Imagining Spaces and Places

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Edited by

Saija Isomaa, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Kirsi Saarikangas
and Renja Suominen-Kokkonen

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Introduction: Imagining Spaces and Places

Pirjo Lyytikäinen and Kirsi Saarikangas

> You are not in a place; the place is in you. (Angelus Silesius)[1]

Recently, the idea expressed by Angelus Silesius, the German seventeenth-century mystic who emphasised "the place in you" instead of "you in the place," has reactualised. The investigation of the interfaces between the experiencing subject and the places experienced has become an expanding multidisciplinary field. This entwinement is also, in many ways, the focal point of *Imagining Spaces and Places*. Our volume explores spaces and places presented, represented and created in and by art and literature. It profits from the vigorous new interest in spatial issues in the humanities and social sciences. The refraction of the prism has led to the acknowledgement that a place is not something that exists "out there" independent of those who are experiencing it. Rather place is understood as a lived place that is shaped by the activities and perceptions of its users in the interaction with the spatial or physical aspects of environment. Place is thus dependent on the perspectives and actions of those who use it. Moreover, "space" has been the focus of intense rethinking: recent decades have even been characterised as the years of a "spatial turn." Instead of space in an abstract or geometric sense—which has been a prominent conception of space all through modernity—the new lines of study underline the experiential and multi-dimensional aspects of spaces. This has meant a more dynamic understanding of both places and spaces. The growing attention to the sensory and lived aspects in the formation of spatial meanings has also directed interest to the places and spaces of ordinary life. This has prepared the way for new approaches to the exploration of spaces and places in our volume, whether these be presented, represented, remembered, sensed and narrated or whether they be fictional, urban or national spaces or locations. We ask what the role of cultural and artistic renderings of space is in relation to the everyday experiences of spaces. We examine from various angles how the experiences of places are mediated in various art forms and other cultural discourses or practices and how art and literature contribute to the understanding of particular places and also to understanding space in more general terms.

[1] Quoted in Krohn 2004, 5.

The interest in questions of space and place has extended beyond the "spatial disciplines." The exploration of how places are represented and historically have been represented and modified by these representations has become a major preoccupation of cultural analysis. If the representations not only reflect or "imitate" existing conceptions or observed features, but also recreate the places by inventing and imagining new relationships and conceptions, then studying the cultural representations is a key to understanding places. Amongst these representations, those of art and literature figure prominently. As cultural practices, literature and art have crucially mediated and still do mediate the experiences of spaces and places. They not only represent or contemplate the surrounding world and spaces within us, but refashion the sphere of our experience by imagining invisible and alternative spaces. Works of art exemplify with striking clarity the interaction between perception and imagination, which creates what in contemporary discussion is often called "scapes." The cityscapes, bodyscapes, mindscapes and memoryscapes, like the more familiar landscapes, created by artistic as well as other kinds of cultural practices are part of collective cultural memory. The intertwining of what previously was called "macrocosm" (nature and society) with "microcosm" (body and mind) and the role various art forms and cultural practices play in articulating and negotiating these chiasmic encounters are focal points for the current interest in spatial issues. At the same time, this intertwining is the challenge that has to be met. The fact that the spaces *without* mix with the spaces *within*, with what can be called our bodyscapes and mindscapes, requires the mapping of complex and even ambivalent networks of interaction.

Space

Space and place are vast and ambivalent concepts that refer both to physical and visual surroundings and to their experiential and cultural aspects. While in recent years "space" and "place" have been the objects of intense rethinking in the humanities and social sciences, in different traditions they have been conceived differently. Although various traditions emphasise either space or place, the notions are closely linked: the one makes the other possible. The meanings of space range from the physical universe to mental space while also referring to an area or expanse defined in terms of height, depth and width. While space indicates mobility and physical boundaries that are not necessarily clear, in everyday parlance place refers

to a particular location or position. (S.v. "space" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Since the 1990s, interrelated spatial, affective and material turns along with feminist theories have been essential to the refraction of the prism and created inter- or multidisciplinary terrain for analyses of space and place. Various parallel, overlapping, yet also contradictory intellectual paths have opened up to reconceptualisation. Michel Foucault's conception of spatial order as a network of power, the phenomenological analysis of spatiality and corporeality initiated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty where these are human modes of being, Henri Lefebvre's analysis of the social formation of space and spatial meanings and Michel de Certeau's discussions of spatial practices and the ways of using and perceiving space have had a crucial impact on the current interest in space.

