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Ecological, Egotistical, and Interstitial Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper intentionally emulates Yi-Fu Tuan's style of writing and assumes, at times, that the reader is familiar with Tuan's text, Space and Place, while also, assuredly, incorporating my own language and ideas. Some of the concepts presented here may seem abstract or philosophical as these thoughts coalesced and culminated after a semester spent thinking with multiple scholars regarding the ways we inscribe meaning to place and how we inhabit space.

Space itself, as David Harvey asserts, elicits the need for modification and, hence, the necessity for the multitudes of spatial typification (Harvey, 2006). Attempts to create categorical lists of "space" will understandably always be ephemeral, lasting only until another spatial iteration reveals itself. Thus belies the inherent difficulty in tackling such weighty and nebulous topics—they are hazy and transitional. Interstitial space allows us to conceptually contend with this fuzziness by materializing in and between liminal spaces at boundary thresholds. Interstitial space refers to space that intervenes, it is the malleable space situated within and between things. According to Janet Fiskio, this interstitial in-between space is more a process than a stable site or a fixed location (Fiskio, 2012). Interstitial spaces, or intervening spaces, exist within and between disparate spaces along an experiential continuum, pulling alternate realms of reality into a unified space that is, simultaneously, manifested and manifesting (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). Manifested (objective) space dwells in observation, characterized by physical reality, while manifesting (subjective) space floats with expectancy, signifying the future and intellectual possibility (Tuan, 1977). Interstitial space is multiscalar, multi-centered, and elaborate. It resides in the microscopic space between individual carbon molecules in decaying plant matter, the sinuous spaces of cellular tissues enveloping living organs, and the particles of infinite stardust suspending the universal cosmos. Interstitial space knits the threads of mythical and theoretical space together into a bulky sweater of blurry convergence to provide us with a narrative garment we can slip over our heads that encapsulates paradoxes at the edges of our existence. Here, "mythical" refers to origin stories and explanatory frameworks that weave the normative with the imaginary to serve as foundation and guide for universally shared visions (Mackinnon & Derickson, 2013). Theoretical space, rather, uses abstract geometric patterns to divide, value, quantify, and measure space—often in quarters: four winds, four quadrants, four cardinal directions (Tuan, 1997). Mythical and theoretical space are intellectual and social constructs that retain immaterial qualities and symbolic representations. Interstitial space is simultaneously multifaceted—imaginary, real, invisible, thick—and singular.

