

The Intelligence of Place

[Introduction to *The Intelligence of Place – Topographies and Poetics*,
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To talk of the 'intelligence' of place is to refer both to the intelligible character that belongs to place and to the apprehension of that character in our own thinking. To look to the intelligence of place is thus to look both to the character of place and to the character of our encounter with place. The two are inevitably and inextricably connected, since we cannot attempt to address the character of place without also addressing the encounter on the basis of which the character of place can even arise as an issue for us, and yet neither can we afford simply to collapse the two. Place is not identical with our thinking of it, and our thinking itself stands always in the shadow of place, even though place itself often remains in shadow.

Place is everywhere – ambiguously so, perhaps, in that it is both *everywhere* ("all about") and every *where* (every place is a 'where' and every 'where' a place) – but also tautologically, since to speak of 'where' is just to speak of place. In its 'everywhereness', place can readily appear as 'commonplace' – as so familiar as to be an unremarkable part of the everyday comings and goings of the world, as so obvious as to need no explication, and as so ordinary and basic as to be incapable of any exact or precise apprehension. Not only in the character of existence or our immediate experience of it, but also in our *thinking about* existence and experience, place appears as equally ubiquitous. Even though the place in which such thinking takes place may sometimes perplex us, and may even lead us to suppose (mistakenly I would argue) that thinking can somehow escape the constraints of place,¹ still our thinking is essentially determined by *where* we are, by the contingencies of our own

location (and one need not be a reductive materialist to claim that the place in which thinking takes place is indeed identical with the place of location of the body), and what it addresses is essentially given to us in and through the places *in which we find ourselves*. Moreover, in our very thinking, place, and with it topographic, bodily and spatial ideas and images seems to be constantly invoked – we think 'through' things, we 'grasp' ideas, we explore the 'place' and 'space' of ideas, we 'move between' concepts or arguments, we find ourselves taken 'up' and 'into' a way of thought.

So ubiquitous is place in thinking that often we do not even recognise it as present – and the very suggestion that there is an essentially topographic character to thinking is likely to be dismissed as merely an incidental feature of language and nothing more (although at that point one might also press on the topographic character of language²). There is an as yet unwritten history of philosophy that would explore, not the history or 'fate' of the *idea* of place (which Ed Casey has already documented so well and which is largely the history of the displacing of place by an increasingly narrow idea of space), but instead the unremarked history of place as integral to thinking – of thinking, and so of philosophy, as essentially a sort of 'topographic' exploration. Such an idea might be said already to be adumbrated in Kant's designation of Hume (as so also himself) as a 'geographer of reason'³ and Heidegger's characterisation of thinking itself, and not just the thinking that he undertakes, as a 'topology of being'.⁴

Although Aristotle took place to be a key concept in the study of nature,⁵ the rise of modern natural science also saw the near disappearance of place from scientific discourse – indeed, the reaction against Aristotelianism can be seen as also a reaction against the topocentric ordering of the world that was such an important part of Aristotelian thinking.⁶ Modern scientific thinking tends to treat place as either a subjective construct or else as reducible to a mere location in space. Understood as mere location – which is essentially the only notion of place remaining within the physical sciences – place is no more than a numerically specifiable point or area within a spatial field; understood as a subjective construct – an approach common

across much of the social sciences and even in the humanities – place becomes a mere product of psychological, social, or political structures and processes. Moreover, this scientific neglect of place remains true in spite of the tendency to talk of a spatial turn within the social sciences and humanities.

That a turn towards space can itself be construed, as it often is, especially in English-language scholarship, as automatically encompassing a turn to place is itself indicative of how little attention is given to place as such. What the relation is between place and space, and whether or to what extent they are indeed related, cannot simply be assumed. In English, there is good reason to assume a *prima facie* distinction between them, or, at least, between 'place', which retains a broader meaning connected with ideas of 'locale', 'situation', 'country', 'land', and even 'home', and 'space', which has tended to move towards a narrower sense restricted to notions of physical extendedness.⁷