In his lecture "Des espaces autres" ("Of Other Spaces") in 1967 Michel Foucault stated that the "present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (Foucault 1986, 22). Throughout his writings Foucault was interested in space not as a void, but as a complex set of relations that explore how space and spatial arrangements maintain and produce bio-power and various cultural meanings in modern society and how they define and regulate social practices. According to him, for example, the new penal practice in the early nineteenth century involved a new spatial order of prisons—the famous Panopticon by Jeremy Bentham—a new matrix of thought and a new strategy in which "stones can make people docile and knowledgeable" (Foucault 1975, 174; quoted from Foucault 1991, 172). Hence, the spatial order itself produces power, meanings, practices and habits instead of merely representing and symbolising power. Foucault pointed out that the monumental work of Gaston Bachelard and the descriptions of phenomenologists "have taught us that we do not live in homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly phantasmatic as well" (Foucault 1986, 23).

The contemporary approaches to spaces and places also owe a great deal to phenomenological philosophy. While Foucault approached questions of space in connection with modern normalising efforts and as a network of controlling and regulating social relations, the phenomenological tradition emphasised the perspective of the experiencing subject. The current attention to lived spaces has a major source of inspiration in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who underlined the reciprocal relationship of the corporeal subject with space. In his view the human mode of being in the world is both corporeal and spatial: for the corporeal subject space is

his or her first experience of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Hence, the space is not just there before people; rather people as living subjects inhabit the space (*habiter*) (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 173). Space is never simply a neutral, homogenic physical space, but is always meaningful, lived space to the degree that there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences.

Lived space was also a key concept for social scientist Henri Lefebvre, but from the angle of the social production of space. He too emphasised that space is not unambiguously one, but rather several spaces. In his seminal book *La production de l'espace* (1974) Lefebvre opposed the idea of abstract, absolute space and approached space as socially produced. Lefebvre's view was that conceiving space as abstract also turns lived spatial experience into something abstract. Spatial meanings, he wrote, are produced only in relation to the social practices of space. Space does not exist outside social relations, and reciprocally space produces social relations. Space therefore is not a container of social processes; it is itself a social process. Lefebvre approached the formation of space through three-part dialectics and distinguished three spatial dimensions that interact with each other in the production of space: the perceived (*perçu*), the conceived (*conçu*) and the lived (*vécu*) dimensions of space. Together they make up "space."

The critical potentialities of the notion of lived space have been taken up by Edward W. Soja in *Thirdspace* (1996), and both Lefebvre and Soja have emphasised the role of art and literature as "sites" of lived space or "thirdspace." Whereas Soja seems to value the lived dimension of space most, Lefebvre does not present a clear hierarchy among these three modes, nor does he clearly define the different operations. Without going deeper into Lefebvrean thinking, one can nevertheless observe that Lebfebvre himself points out that spatial practices are not only social and cultural, but also deeply corporeal and sensory.

The new interest in spatial meanings and practices has directed attention to the users and meanings emerging in the use of space. Cultural historian Michel de Certeau shares with Foucault the idea of space as a network of power, but also acknowledges the daily acts and meanings that emerge in the various uses of space. According to de Certeau, spatial meanings are formed in the movement and everyday uses of space that transform a physically determined place into a space, or in Merleau-Ponty's words, transform a "geometrical" space into an "anthropological space" (de Certeau 1984, 117). Moreover, users are not only corporeal objects, but also gendered, sexual subjects. Feminist researchers have pointed out

gendered and gendering spatial practices. The ideas of users as corporeal and gendered subjects are the unspoken precondition for the built environment. The spatial order both shapes the relations between users and is shaped by them. (Colomina 1991; Saarikangas 2009.)

Place

Place, in turn, has been a key focus in the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, an eminent human geographer who follows the phenomenological tradition. His reconceptualisations of the notion of place and his ideas of a "sense of place" have been highly influential in human geography and in other, related fields. His differentiation between the terms *space* and *place* has been a common approach in studies that put emphasis on place instead of space. According to Tuan, "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977, 6). In his distinction space is more abstract than place, but Tuan also emphasises that the terms require each other for definition: "From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa" (ibid.). In Tuan's view places and spaces not only engender feelings and are shaped by complex networks of feelings, but place and space are also intimately connected with movement and with restrictions of movement as well. Tuan reminds us that the more abstract notion of "space" usually connects with ideas of movement and freedom, whereas "place" connotes not only security and homeliness, but also closure, pause and even imprisonment. (1977, 3–6.)

