.

What does this dilemma have to do with place? It seemed to me that I would better understand philosophy's approach to place if I talked to non-philosophers. It also seemed to me that philosophy might have something to offer the academic discourse on place, not as the one discipline that could theorize place for others, but rather as a way of approaching place that had a set of specific concerns and abilities and which had a particular history in relation to the concept. Philosophy has a place, in all senses of the phrase.

African Philosophy and Place

My third stop on the way to place was African philosophy. Again, this may seem to have little to do with place, but appearances are deceiving. What interested me in African philosophy was that, as a relatively new area within the discipline of philosophy (putting to the side for the moment the claims of priority of Afrocentrism, and the historical philosophical texts and traditional wisdom which can be found in various parts of Africa), African philosophy was under a constant challenge. The challenge was one of self-defense—European philosophy continually challenged African philosophy to justify its existence. Over time, this defense has become internalized so that a great deal of work in African philosophy is of the form “Here's why this particular thinker or concept is both truly African and truly philosophical.”

This struck me as a spatializing activity, in the sense that African philosophers were assumed (by Western philosophy) to have no intellectual territory but were trying to claim some territory. They were being asked to justify their territorial entitlement. The result was that African philosophers turned to various concepts, such as tradition, reason, culture, language, and so forth, to identify elements in African society that were truly African and truly philosophical.

Most of these efforts, unfortunately, met with mixed success, not because these concepts are not intrinsic to philosophy, but because they cannot serve the spatializing purpose. They cannot guarantee either that the thought that emerges is either truly African or truly philosophical.

Moreso, the real problem is that the wrong question is being asked. Instead of the spatializing question, “Is there an African philosophy?” a question more related to place must be asked: “What is it to do philosophy in this (African) place?” This is a phenomenological and

hermeneutical question, but also has the capacity to take symbolic and social constructivist concerns to heart.

The result of taking place seriously in African philosophy is that the Eurocentric challenge is uncovered as an illegitimate one, and African philosophy can attend to the task of philosophically explicating life as it is lived in Africa.⁵ This third stop on the road to place suggested to me that in order to understand place, we need to understand the questions that we ask. Some questions are not platial questions but spatial ones.

A Place Itself

There is a fourth stop on the way to place, and it is not so much an area of research as it is a place itself. In the summer of 2003, I moved from 11 years of teaching in Western Canada to Orlando, to the philosophy department at the University of Central Florida. While the department and university have been congenial, Orlando itself struck me as a very strange place indeed.

I first thought of Augé's non-places, and thought that Orlando might qualify as another example of a non-place. But the signifiers do not all point outside—exactly the opposite. They point inside, as do most tourist destinations. Orlando is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, and inevitably the area becomes defined by that fact. Instead of Augé's non-places, Baudrillard's simulacrum came to mind (and of course, Disneyworld is almost the quintessential example).

Living in Orlando as a Canadian has forced me to rethink my ideas of what makes a place. I have rarely seen a stronger division between those who see Orlando as either a non-place or a simulacrum of a place on one hand, and those who see it as a good place, possibly the very model of a good place on the other.

For some Orlandoans, there is absence of culture; for others, profusion. For some, there is transience and lack of roots; for others, the place has deep history. Some find strong communities and coherent cultural narratives which give it a unique character; others fail to find those narratives even after many years and continue to sojourn in Orlando rather than dwelling there. Is Orlando *The Terminal*? Is it wishful thinking, a playground, or perhaps a nightmare? Explicating meaning becomes much more difficult when it is conflicted at every turn.

Some Questions

These stops on the way to place have produced a number of questions:

1. How can philosophy take itself seriously as an emplaced discipline? Philosophy has rarely, if ever, understood itself as an intellectual pursuit that is affected by its places. It has rarely connected itself with the situation from which it comes (apart from identifying contingent philosophical traditions using national or ethnic descriptors, e.g., German or British philosophy). It has rarely considered fieldwork, for instance, as a part of philosophical method. It has rarely thought of its “debts and duties,” to use a phrase of Derrida's. What would philosophy look like if it regarded place not just as another concept for analysis but as an integral part of its own self-construction?