The distinction here is itself complicated, in many English-language discussions, by the introduction of texts from other languages in which terms are translated into English without regard for the different ways in which the distinction between ideas of space and place may originally operate in those languages and texts. One cannot assume, for instance, that a term like *espace*, in French, can be unambiguously translated into the English 'space' nor *lieu* (or indeed *place*) into 'place'.⁸ One of the consequences of the appearance of works such as Henri Lefebvre's *La production de l'espace* or Foucault's 'Des espaces autres' in English as works *about space* has been to obscure the complexity of what is at issue, the original works themselves, in terms of both space *and place*. Moreover, neither of these works addresses the question of what either space or place are – their interest is not, one might say, *ontological*, but primarily sociological or political – and the spatial and topological ideas at issue are essentially deployed to other ends than the inquiry of space and place as such. The ontological commitments that are present, especially in Lefebvre's case, are also such as to treat space and place as primarily produced rather than producing. Space and place may thus be central terms in Lefebvre's

analysis, but they are secondary phenomena with respect to the structures that are analysed.

The difference between place and space is perhaps most succinctly expressed in terms of the idea of place as that which, through the boundary or limit that belongs to it, also opens up a space – place is thus tied to boundary, as Massimo Cacciari points out in his essay, and space to the openness within the boundary.⁹ Place and space are therefore distinct, but they are also related, which is why the same term can sometimes be used, depending on the language and the context, to refer to both. The inter-relation of place and space (which I would argue also extends to place and time) means that, although one cannot take a 'turn' to space as *necessarily* encompassing a turn towards place, still any genuine engagement with space ought indeed to imply an engagement with place – and so any genuinely spatial turn ought also to imply a topographic turn. Place, moreover, shows remarkable resistance, moreover, to being overlooked, forgotten, or ignored.¹⁰ Consequently, even given the limitations of much of what passes for 'spatial' thinking in the contemporary literature, such thinking, in virtue of its very focus on space, nevertheless often retains the potential for place to re-emerge. To some extent, this has indeed been what has occurred in recent years as both space and place have appeared as central terms for theoretical discussion across many different disciplines. Yet precisely because of the tendency for space and place to be used in ways that are often quite uncritical of the terms or concepts themselves (ironically so given that they are often taken as terms of 'critical' discourse), so the very appearance of space and place often leads back into their forgetting.

We seem always, in fact, to be caught between the remembering of place and its forgetting – caught in a constant turning in which place appears and disappears. This means that the thinking of place has to take the form of a returning to place that has always to be repeated – a returning that is never simply accomplished and completed, a returning that never brings us, once and for all, into a fully and enduringly-present 'there', a returning that never results in our finally and forever

finding ourselves simply and unequivocally 'at home'. The thinking of place remains a demand, a challenge, simply because place is so fundamental – so much an inevitable and inextricable part of things. To understand ourselves and our world we have no choice but to attend to place and to our own being-in-place – to attend, therefore, to the 'intelligence' of place both as it belongs to place as well as to our understanding of it, and to the intelligence of place as it pertains to our own being as itself placed.

The fundamental character of place in relation to human being is evident in the way in which place, whether expressed in terms of land, earth, or country, figures so prominently in the life and experience of indigenous societies and cultures. It is no less evident, however, in modern forms of life and experience. Indeed, in spite of what is often taken to be the erasure of place in modernity (exemplified by the contemporary rhetoric of the connectivity and mobility, as well as the supposedly homogenising effects of globalism), place constantly seems to re-emerge – as soon as we look to any sort of encounter or engagement with the world (and this is true of the encounter that is other than human as well as of the human), then place is necessarily at issue. The reason for this is simple: just as any appearance is always an appearance somewhere (as Aristotle says, "all suppose that things which exist are somewhere...the nonexistent is nowhere"¹¹), so is any encounter, any engagement, also similarly placed. The encounter with the world is never with the world in its entirety, but always and only with the world as it is present here, in this place (which is why Casey suggests we adopt the term 'place-world') – one might even say that the place brings forth the encounter, and the encounter, the place.