The concreteness of *being-in-place* or living in places was also emphasised by one of the pioneers of the new kind of philosophical place studies, Edward S. Casey (1993, xv). As the ancient philosophers knew, "to be is to be in place" (ibid., 14); in light of that idea Casey suggests that it is fruitful to focus on places instead of being or beings and explore how places constitute, modify or influence our being and how our identities are formed in interaction with places. The spaces that every one of us is occupying at every moment range from the room or the street to the city, the country or the planet in a geographical sense and, in the sense of feeling "implaced," from one's home to the neighbourhood, home region, nation and perhaps other, even more encompassing places of belonging. These spaces and places are lived and experienced and are not just containers. Even if they serve to "implace you" or "to anchor and orient you, finally becoming an integral part of your identity," as Casey (1993, 23) argues,

they are also constituted by you, by your ways of perceiving them and interacting with them. And the relationship between bodies/minds and their spatial environment is not just natural, but also cultural: "Implacement is an ongoing cultural process" that "acculturates whatever ingredients it borrows from the natural world" (Casey 1993, 31). The representations of places, themselves cultural artefacts, build on already culturally-determined meanings given to places and bodies, and at the same time may well change them in the ongoing negotiation between the given and the experimentally imagined.

While both Tuan and Casey conceive place as bound to a certain location, place can also be seen as porous. Geographer Doreen Massey, among others, has advocated a more mobile notion of place, one that is open to the interrelations outside it. She emphasises the relation instead of the opposition of space and place. Massey asks "where is here?" and she calls for an "understanding of the world in terms of relationality" and the mutual existence of local and global in the same place. (Massey 2005, 183–184.)

Landscape

An important aspect of the power of places, an aspect directly connected to pictorial and textual representations, is conveyed by the notion of landscape. The term landscape has a double meaning. It refers both to the visible features of the land and to the genre of landscape paintings and the representations of demarcated areas. It is hence both the perceived and the lived physical environment and its visual, verbal or aural interpretation (Haila 2006, 23–27). According to art historian W. J. T. Mitchell, landscape is already encoded with cultural values and meanings and is "best understood as a medium of cultural expression" (Mitchell 1994, 14). Landscape is hence both a human and a natural construct.

The notion of landscape also brings in the intertwinement of space and place in the representation of places. Casey (1993 and 2002) understands "landscape" as encompassing not only landscape painting or literary descriptions of picturesque places, but also as a general term evoking cityscapes and containing special subgenres such as waterscapes and potentially linked to city-building, imagined communities (such as nations) and to the construction of memorial places. What emerges from the notion of landscape and from landscapes' various cultural representations can inspire many different approaches to the study of places. It also brings into

focus both the experiencer (the viewer) and the "limitless extension" in the experience of space or place.

> A landscape seems to exceed the usual parameters of place by continuing without apparent end; nothing contains it, while it contains everything, including discrete places, in its environing embrace. The body, on the other hand, seems to fall short of place, to be "on this side," the near edge, of a given place. Nevertheless, body and landscape collude in the generation of what can be called "placescapes," especially those that human beings experience whenever they venture out beyond the narrow confines of their familiar domiciles and neighbourhoods. (Casey 1993, 25)

Casey refers to the aspect of displacement or movement, which is often connected with landscapes: it is travelling and moving beyond all-too-familiar surroundings that provoke the attitude of contemplation characteristic of landscape experiences. Jean-François Lyotard (1989, 212) even sees landscape in opposition to a familiar place: it is seeing the countryside with the eyes of a city dweller, seeing as a tourist who retains a memory of what is familiar while viewing what is "exotic" in relation to those familiar frames. Although this is an interesting aspect of placescapes, which in many ways influenced even the formation of so-called national landscapes (a nation-building activity that was attracted to what was deemed "primordial" or even "primitive" places), this aspect restricts the perspectives opened by the notion of landscape. Casey takes the opposite view from Lyotard by defining a landscape as "what encompasses those more determinate places, such as rooms and buildings, designated by the usual idiolocative terms" (1993, 24). Landscapes are perhaps "the bounds of places" (ibid., 29), but represented landscapes are mindscapes imagining places and spaces from the perspective of a viewer, inscribing meanings and perhaps whole ideologies to places. In many ways these insights help to capture aspects of the whole range of represented places or spaces in art and literature.

Contributing Essays

By no means does the brief discussion above exhaust the multiple perspectives on spaces, places and landscape currently being used in the vast area of spatial studies. In *Imagining Spaces and Places* these questions are approached from the perspectives of the visual arts, literature and, in particular, urban space. The volume shows a plethora of fruitful

and interesting approaches, but it would be pointless to try to summarise them in this general part of the introduction. The following brief view into the contents of the volume will give an idea of the further insights and perspectives into imagining places and spaces offered here. As a whole, the volume produces an interdisciplinary dialogue between art history, literary studies and other fields of cultural analysis. Most of the articles explore how art, literature or urban spaces forge "scapes" by imposing or suggesting aesthetic, evaluative or ideological orderings and perceptual as well as emotive perspectives on the "raw material" or on previous ways of spatial world-making. Furthermore, the articles that address historical places or general cultural practices related to spaces show how spaces and places always make reference to the events and circumstances connected with them and how they are constructed by social relations. The identity of a place is open and constantly reproduced, and the politics of a place involves negotiations and policies of openness and closure.