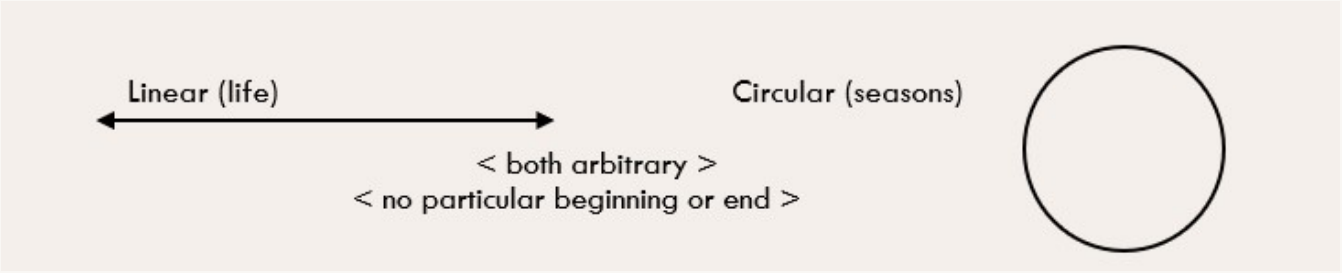
A term often used interchangeably and

synonymously (and, for our purposes, erroneously) with space is place. Space and place conceptually inform and interact with each other. Bounded, named spaces that are imbued with importance morph and transmute from space into place (Tuan, 1977). As place, these storied spaces acquire profound meaning. They are deeply loved and saturated with significance; they convey tales of fellowship, transformation, and triumph to become centers of felt value (Tuan, 1997). Place requires conscious organization of storied spaces that feel familiar. We build place in the internal imaginary nooks and corners of our minds while concurrently erecting place externally as visible representations of our lived experiences mapped onto buildings or landscapes. All places are assemblages—a unique whole with properties that emerge from the interactions within and between its components. In addition to being a geographic and philosophical object of inquiry (like space), place is also a way of being (Cresswell, 2015). For, while place can be used to represent a static concept and an ideal, in the day-to-day place is caught up in a relentless state of unfinished perpetual perishing (Fiskio, 2012). Place and its remembered stories are nuanced by the positionality of the storyteller. In the United States, the country's dominant origin story has been one of settler-colonial discovery and manifest destiny without homage to the existing indigenous inhabitants of Turtle Island who, where mentioned, are portrayed as savage visages in need of domestication or eradication. As indigenous peoples reclaim their histories and repossess their narratives, this discourse shifts. The point is, as Leonie Sandercock states, that the writing of histories is not simply a matter of holding a mirror up to the past and reporting on what is reflected back; the past is always a representation, a textual reconstruction, rather than a direct reflection (Sandercock, 1998). Interstitial space breathes into these historical narratives. It lives in the disparate remembering of people recounting shared experiences, morphing through stories and recollections as it stretches across gaps both real and imagined to provide buoyancy from one place to the next.

To situate space, place, and stories, we must invite time into our conversation. Yet another concept with many gradations, Harvey proclaims it "impossible to understand space [and place] independent of time" (Harvey, 2006). There are two ways to display time: first, in a linear fashion shown by a line (or an arrow) drawn from some beginning point to some end story (e.g., the span of a human life from birth to death); and, second, as a repetitive, circular orbit (e.g., the passage of days marked by the daily movement of the sun and the moon) (Tuan, 1977). Both ways of "telling" time are arbitrary attempts to translate spatial motion into reductive nodes of then and now—or past, present, future. Time can find us in a garden watching the weather and planting seeds one day and, on another, catch us delighting in the taste a just picked sun-ripened fruit.

A. Representations of TIME

The passage of time affects our senses and memories of place. Time spent in a particular place increases our familiarity with that place. This time-familiarity follows two paths, along the first path we take place for granted as mere banal manifestation in our daily life, while as we traverse the second path we fall deeper and more enduringly in love with place. Time filters into and touches all the hazy interstitial space between (inward) memories and (outward) realities. Time endeavors to help us hold on to the fleeting pleasures of sweet memories or, alternatively, aids with the erosion of grief and painful remembrances.



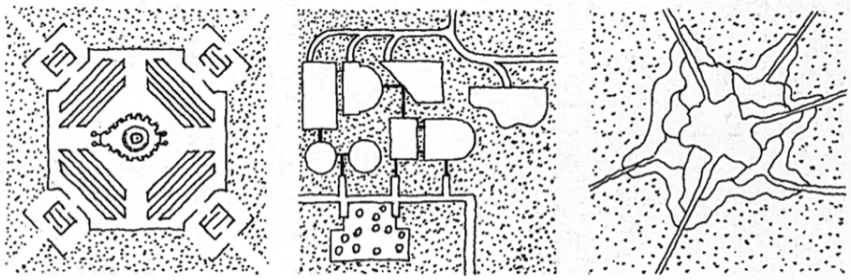
Imagining our shared future requires reconsideration of our shared stories, our place histories, and how they are perceived (Sandercock, 1998). Space, place, and time influence our perception and determine how we interact. Perception, and its cousin perspective, refers to the way our tenuous, personal world views inform how we come to make sense of individual and collective lived experiences. Each being is perceptually centered with privileged access to the myriad of complicated responses arising from their own existence (Tuan, 1977). Responses range from the psychological realm—of thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences, and sensations—to the symbolic, economic, material, habitual, social, and the intimate. Paraphrasing Lefebvre, Harvey claims that "we do not live as material atoms floating around in a materialist world; we also have imaginations, fears, emotions, psychologies, fantasies and dreams" (Harvey, 2006). As we live (itself a simplified term used to account for our movement through space into place over time) we encounter stimuli. Our reaction to stimulating confrontations expands our understanding and our abilities. We learn by doing and we learn through formal instruction—skill and knowledge are intertwining dance partners in an ever-lasting and performative entanglement between "integral experience" (subconsciousness) and "deliberative calculation" (consciousness) (Tuan, 1977). In a similar dance, Culture (ego) and Nature (eco) affect our perceptions and are brought into dialogue through the vast networks of interstitial space. Woven around, over, through and between, egotistical-culture space and ecological-nature space affect our perceptions so that we do not recognize the obvious beginning of one or the implicit ending of the other. Egotistical space is uniquely developed in humans. While our species growth has "biological imperatives" (nature), it is our aspirations that differentiate us from our animal heritage (Tuan, 1977). These aspirations inhabit art, literature, and architecture—each a demarcation of humanity's departure from the animal kingdom and our entrance into thick worlds of our own making. Humanized space caters to demand-driven wish images and situates humankind in a God-like position that defies—nay, commands—natural forces by bending them under the will of aggressive ego (Friedman, 1977). Humanity occupies the center of egotistical space. This center is a place of power, control, and prestige conceptualized as a nexus of spatio-temporal beginnings. This centered view of humanity—this egotistical space—loves achievement and order and the historical organization of human experience implies that the world revolves around mankind (Tuan, 1977). Alternatively, ecological space is the essential representation of space from which all materiality flows and is the basis of everything, including culture's egotistical space.