It is against this background that the contributions to this volume ought to be read and reflected upon. They each arise out of this same complex background in which place appears as both central and fundamental, and yet also as often being forgotten, overlooked, and even dismissed. Part of what they aim to do is to bring us back to place, but in doing so they also aim to bring us back to a place we never really left – never could leave. In this sense, they are reminders of where we are – are

exploration of the places in which we are already placed – rather than offering passage to what is new and faraway.

These contributions do not, for the most part, take up the distinction between place and space explicitly or at length – the major exception is Alberto Pérez-Gómez's treatment of place and architectural space in Chapter Nine. Nevertheless, the distinction does operate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the background of every one of the works contained here. What is at issue is indeed place rather than space, even though space (both broadly and more narrowly construed) is itself implicated in place, and may be said to be derived from it.¹² The way this inquiry into place is taken up is through the exploration of place as it stands in relation to a specific set of key concepts: *sentience, limit, edge, loss, histories, singularity, media, atmosphere, architectural space, connection, sensory composition, and formulation*. These are not the only concepts that could guide an inquiry into place, but they are concepts that provide points of entry into the thinking of place for each of the authors whose work appears here. Taken together, and viewed as contributing to a topography or as constituting a set of topographies – where 'topography' is taken to be a 'writing' of place (with an emphasis on the 'graphic'), as well as a 'mapping out' of the conceptual structure of place¹³ – these contributions can thereby be seen as indeed offering an account of place in its distinctiveness, and so as both apart from as well as related to a range of concepts, of which space is but one.

Perhaps because it is so seemingly 'evasive' a concept, as well as so 'ubiquitous' and fundamental, place belongs to no single discipline or mode of inquiry. Aristotle does indeed claim that it is an essential concept for the inquiry into nature, but that does not mean that only within the inquiry into nature is place properly thematized or taken up. As a consequence, this volume does not sit within any particular disciplinary framework, nor does it represent an exclusive or exhaustive array of those frameworks or discipline within which place appears as a salient concept. The discussion trespasses upon architecture, anthropology, art, geography, literature, media, philosophy, poetry, and other domains as well. Place is

indeed 'everywhere' – and nowhere is place not an issue. If one aspect of the overall project that this volume attempts to carry out is indeed a writing or 'mapping' of place (though not one that aims at any sort of completeness), then this topographic task is matched by a poetics. Such a poetics may be seen as actually another form of topography, although it can also be seen as having its own character as an attempt, not to 'map' place, but to respond to it, to give expression to it, perhaps evoke to evoke it – that is, to bring it to some sort of appearance.

'Topographies' and 'poetics' thus refer to two aspects, though perhaps overlapping aspects, of what this volume aims to offer to its readers – and it is to these that the volume belongs rather than to any specific discipline. In the emphasis on these two aspects, I would add that this also means that the volume is not to be construed either as entirely 'phenomenological' or as a work of phenomenology. It often seems to be assumed that work that is indeed oriented towards place in the way this volume is oriented is automatically 'phenomenological' in character, and that this also follows from an attentiveness to the experiential and the first-personal. An emphasis on the experiential and the first-personal is not itself sufficient, however, to warrant an approach as phenomenological. Moreover, the way the experiential, or even the first personal, figures in these inquiries is not the same in all cases, nor can all of these inquiries be adequately characterized by such a focus. There is a strong phenomenological presence and orientation evident in several of the essays – most obviously so in the essays by Pérez-Gómez, Pallasmaa, Casey, and Relph. Even there, however, phenomenology is one strand among several, and I would argue that what their contributions represent is a phenomenologically-inflected *topography*, rather than a topographic or topological *phenomenology*. The emphasis, in other words, is on *place*, and to some extent on place as that within which phenomenality arises – and so within which arise both experience and the first-personal – rather than on place as phenomenon (although concealed here is a deeper issue as to the extent to which phenomenology is itself a mode of topography).