The first section, **Remembered and Sensed Spaces**, consists of two chapters. In "Memory and Place from the Red Center of Australia to the Periphery of Paris: To See the Frame that Blinds Us" Claire Farago addresses the processes involved in the invention, production and reception of Australian "Aboriginal Art," processes that raise fundamental epistemological and ethical concerns about the ways of construing place and space and negotiating different cultural understandings across physical and figurative boundaries. The chapter weaves together indigenous Australian beliefs and memoryscapes with the expectations of a globalised art system in which abstract paintings are simultaneously imagined as personal evocations of a specific geography and as manifestations of the timeless, universal and enduring presence of pure artistic form. The second chapter, "Multisensory Memories and the Spaces of Suburban Childhood in the Greater Helsinki Region in the 1950s and 1960s" by Kirsi Saarikangas, examines lived and narrated suburban spaces by analysing the written memories of suburban habitation together with the built suburban space. Her analysis brings out the experiential aspects in the multi-layered sensescapes of suburban space. The focus of the chapter is the reciprocity of the relationship between human beings and the inhabited landscape in the context of everyday life.

The second section of this collection, **Urban Spaces**, begins with Bart Keunen's analysis of the development and interpretation of urban imagery as an ambivalent space of modernity. "Urban Imagery between Enchantment and Disenchantment" provides an overview of the ideas of modernity essentially connected to urban space and juxtaposes Max Weber and

Walter Benjamin's views of modernity and urbanity—and the disenchanted and enchanted representations of urban space. The phantasmagoric and mythical representations of modern urban space that dominate the artistic rendering of cities emphasise the pre-rational and affective aspects in imagining modernity and big cities. The aesthetic experiences are shown to engender a modern counterpart to magic. Relying on Ernst Cassirer's ideas about mythical thinking and Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, Keunen explores how literature articulates the ambivalences of modernity by creating "other places" where bourgeois rationality is transcended. The other two chapters in the section are case studies of problematic urban spaces. In "How Cultural? How Material? Rereading the Slums of Early Victorian London" Jason Finch focuses on literature that describes the London slums. Finch traces two strands in recent work on nineteenth-century London slums as imaginative places: the discursive or cultural and the empirical or material. The slum writings of the period 1820–50 which he discusses, by Pierce Egan, G. W. M. Reynolds, Thomas Beames and Charles Dickens, indicate that both the cultural and the material dimensions need to be kept in mind by those working on imaginative place. Philipp Demgenski's chapter, "Making and Taming 'Messy Space': The Contested Nature of Historical Space in Urban China," looks at the transformation of historical urban space in the old town centre of Qingdao, where rapid processes of change are replacing historical spaces with the "messy spaces" of urban modernity. The case study thus demonstrates how space is constantly produced and reproduced by the people who engage with it.

In the third section, **National Spaces**, three ideologically pregnant spaces and their historical development in the national literary imagination are explored. Ellen Rees writes on "Cabins and National Identity in Norwegian Literature." The cabin is a central topos of Norwegian life and literature that has been a signifier in strikingly different ways over the course of two centuries. Rees reads the cabin allegorically as a symbolic home for a nation uniquely positioned between nature and civilisation. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Rees argues that the cabin functions as a heterotopia of compensation, a real yet simultaneously idealised place that helps organise the nation conceptually. In "Constructions of Space: The Literary Configuration of 'The English Countryside'" Angela Locatelli focuses on several literary texts from the Renaissance to the twentieth century to illustrate how "the English countryside" has been empirically experienced and theoretically framed. She argues that the myth of the English countryside is strongly indebted to its literary conceptualisations. In "'There in Thousands of Lakes the Stars of the Night Glimmer':

Lakescapes in Literature" Pirjo Lyytikäinen analyses Finnish literary lakescapes and their historical development in the context of building national landscapes. The central role of lakes in the Finnish national imagination was largely created through poetry and fictional presentations, although landscape painting and photography assisted and eventually took over this role more and more. The changing literary currents as well as the simultaneously changing historical situations influenced the ways in which the lakes were represented. The three chapters in this section show the parallels and variations in nationalist thinking in the respective literary traditions as well as the formation of different identity constructions that shape both the understanding of real places and the national traditions of imagining connected to the places and spaces analysed. The reverberation of literary topoi and the conservatism of the national cultural memory combine to create the "messy" mindscape often indicative of modern national thinking.

