

Critical Spatiality: Mhay's Room and the Kingdom of God

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Introduction

I'd like to begin with my "unofficial" resume—the stuff that doesn't make it into official introductions, because it doesn't really look theological or academic. But, in fact it is through my "unofficial" resume that I actually came to care at all about academic theology as a tool for social justice. So let me offer you elements of my counter resume. I have worked with blind and visually-impaired children at what was then known as the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School, with adults and kids on the Southern Ute Reservation, in rural, southeastern Colorado with students at the High School of last resort for pregnant, court committed or formerly incarcerated adolescents, with men, women and adolescents self or court committed to a locked psychiatric unit.

All these places come with cultural assumptions about what kinds of places these are and what kinds of people inhabit them, an institution for the blind, a Native American reservation, a run-down high school in the middle of a city evacuated by white flight and left to fall apart, a locked psychiatric unit. There are the dominant, externally imposed assumptions about what these places mean, and then there are the unexpected, effervescent definitions created by the people themselves: the competitive track team at the Iowa School, the prom at the high school of last resort, laughing with patients in the psych unit until tears streamed down our cheeks, standing on infertile ground with the Ute celebrating and giving thanks for blessings when 75% of the

population has some form of diabetes and 100% live in poverty. These are the definitions of places like psych units, reservations and blind schools I care about—the ones in which the practices of the people within tell me who they are and what is possible, within a whole host of apparently limiting conditions. Their definitions of place and self are the ones I want to learn. Definitions from the outside, often not only fail to do justice to the complex, creative lives within apparently impermeable boundaries, but, in fact, diminish those lives, in many cases (as we will see below).

I want to know those “different stories” of space, identity and practice because of the simple but profound acts of liberation the people I have met practice: running the 440 relay blind, dancing in a tuxedo, covered with facial tattoos and a felony, laughing with glee in the loony bin, these say something to me about the Kingdom of God. Traces of it are everywhere, perhaps especially I believe in the places we disregard most easily. I ask you to keep these people in mind, and those places and people who have shocked you into a Kingdom vision, as I present you some of my work on critical spatiality. I work on theoretical space as a theologian because what I care about most is doing justice to all of the people who have taught you and me how to live hopefully and gratefully in the world in contexts most of us find hopeless. If the Kingdom of God is among us, we should continue to train our eyes to see its marks.

As I work to recover uncover and discover the amazing practices of hope the people I have served enact using the lenses of cultural geography and theology, I place myself in the tradition (but certainly not in any sense on equal footing) with those theologians who believe that theology is at its best as an ongoing conversation with often surprising partners. If God is still at working the world, we should not fear finding God in languages and disciplines we never expected, in my case in geography.

Mhay's Room and the Kingdom of God

For the past 15 years, my teaching, research and activism have been supported and challenged by this insight from Marxist geographer David Harvey;

Our future places are for us to make. But we cannot make them without inscribing our struggles in space, place and environment in multiple ways. That process is on-going and every single one of us has agency with respect to it.¹

I believe that Harvey calls us to take geography seriously as a constituent in our constructions of meaning. Understanding the geographical component to meaning is critical for us in the 21st C, I believe, because the majority of the most pressing social justice concerns of the day rest on interpretations of space. Massive global immigration and population displacement, environmental degradation and racism and the unchecked movement of global capital are warranted and sustained by interpretations and divisions of space, some of which I will highlight below.

To the extent that theology is a language of challenge to structures of power that limit the thriving of all creation, theology must engage these contemporary spatial problematics in ways that make clear both the destructive elements of particular spatial constructions and simultaneously offer alternative, liberative spatial models and metaphors. Theology must offer those liberative possibilities, I suggest, because its ethics are inherently topocentric—concerned with place and place-making. In the concept of place as I have found it in the work of cultural geographers, philosophers, architects, postcolonial theorists, I find a set of tools for both deconstruction and reconstruction. So, I want to give you two examples of how space and place function to create meaning, meaning which has everything to do with ultimately defining people. I want us to consider the language of globalization and the world it conveys and I want us to consider the US/Mexico border. I'm going to follow that with a little theory which I hope will be relatively painless. And then I end with a simple and, I think, profound example that I believe trains our eyes toward the liberative possibilities of place-making and the traces of promise there: it comes from a bedroom in British Columbia.