Since the contributions to this volume – though they all converge on a similar topic – are influenced by and derive from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds, so they vary considerably in style and approach, as well as length. These differences are perhaps given a stronger rendering as a result of the fact that the authors themselves are so well-established in their own thinking. What is on view here is not merely a set of different ways of entering into the question of place, but also a set of quite distinctive voices that themselves speak from a sustained thinking and writing about the issues at stake (something indicated by the way in which many of the essays make reference to the work of other contributors). These contributions are thus points of entry into the discussion of place, but also points of entries into significant bodies of work – into larger topographic and poetic projects that stand in their own terms. Kenneth White's essay, for instance, with its own distinctive approach to place, opens into, as it also exemplifies and to some extent summarizes, White's extensive investigations, over many years, in essay, narrative and poem, that have led to the multilateral theory-practice of what he calls geopoetics. Ed Casey's discussion of place and edge is itself the edge that leads back to a larger 'philosophy of place' that Casey has developed over several books and many previous essays. Kathleen Stewart's treatment of place and sensory composition draws upon and feeds back into a large set of prior explorations of our affective attunement to and placing in the world. The same is true for all of the contributors to this volume, and in this respect, the volume can be read as an introduction, not only to place and the thinking of place, but also to the thinking of each of the contributors, and to the topographies and poetics that are embodied in their work as it extends beyond the confines of this collection alone.

The fact that these contributions do indeed connect with such larger bodies of work makes it somewhat ridiculous to attempt to summarize their contributions to the volume in any cursory or introductory fashion. The titles of each of their contributions ought to carry a clear enough sense (at least inasmuch as this can be given in advance of the reading of the essays themselves) of the direction in which

those contributions move. Since the contributions do indeed offer a set of different points of entry into place, so there is also no obvious conceptual ordering that obtains between them that ought to be followed in their reading – the 'compositionality' of place (and so also the 'topology') that appears in Kathleen Stewart's essay could thus be taken to be reflected in the character of the volume itself. As one can enter into a place by any number of routes, so there is no single way into the essays collected here – one can as easily begin with the final chapter as with the first. Some chapters bring a more analytical perspective, some a more personal orientation, and yet, in spite of the different ways in which each is framed and positioned, still there is also significant convergence between them, and they can indeed be taken to form a single 'composition'.

One of the most important points of convergence is in the idea of place as not merely some sort of enclosed container that holds us within, but rather of place as precisely that which, though the manner in which it holds us (and so through its very character as limiting or bounding), also allows us access to that which lies beyond its boundaries – allows us access to the world. In Relph's essay, this idea is developed through the emphasis on the openness and connectedness of places; the openness of place, and the openness of world, is one of the ways it appears in White's discussion also; in Casey, the idea is present in terms of the 'out-going' character of the edge; in Lippard, it is there in the way place connects with other places, and with other persons, with other memories and histories; and in Dubow, it is suggested by the very idea of place as tied to loss and the experience of loss. Similar variations on this idea of place as 'opening to' rather than 'closing from' appear as central ideas in all of the contributions included here.

In Susan Stewart's 'These Trees in Particular', the sense of opening is one that expands beyond the 'human', as narrowly understood, to a sense of the essential interconnectedness of the human with that which is other than human. One might find an echo here of Seamus Heaney's comment, in relation to Wordsworth's 'Michael', that place is both "humanized and humanizing",¹⁴ but more directly

evident is the sense of the openness of place as that which draws what is other than human ("these trees in particular") into the human, and the human into what is other than it, so that the two can no longer entirely be set apart. Place opens, but so place also gathers. Place gives voice to what might be thought silent, and renders silent what otherwise might speak.

Just as place is understood as both a potentially expansive and also inclusive notion, so too do almost all of these essays see place as retaining its significance even in the face of the seeming displacement that many also identify as a pervasive feature of modernity. This is especially important for a volume such as this, since so often has place been taken to be a backward-looking and regressive notion – one that looks only to invoke a long-gone past and that is inextricably tied to a disabling nostalgia for what no longer is. Whether we recognize it or not, even the technologies of mobility and connectivity, even the economic and organizational pressures associated with globalization, operate only in and through specific places. The world is given in and through place no less now than it ever was – the difference is that we may be more prone to forget or to overlook or to neglect this basic ontological and existential fact. This is brought home in a particularly important way in Joshua Meyrowitz's discussion of place and media, in which the complexities of our contemporary globalized, and yet nonetheless 'placed' existence, are explored and delineated.