To give space to different voices that have been silenced in the course of history, the texts in the fourth section, entitled **Locations,** focus on different transnational spaces and places. In "Sites of Slavery: Imperial Narratives, Plantation Architecture and the Ideology of the Romance of the South" by Julia Faisst, sites of slavery and their narratives are addressed as transcultural spaces, and the interrelationship of architecture and social order is analysed from alternative angles. In "The *Cranbrook Map*: Locating Meanings in Textile Art" Leena Svinhufvud examines the built environment by locating meanings in a tapestry called the *Cranbrook Map*. She investigates the place of textile art and the roles and positions of the textile artist in the Cranbrook art community in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Challenging the conventional system of attribution and single authorship, Svinhufvud explores how textile art and architecture are formed in networks of power. In the third chapter, "Hybrids, Saints and Phallic Displays: Painted Bodies and Ecclesiastical Space in the Medieval Diocese of Turku" by Katja Fält, the focus is on medieval church spaces and the representation of bodies in medieval wall paintings. Through the examination of the relationship between wall paintings and ecclesiastic space, the article explores the role and function of different kinds of painted bodies in mid-fifteenth century wall paintings. The emphasis is on the representations of bodies regarded as sacred, gendered and ambiguous observed in the context of a medieval parish church in Finland.

Finally, the fifth section, **Visible and Invisible Spaces**, explores mindscapes expressed in poetic metaphors, magical thinking and contemporary visual arts. In Maria Salenius's contribution, '"Let Us

Possesse One World': Spatial Images of Temporal and Celestial Love in John Donne's Poetry," the extraordinary spatial imagery in Donne's poems gives rise to an analysis of both extremely constrained spaces and spaces extending to infinity; the intertwining of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic expresses a worldview that connects visible and invisible realms. In "The Disappearance of Gravity: Airy Spaces in Contemporary Art" Hanna Johansson analyses the airy spaces of recent visual art, which problematise the representation of space as stable and substantial and activate the viewers' affective and reciprocal relationship with their invisible, insubstantial, but fundamentally airy surroundings. The volume closes with a chapter entitled "Invisible Worlds and Imaginary Spaces of a Renaissance Magus" in which Lauri Ockenström focuses on the mindscape of magical and astrological thinking, thereby challenging our rational habits. It sheds light on the various magical beliefs with which learned magicians of the Renaissance constructed their spatial worldview and illustrates the techniques—such as rites and visual symbols—that were used to comprehend, control and manipulate not only the immediate physical surroundings, but also the interplanetary influences in a vast cosmic framework.

Imagining Spaces and Places seeks to produce an interdisciplinary dialogue between art history and literature studies and other fields of cultural studies that work with the concepts of space, place and various "scapes." This is a huge area ranging from visual and textual studies to urban studies, human geography and environmental history. The volume is based on a peer-reviewed selection of papers presented at the conference *Imagining Spaces/ Places*, which was held at the University of Helsinki, 24–26 August 2011. We hope that scholars and teachers working at the intersection of cultural and spatial analyses, as well as their undergraduate and postgraduate students will find value in the perspectives offered here.

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I

Remembered and Sensed Spaces

Memory and Place from the Red Center of Australia to the Periphery of Paris: To See the Frame that Blinds Us[1]

Claire Farago

The epigram by the peripatetic Lutheran-turned-Catholic physician, priest, and poet Johann Scheffler, better known by his literary pseudonym Angelus Silesius, that appeared in the call for papers to the conference *Imagining Places/Spaces*, which later became the volume you are reading now, is highly appropriate to the discussion of indigenous Australian artists' entanglement with the global art industry that follows here. Silesius's one-liner, "[y]ou are not in a place, the place is in you," is fitting in the first instance because Aboriginal identity is construed in terms of a fluid combination of space and time that is always moving, in which personal identity is tied to a series of places understood as events linking the past with the present. In the desert region at the center of the continent (see plate 1–1), the native Australian cosmology is in keeping with a lifestyle that may entail navigating 4000 square kilometres in a single year in search of food and water. Yet the travelling is not undertaken solely for sustenance, because the journey is the source of the indigenous Australian lifeworld ("Lebenswelt") where all consciousness and meaning, all sense of place and belonging, as well as all individual historicity, are generated, in the never-ceasing movement through space. In the second instance, Silesius is pertinent to the manner in which Aboriginal representations of the places inside/outside become packaged, commodified, and moved around the world.