Free Trade Zones: Global Market Capitalism

Think about the world that is created with the language of global economic capitalism. Economist Malcolm Waters writes that globalization is “a ...process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede.”² Spatial language in global market capitalism helps construct a central Western good, “freedom.” The good of human freedom is carried along in images of space as limitless. Writers like Alexander Goldsmith³ have spelled out the appeal to illusory spatial freedom in phrases such as “free trade zone” and “free market.” Beginning in the 1970's financial press, this new economic freedom - sailing on the winds of “globalization”- was touted as both “progressive and inevitable.”⁴ Further, the limitless economic frontier constructed by global market capitalism calls for market

economic practices of adventure and conquest, as Heather Eaton points out. She cites phrases such as “Gateways to the World,” “Spread Global Wings,” “Track Global Competition,” and I would add “Venture Capital,”⁵ as examples of the excitement supposed to be felt in the new “wide open spaces.”

Ironically, contiguous with space as limitless freedom is the notion of increasing spatial coziness, e.g. “the global village.” This coziness comes through in descriptions of globalization as a force that shrinks the space between persons and cultures. From this compression comes the phrase, “think globally,”⁶ or phrases that encourage a “global consciousness” of our “one world.” Spatial coziness relies on the notion that too much separation, too much space, is isolating and ultimately harmful. Thus globalization is supposed to bring us closer together faster.

With economic globalization in control of spatiality, if not a better home, this one world is touted to be at least a better neighborhood than those in which we have lived.⁷ What we want to look for here is how the language of space promotes beneficial conditions for some and simultaneously obscures the lived reality of “the globe.” As Hawthorne and Eaton, among others have argued, “This ‘globe’ of which they speak is an utter abstraction with no accountability to anything but an economic agenda.”⁸ “The ‘constraints of geography’ that limit capital movement (as if capital moved by itself) are the constraints of real life on a finite planet. As those constraints have receded, within the culture of the transnational sector, there is the overwhelming ideology that there are no constraints on anything....”⁹ Those made rich through the increasing globalization of wealth can avoid admitting any material effects, such as real poverty resulting in vast human migration and planetary degradation, in part by casting its lot with unproblematized constructions of infinite space. As we in the so-called developed countries contribute to the good of human (and capital) freedom through our consuming practices, a good guaranteed us by the Creator, we participate in naturalizing the rhetoric of global capitalism, a world and market without boundaries denying the counter voice that would suggest that the limitless spatial possibilities for economic movement and prosper are true only for some.

Immigration, Displacement and the US/Mexico border

In this country 11.1 million undocumented immigrants, displaced by global economic conditions, risk their lives to come to this country for low-wage jobs with few of the basic human rights afforded Americans. Fifty-seven percent of that 11 million come from Mexico

with whom we share a border.¹⁰ Each year I take students to the US/Mexico border to study the complicated reality of that 'place.' I do so because I want students to see how lives are made in transition. I want them to recognize how deeply implicated each of us is in the migration of these people by virtue of our ways of living. If the spatial is always already ideological then the Mexico/US border is the material manifestation of American xenophobia: fencing, barbed wire, guards, and dogs - tools of fear - greet immigrants into the United States coming to do the work we Americans refuse to do for wages we would never accept.

Further, there is a whole world Americans refuse to see living *within* the border between Mexico and the United States. As Daisy Machado has written, the undocumented worker, the unnamed woman, lives literally and figuratively within the open wound that is the U.S./Mexico border. She is between worlds and excluded from the conditions of full thriving in both.

She is the ultimate outsider with no alternatives, no legal rights, no voice, no access to protection from those who have the power to exploit her labor and even her body. Fear, humiliation, exploitation, poverty and even physical abuse are a part of her reality, and to talk about justice for these women means to call into question the very structures of our society that are capable of such injustice.¹¹

Social justice is intricately tied to geography and the language of spatiality. In the crisis of displacement, this is the language of border, boundary, displacement, exile, outsider and insider, resident and alien, legal and illegal. The interpretation of a variable line in the sand, drawn and redrawn over the past century and ½ for the benefit of the US is depicted as an absolute foundation which legitimates practices of exclusion, militarism and racism. From the side of the US, the language of what is "legal" permeates this spatial division, as if the line and the law were and had always been unalterable--as if Jim Crow laws had never existed, and the 14th amendment had always existed. From these two brief examples I want to do some theory so we can understand how geography, meaning and human identity come together.