Perhaps the clearest representation of egotistical space is the City as it weaves through, sprawls into, and encroaches upon ecological space. Yet, as Kostof astutely observes, "a city, however perfect its initial shape, is never complete, never at rest" (Kostof, 1991). The designed environment is as a book where, instead of pages, distinctive streets and buildings display place meanings and reveal storied spaces. The history of civilization winds its way through interstitial spaces of urban places, and we "read form correctly only to the extent that we are familiar with the precise cultural conditions that generated it" (Kostof, 1991).

14 The cosmic city: a spatial diagram of social hierarchy.

15 The practical city: a functional construct of interrelated parts.

16 The organic city: an indivisible, living organism.



"How is it that different human practices create and make use of different conceptualizations of space?", asks Harvey (Harvey, 2006). The contrast of traditional ecological knowledge (indigenous science) with western objective knowledge (technological science) provides juxtaposition of human practices from which to draw, as these initially oppositional knowledge bases are being pulled into conversant interstitial space more and more. Humanity is shifting, beginning to understand that human is not at center, to realize that man is not the measure of all things—of capacity, or area, or distance, or time, or movement. A new type of measurement is necessary, archaic anthropocentric views have done the work of human erosion by placing culture outside of nature for long enough (Tuan, 1977). Our biological appetites and greed have found their way to the edges of ecological space and reached their natural limits. Massive, sprawling vacation homes sit perched atop verdant hillsides, voluminous space that sits empty save for the rare weeks when victorious residents fill its rooms to live in exorbitant comfort, while nearby invisible neighbors shiver with lack.

Two things stand out about egotistical space: meaning and materiality (Creswell, 2015). Our previous discussion of how storied spaces morph into place established a cursory understanding of meaning. Materiality, rather than merely imbuing space with meaning, seeks to extract raw materials and existence from ecological space. All materiality flows from ecological space. Yet, as Braun observes, we often conceive of 'natural' (ecological) as an entity separate from the 'cultural' (egotistical) (Bruan, 2007).

"It is not required to become landlords of large swaths of land in order to access a meaningful relationship to earth; is not necessary to first become a paragon of virtue before we can begin healing familial patterns; we need not have all the answers before attempting to reshape our culture to be friendlier, more humane, more connected" (Walla, 2016).

This, then, becomes our central paradox: egotistical space embodies a dualistic vision in which humanity is entirely outside ecological space (Cronon, 1996).