To begin, given the precarious nature of living off the land especially during the present era of desertification pressed by climate change, there is the question of who controls that space. In the late 1960s, the Australian

[1] This paper is an outgrowth of a collaborative book co-authored with Donald Preziosi (2012). Portions of the text here have been adapted from this jointly authored study; I thank my co-author for permission to excerpt my contributions in their present form, which, like the original, benefit substantially from our joint discussion and his critical interventions.

government removed several groups of indigenous peoples living on cattle lands in the Western Desert region of the Northern Territory to Papunya, a government relocation center established 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. In 1971, Geoffrey Bardon, a school teacher newly arrived to the centre, encouraged his young students to paint using only indigenous patterns and motifs. Bardon was soon approached by a small group of initiated Aboriginal men who proposed creating their own designs based on traditional graphic schemes. This initial exchange resulted in the Honey Ant Dreaming mural (figure 1–2) Tjukurrpa, a Walpiri word that is usually translated as dreamings—and there are many others in the 250 or so native languages of Australia. It designates the creative principle that saturates the world with meaning, as manifested in the topography of the land, its life forms, its law-codes of social behaviour. *Tjukurrpa* take the form of inherited narratives about the creation of sacred places, land, people, vegetation, and animals, and they comprise a complex network of knowledge informing all aspects of an individual's life by tying his or her existence to prior events. Upon birth, the child is considered a special custodian of that part of his country where the mother stood when the child first moved in the womb, the place from which his or her spirit came as his or her dreaming. The named landscape features of this geography are said to be created "as the result of the activity of a Dreamtime hero in the distant past" (Langton 2000, 16). The ancient beings are present all around, in this world, and their stories are the Western Desert peoples' geography.

Figure 1–2. Honey Ant Mural at Papunya School, Papunya, Northern Territory, Australia, June–August 1971 (destroyed). Johnson, 43. Photograph Geoff Bardon, courtesy IAD Press.

The invention, production, and reception of "Aboriginal Art"—itself a problematic term given its links with notions of cultural "primitivism"—nonetheless raises fundamental epistemological and ethical concerns about ways of construing both place and space, and negotiating different cultural understandings across both physical and figurative boundaries. Such negotiations are the subject of this essay, which weaves together indigenous Australian beliefs with the expectations of a globalized art system in which abstract paintings are simultaneously imagined as personal evocations of a specific geography and as manifestations of the timeless, universal, and enduring presence of pure artistic form. How these apparent contradictions maintain one another in juxtaposition is the focus of my thinking about imagined places/spaces.

To approach the problem of imagining places and spaces in such a complex intercultural framework requires considering the entire arc of cultural production, from the paintings' point of origin in indigenous beliefs (to which I have only partial access), to the paintings' various points of reception outside the communities in which they are produced. The intersection of cultures now stretches across the entire globe, and reverberates in many directions almost instantaneously. At an art centre located in an impoverished desert community half a day's journey from the next outpost, the staff work at computers negotiating with high-end galleries in London, Amsterdam, Dubai, and elsewhere to which they will ship unstretched canvases painted by Aboriginal artists instructed by their art teachers on the model established at Papunya in 1971.

The Honey Ant Dreaming story belongs to the place of Papunya, not the relocation centre but the place where the dreamings of the Pintupi, Luritja, Walpiri, Arrente, and Anmatyerre peoples who were sent there by the Australian government converge. Painted on the walls of a disused building (and later painted over by government administrators), the Honey Ant Dreaming mural utilised indigenous drawing and painting patterns. According to Bardon's own recollections, at a time when the first individual interpretations were materializing, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa won the lucrative "Caltex Prize" in 1971 and returned to Papunya with the prize money, there was a clamour for art materials from a number of men. Yet we could equally say that the story began decades before Bardon arrived, with Albert Namatjira (1902–1959), the first Aboriginal person to achieve mainstream recognition as an artist, who spent his last two years at Papunya.[2]

[2] Namatjira's first exhibition was held in Melbourne in 1938; he was awarded the Queen's coronation medal in 1953. His career ended tragically when he was

In other words, the Western Painting movement was not the outcome of naïve indigenous artists meeting a gifted white art teacher. The formal artmaking skills of the Aboriginal men preexisted Bardon's arrival and were connected both to their traditional responsibilities as initiated adult males and to an existing cottage industry of making "art" for tourists and the mainstream art market in which Namatjira participated by painting in a western representational style that he himself valued highly. For his part, Bardon promoted a *non*-representational style that translated what he seems to have understood as his students' tactile engagement with the world into a fully "visual" form of painting (Carter 2007, xvii–xviii).[3] In one sense, his pedagogy reproduced problematic, essentializing distinctions between the mentalities of different people still rooted in nineteenth-century racial ideas.[4] On the other hand, he tried to develop an understanding of art free from racial theories of cultural evolution. He practiced a hands-on approach with his adult students, encouraging them to paint visually coherent images that were individual, personal interpretations of the sacred, communally sanctioned designs traditionally appearing on sacred boards (*chirungas*), as body ornamentation and ground paintings associated with secret-sacred ceremonies, as well as the designs that were drawn in the sand to accompany the narration of unrestricted stories.[5]

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arrested and convicted for illegally supplying alcohol to Aboriginals, a victim of the neo-colonial paternalistic government despite his success as an artist. (Johnson 2008, 7–19.) On Albert Namatjira, see Kleinert.