This question is not only relevant to philosophy but is a fruitful place to start. Most disciplines regard their methods and knowledge as beyond place, as having no history and as the

answer to universal rather than contingent questions, even if the object of their research is place itself. Even many practitioners of cultural studies who would be inclined to value the particularity of human experience tend to regard critical methods coming from Foucault, Derrida, and others as not having come from a place—that is, as not being a response to particular questions in a localized history of thought. This lacuna does not invalidate the use of these critical strategies but does raise the question of how one can be rigorous in recognizing that thought is rooted in places and is a response to concerns that may not exist in the same way elsewhere.

2. How does the discourse on place across the disciplines shape our understanding of place and our approach to it? Why does the concept of place find such a contemporary renaissance? What are its purposes and the ranges of its use?

This question became apparent to me as I developed a tool for the study of place, collecting references and central papers on the concept of place. I thought this effort would be a preliminary task, a kind of literature search. Two things became clear—the task was endless (the amount of work on place is staggering, far more extensive than I anticipated), and this was no mere literature search. If place exists, in part, through the discourse about it, then collecting work on place amounted to a study of that discourse and a contribution to place-making itself.⁶ Eventually, the collection of resources became the website *Research on Place and Space* [see box, right].

I found it particularly interesting that the concept of place not only has multiple applications but also applications that are in tension. Place may point to the recovery of individuality in the face of alienating mass society, or it may point to the recovery of community (and the subsumption of individuality) in the face of reductive modernity. Yet again, place may point to stability or, as in the case of *The Terminal*, to fluidity. If the threat to life is its oversimplification (e.g., under an umbrella such as globalization), then place is that which is chaotic or complex. On the other hand, if a threat to life is its complexity, place then becomes what is simple. Nature may be a place, indeed for some the quintessential place; or, nature may be a non-place if, as poet Don McKay writes, place is “nature to which history has happened.” Tensions abound, and they become clearer as the uses across disciplines are made apparent.

3. What are places like at the edge of “place-ness”? Can places die? Where do they come from? What is the “other” of place – globalization? Hyperreality? Limbo? If place is not just seen as a kind of stasis or permanence, what else might it be? And can it serve its purpose if it is seen as transient rather than permanent?

In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger argue that what has been seen as simply rooted in time may in fact have an unexpectedly recent history.⁷ Does this invalidate the tradition? Not necessarily, but it does require that we think about the border between thought and its other. Tradition is that which we are willing to not think about, to regard as simply pre-rationally constitutive of identity. To regard tradition as having recent history is to subject it to thought and, possibly, to raise questions about the identity which it supports.

Place is like this. For many, its stability and permanence are important because they legitimate identity. But if place comes and goes, if it has a history like tradition, can it do the work that many thinkers and practitioners want it to do? Can it really support identity? We create

place like we sometimes create tradition, for good reasons. Places tell us who we are at our best, but like tradition, places tend to get out of hand and have the potential as well to show us who we are at our worst. Thus, the transitions of place, rather than just the stability of place, is worthy of attention.

4. How can places be both one and not one at the same time? That is, how is it possible that places can have both a unity and a contradiction of meaning at the same time? The easy answer is to regard this paradox as one of subjectivity—we bring interpretations to places such that the same place can be a completely different experience for different people. But if place exists in a hermeneutical circle, then place itself is already interpreted. So the paradox exists in the very nature of place itself, not as a later subjective interpretation on an objective feature of the world. At the same time, place is not just the product of subjectivity—it is not all relative. Place, like reality, “bites back.” Places resist some interpretations and reject others, even as they make some possible.

To me, the lesson in all this is clear. One’s path to a concept matters, and the questions that can be raised about that concept become available the more one is clear on where the questions are coming from.

Notes

1. Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995.
2. I am aware of the problematic phrasing here. What if, as Edward Casey (e.g., *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996) and others argue, place precedes space?
3. Boehme’s dialectical philosophy earned him the title of the “first German philosopher” from Hegel.
4. Augustana University College is now the Augustana Faculty of the University of Alberta.
5. See my “Philosophy as If Place Mattered: The Situation of African Philosophy,” Havi Carel and David Gomez, eds. *What Philosophy Is*. London: Continuum Publishers, 2004, pp. 103-115.
6. For more on this, see my “Walls and Borders: The Range of Place”, *City and Community*, forthcoming.
7. Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1992.