This egotistical view of space reduces ecological space to the domain that provides for our biological needs and as a "thing" to be tamed to our liking. "Before the domestication of other species, human beings, like primates, related to their habitats as whole societies." Under our feet, deep in the soil is an entire universe teaming with the infinitesimal microorganismal life. Above us lives infinity, planets, stars, and all the elementals. Ecological space is fantastical and vast, it is also banal and ordinary (Friedman, 1999). Common representations of ecological space include "wild" landscapes and "controlled" gardens. Wild landscapes are often used to connote awe of a hostile or enigmatic land, while controlled gardens are aesthetic or productive human constructions of nature. Ecological space is transitional space, it is actual and imagined, raw and polished. It is space that can be seen, felt, and heard. She is brimming with soil, water, and imagination. Her earthly substance and changing seasons provide a universal backdrop of intimacy for all life's spatio-temporal experiences. Nature is simplicity; she is

simply being. Ecological space exists outside of egotistical space, the reverse is not true. Egotistical space is embedded in and embodied by ecological space and nature's processes (Harvey, 2006).

We must rewrite the links between cultural domination and ecological degradation that persist in the new imperialism of our current times (Holleman, 2018). Let us break out of the container of egotistical extractive space to embrace the expansiveness of embodied humanity (egotistical + ecological + interstitial space) (Friedman, 1999). The earth, rather than being the human body writ large, is in actuality reversed—the human body is the earth writ small (Tuan, 1977). Humanity must be conscious that we exist in the interstitial space in between, born of both nature and culture, and acknowledge with gratitude the inextricable ways nature sustains all life (Cronon, 1996). Ecological and Egotistical space reciprocate one another (Abrams, 1997). Every person—even the most domesticated among us—contains the feral seeds of our own indigenous origin (Walla, 2016). Embodied humanity is present in the feral seeds of our gardens and exists in landscapes of our lives. A seed is a "deep time technology so sophisticated that it appears quotidian" (Brookes-Keeve, 2020). To plant a seed is to plant a story in the soil of life, and every seed has its own story to tell.

B. FERAL SEEDS

Seeds cannot be controlled as artifacts in a museum or entries in a vault. They will always slip through the cracks. They will always move.

Brooks - Keeve, 2020

Ecological space respires in the interstitial substance of egotistical space. Provider and keeper of egotistical space, ecological space is also humanity's home. The concept of "home" is often portrayed as an essential shelter and a dependable source of physical and psychological comfort, a source of nurture, and a haven of stability. But what happens when this picturesque rendering of home breaks down—when this seemingly secure place becomes fraught with abuse and violence instead of love and care? When home is a place full of fearful emotions rather than a refuge for solace? For, as Doreen Massey explains, "the identity of any place, including that place called home, is in one sense ever open to contestation." What, then, happens we realize Nature (that ecological space from which all our material flows emerge) is our only home? What if, instead of defying, commanding, and bending natural forces, we choose instead to work alongside them (Tuan, 1977)? Winona LaDuke tells us that "cultural diversity is as critical as biological diversity and must be manifested in our methods of relating to the land" (LaDuke, 1994). Humanity has a long lineage of living in tandem with nature as our home. Home is not a place that is arrested at some pinnacle ending and held there in permanence, a home is not achieved once to be enjoyed thereafter (Tuan, 1977). Home is a lesson in impermanence and growth—it is a process. There is deep need for reciprocity within our home. Egotistical and ecological spaces of the future require the careful threading of interstitial space's fine gossamers into the nature-culture-world fabric. In revaluing this timeless and enduring connectivity, we must navigate routes between communities and within ourselves while, concurrently, honoring existing roots to gain a more visceral understanding of how the fate of the trees, the animals, the plants, and the waters are bound up with humanity's own

(Walla, 2016). We are entering an era of spatio-temporality that is no longer human-centered, an era where the locus of prestige lives at the edges. Today is our invitation to reimagine and restructure our futures, for no cultural revolution succeeds "without being at the same time a conscious, spatial revolution" (Soja, 1980).

"If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both." (Cronon 1996).

(This paper was initially written for an assignment in Dr. Bryan Wee's course titled "Place, Landscape, and Meaning" that asked students to, first, read Yi Fu Tuan's book Space and Place written in 1977 and, next, to conceptualize and draft an additional chapter for the book that would bring Tuan's ideas forward nearly five decades.)

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