[3] As Paul Carter has already emphasized. See Carter (2007, xvii–xviii), which also mentions Bardon's source in the writings of early twentieth-century Viennese art educator Viktor Lowenfield. See further discussion in Farago (2009).

[4] See further, Farago (1995).

[5] See Munn (1973), for a groundbreaking contribution to non-native understanding of these representational systems. An extensive body of scholarship now exists, but for a recent contribution with further bibliography, see Ryan and Batty (2011). Their exhibition features approximately 200 of the first paintings produced at Papunya in 1971–72 by the founding artists of the Western Desert art movement. It establishes connections between these paintings and their sources in designs made for use in ceremony. The exhibition will begin with a massing of shields, spear throwers, stone knives, headbands and body ornaments, early drawings collected by anthropologists, historical photographs, and a ground painting. My thanks to Philip Batty for this information in advance of the publication.

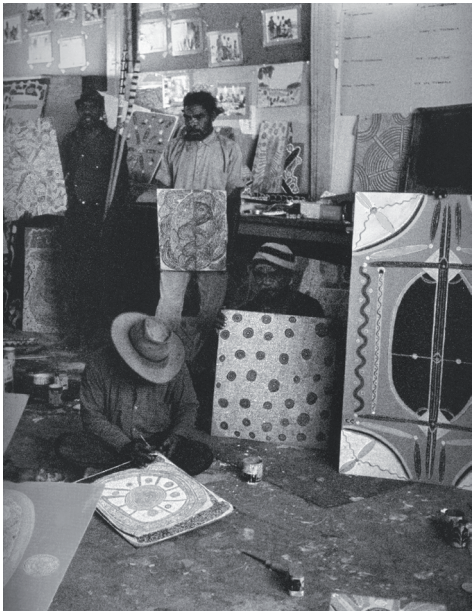

Figure 1–3. Men's painting room, 1972, with Shorty Tjungurray working on Water Dreaming. Benjamin & Weilogel, 2009.

Composition board, acoustic tiles, tin cans, car bonnets, as well as canvas served as the support for these early paintings. The first paintings were not made for sale. But soon powerful, abstract designs on a much larger scale, still rooted in the land-based belief systems of the first peoples of Australia, were achieving international recognition and commercial success as the most important contribution to High Modernist art in decades. By the late 1980s, the art movement that had begun in 1971 as an educational programme brought new respect for Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia and the world.[6] The creation of Aboriginal art for an international market is also poignantly paradigmatic of the modernist commodification of (fine) art in a very specific sense: as the abstraction and extraction—the reification—of particular visual or optical properties of actual multimodal,

[6] The historical emergence of Aboriginal painting as a respected art form is far more complex than this brief narrative can suggest: Morphy (1998) and (2007). By the 1960s, in the Northern Territory, bark painting was a well established genre within the art industry: see "A Short History of Yolnu Art," 27–86, with further references, in Morphy (2007). Personal communication with Philip Batty, 5 February 2009.

multidimensional, and multifunctional indigenous practices, with the effect of making such abstractions consonant with late Modernist (Western) artistic formalism in its contemporary "globalised" manifestations. The trajectory from an indigenous understanding of identity as performative, immersed in the land, connected to a geography peopled by ancestral spirits, transmitted from generation to generation in communally prescribed ways that not only discourage but ostensibly forbid innovation, to personal interpretations of inherited stories produced as paintings for sale to an audience of outsiders, challenge us to think about place in uncommonly complex ways. The conundrum that Western Desert painting presents at first sight is the possibility of artists unfamiliar with Modernist abstract painting to succeed at making such relevant examples of it.

From a position in the middle of the Australian continent, began a fieldwork project that paused many months later in Paris. My ex-centric route from what was historically a periphery to a center of the contemporary art world intentionally plays with, upon, and against center-periphery models of artistic and cultural development. Center-periphery explanations of cultural interaction have inevitably placed Europe in relation to artistic peripheries elsewhere and generally replicate a colonialist, ethnocentric worldview. While the scale of explanation varies—the center could be Rome, the periphery Florence, or England, the Americas, Australia, and so on—the systemic or structural principle would remain the same if the center were Botswana, Bogota, or Beijing.