To attend to place, to attend to where we now find ourselves, is not to attend only to the past, but is also to attend to our future. One might well argue that that it is in the intelligence of place that all intelligence, and certainly all wisdom, is founded. In that case, it must surely be with the intelligence of place that any genuine engagement with the world, with others, or with our own selves, must begin.

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- ¹ Hannah Arendt suggests that thinking has no place, although what she actually seems to mean is that thinking finds its place *in time* – in the space of the 'moment'. See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol I (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1971), pp.197-212. See my discussion of this in "'Where are we when we think?": Hannah Arendt and the Place of Thinking', *Philosophy Today*, in press, 2015.
- ² See my 'Poetry, Language, Place', in Günter Figal et al (eds), *Pathways to Heidegger's Later Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming, 2015).
- ³ *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A760/B 788.
- ⁴ See Heidegger, 'Seminar in Le Thor', *Four Seminars*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.41. One thinks also of Bachelard's phenomenological-psychoanalytic project of 'topoanalysis' (see Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1969, p.8), or, more contemporaneously, Kenneth White's 'geopoetics' (see his contribution below). Heidegger's talk of 'topology' mirrors, though with some differences, my own use here of 'topography' (see my discussion in *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2006, pp.33-35).
- ⁵ See Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, 208a26, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, rev. Oxford trans, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol I (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984 – Bollingen Series LXXI), p.354.
- ⁶ See Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957).
- ⁷ The distinctions at issue here are indeed conceptual and so are available in any and every language even if they are not always explicit or are made in different ways.

⁸ French presents a special problem here since not only are there important differences between the way spatial and topographic ideas are expressed in French as against English, but French authors and their writings have also been extremely influential in English-language thinking about space and place over the last forty to fifty years. German, for instance, is closer to English in the way it deals with space and place, but, with the exception of Heidegger, the influence of German authors on the English-language discussion has been much less. It is perhaps worth noting that there has been relatively little cross-cultural engagement, beyond specific linguistic, ethnographic and anthropological explorations, that directly addresses differences in the expression and articulation of the understanding and experience of space and place and their relevance in a broader context.

⁹ See also my own discussion in *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.21-43. The relation between place and boundary or limit is also at issue in Ed Casey's discussion of place *and edge*, both in his essay here and in his *The World on Edge* (Indiana University Press, forthcoming). Although I am here treating 'limit' and 'boundary' as more or less equivalent terms, there are distinctions to be made between them. Casey thus takes 'limit' to be the narrower term, and distinguishes it from 'edge' and 'boundary' (see 'Edges vs. Limits' in his *The World on Edge*). In Kant, 'limit' (in German *Schranke*) and 'boundary' (*Grenze*) also seem to have different senses – see my discussion of this issue in 'Ground, Unity, and Limit', in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 20012), pp.84-85.

¹⁰ Even within the sciences, place maintains a certain problematic presence, especially in the biological and environmental sciences (see, eg, Ian Billick and Mary V. Price (eds.), *The Ecology of Place: Contributions of Place-Based Research to Ecological Understanding*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), and especially so in relation to issues of boundary and limit. The notion of an

ecosystem, for instance, can be seen as an essentially topographic or topological notion, and the difficulty of ecosystem identification and definition reflects the difficulty of identification and definition that attends upon place and places. Here it is the character of place as tied to boundary or limit – and of bound and limit as themselves tied to place – that comes to fore. Since such questions extend across all and every form of scientific inquiry, so too can place, in spite of its seeming disappearance, be seen to remain always at issue.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics* IV, 208a30, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, p.354.

¹² For more on the nature of this 'derivative' relation between space and place, see my 'Putting space in place: philosophical topography and relational geography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30 (2012), pp.232-237.

¹³ Note that 'topography' here does not mean the study of the surface of the earth nor merely the in-depth inquiry into the character of particular landscapes (though it has affinities with both). 'Topography' is also not to be contrasted with 'topology' (as it is in some geographical contexts). Rather it is intended as a mode of inquiry that takes place itself as its focus – see 'Putting Space in Place', p.227.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p.145.