Inverting the center/periphery model, that is, utilizing it in order to recognize the dynamically active conditions of reception, is an important corrective but does not alter the structural principle. Alternatively, a network of distributed knowledge practices offers a less Eurocentric (or Sino- or Afro-centric) way to write a "global" history of art. Even in this case, however, even if no centre is more important than another in the network of modules, first there would still have to be general agreement that the problematic notion "art" is a universal, pan-human phenomenon and activity. Yet that raises other troubling questions—such as, who is at the table to draw up the agreement? Many First World and indigenous peoples in numerous locations around the globe refuse the label "art" for their cultural productions and object to public cultural institutions such as museums collecting, preserving, or displaying their esoteric cultural artifacts because they are not meant to be viewed in this manner or seen by the uninitiated or even preserved. I am more than willing to jettison the category of "art" conceived as universal and timeless in favor of articulating *how* the Western ideal of (fine) art came to be applied to cultural

productions of any origin whatsoever—and, specifically, how that now contested but no less globally-disseminated product of European thought operates in the world today. My metamorphic itinerary moving backwards through the center-periphery hierarchy questions and complicates the assumption that the West is central. Can this realignment of hierarchies expose the theoretical underpinnings of an art system that ties identity to place and then circulates the fabrication globally for consumption as an exotic, virtual reality?

The first question. The Aboriginal art movement that began in the early 1970s, rapidly assumed international artistic and commercial prestige. How did indigenous Australians without formal artistic training in any conventional sense or even knowledge of art-making practices and their histories elsewhere come to be inserted into the canon of High Modernism? Disjunctions between communities of collecting and communities of production—an effect of this recent "art historicization" of Aboriginal cultural praxis—foreground aspects of what was forgotten, erased or occluded in European modernity's own invention of what subsequently became the "idea" of (fine) art as itself an abstraction of certain (visual or optical) properties out of cultural behaviour: the abstraction of visuality as such in the service of that modernity.

A first observation. Although their visual appeal is primary to their aesthetic and commercial success, the Western Desert acrylic paintings are also widely valued by collectors for the cosmological significance of designs that are very rarely understood at all by those outside the secret and sacred traditions from which the designs are partly derived. Over time, marketing strategies for these acrylic paintings—the issues of origin and nomenclature are complex and fraught, as I will discuss more fully—have come to incorporate reference to their content in ways that simulate copyright. By including the artist's "dreaming"—told in simple terms that do not violate the community's integrity to control the dissemination of knowledge—the noumenal content of the work is verified, its enigma authenticated along with more prosaic signs of authorship, such as the artist's "skin name," place of origin, the work's exhibition history, and so on.

A second observation. At the art centres I visited in the desert regions of the central parts of the Northern Territory and the eastern edges of Western Australia, art production potentially offers economic relief for impoverished and in many respects severely dysfunctional communities. The mostly government-run operations function in settings without adequate health care, educational opportunities, and with little or no economic infrastructure such as retail businesses. Yet for all the hope that

the production and sale of "Aboriginal art" in an international market may represent for these art centers—it is the reason for their existence, even when they are unprofitable—the artworks themselves have no other intrinsic functions in their own communities. They might be a point of pride, but they are also a mark of indentured servitude to a global market; in any case, "Aboriginal paintings" do not *furnish* indigenous houses with objects of individual contemplation or family décor and acrylic paintings as such serve no function in indigenous ceremonies or other tradition-based collective practices. On the other hand, other objects initially made for sale, such as dancing boards and clapsticks traditionally used in ceremonies, are sometimes taken out of the commercial art centre setting and used in those ceremonies today.[7] There is, in other words, nothing that intrinsically prevents objects made as art from having a functional value in their indigenous context. But the acrylic paintings of dreamings have no such use value. Aboriginal art-making communities use their livelihood to negotiate their divided identities between two worlds. Subtle and profound ways of worldmaking and negotiating difference are involved, homologous to traditional ways of negotiating space and time in a harsh desert environment. A brilliant way of coping with catastrophic change that is neither assimilation to nor a rejection of the dominant culture, but a strategic form of survival in a subaltern position. Resistance under the wire —"managing the interstices with a measure of creativity," as Nestor Garcia Canclini once put it regarding the intersections of tradition and modernity in Latin America (García Canclini 1995, 204).

To appreciate the conundrums that contemporary Aboriginal art presents for consideration of the art system, it is important to bear in mind how sudden the transition has been from the traditional itinerant camping lifestyle of hunting and gathering to a sedentary way of life. As recently as 1984, a group of nine Pintupi people who had never seen white outsiders emerged from the Western Desert. Within three years of first contact, some of them produced museum-quality acrylic paintings for the commercial market.[8] Acrylic paintings mark the arrival of the "genius artist" model of individual artistic production and its attendant manifestation, the celebrity artist.

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[7] As observed in both West and East Arnhem Land, by art historian Susan Lowish and anthropologist Howard Morphy. Personal communication with Susan Lowish, 10 February 2011.

[8] For example, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, *Two Boys Dreaming at Marruwa*, 1987, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; see Kimber (2006, 28) for a reproduction of this painting.