Theories of Space and Place

Space is always/already morally infused; it comes front-loaded with interpretations of it. Thus space cannot be known independent of interpretations of it. Space is always lived and because of this reality, it is better understood as place, which I'll say more about in a moment. Interpretations of the meaning of a space affect how we identify the people within and outside of it; those identifications of persons by the meaning of their location pre- and pro-scribe practices on/toward the inhabitants of place. Finally, interpretations of space are warranted by appeals to unproblematized origins, for instance 'Nature' God' and Space itself. These elements form the dynamic, co-constituting complex of spatiality- meaning- practices.

The bond among spatial-meaning-practice becomes so close that it appears as if the place itself *requires* particular actions and beliefs. This is the "naturalizing" of the place; any other beliefs or behaviors are inappropriate or 'unnatural' to this site. But places do not demand anything; people do. Lost behind the co-constitution of spatiality, meaning and practices is recognition that this place could mean something else altogether. North does not have to be up on maps. Libraries do not have to be quiet places. We have agreed to these Interpretations explicitly or tacitly and so now ideas like these function as "the way things are." But "the way things are" can be changed.

The recognition that space is always/already ideologically infused and has real world practical implications has returned a variety of theorists to the concept of place. Whereas space between pre- and post modernity was constructed as a medium through which we *perceive* the world, a neutral ether, pure extension, cultural theorists understand place as the formulation of spatiality in which we *conceive* space.¹² There is no space without interpretation of it. What is evident from these examples is that imposed definitions of the meaning of place like a boundary the separates humans into two apparently unalterable existential essences, legal and illegal, change the courses of peoples lives. We enact practices in place based on the meaning we give those places and the inhabitants who "absorb" that meaning by inhabitation or proximity. People in psyche hospitals are crazy, kids in the High School of last resort are beyond change, women and children should "know their place."

Theology

So, what use does critical spatiality, place, have to do with theology? Critical spatiality, place, offers us the tools to deconstruct the emplaced ideologies that limit the thriving of human beings and the environment: “space” as a neutral ether or as sheer dimension, “freedom” as always and equally defined by my first world freedom and the necessity of capital movement (free-flowing), the apparent incontestability of “legality” written on lines in the sand. We can look for ways that geography meaning and practices come together to be abusive and we can name that and change it. But as I said above, critical spatiality, if it is to actually function as a theological tool must speak to the liberative promises of the Christian message. And It turns out that Christianity is deeply and finally topocentric—centered on place-- and that place is the Kingdom of God. This place is shot through with hope and with an ethic that challenges us to pay attention to where we are and how we treat one another; Kingdom of God as theological place turns our eyes to the mundane as manifestations of what we have been left to imagine as “up there.” The metaphor of God’s Kingdom, as place, forces into relief the necessity of an emplaced hope, a kind of hope for which geographers and anthropologists do not have ready language. Keeping our eyes attuned to the world, I believe that we will find, what my teacher Mary Fulkerson has called traces of redemption in the practices of place-making.¹³ This is meaning is created by the inhabitants of place. The hope to be found in these practices is **not** predicated on leaving the mundane in favor of the ethereal i.e., waiting for the next life to redeem this one (although there is liberative strategy in that position.) and the hopeful meaning of place does not come through externally imposed definitions of Blind Schools, Native American Reservations, psyche units. In place, Vitor Westhelle writes, “The question of transcendence is much more related to fences and walls than in the shiny new day to come.”¹⁴ Whatever ought to be the case is inextricable from what already is—we just need a way to see it, celebrate it and amplify it.

Let me offer you one example in which I find revelations of the Kingdom, eyes firmly connected to mundane space. It comes from anthropologist Geraldine Pratt. In her research with Filipina domestic workers, Pratt, a professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia, cites this example of the creation of place and through place identity in the midst of displacement. Mhay is a Filipina domestic worker brought to Vancouver Canada to work through a national live-in caregiver program to bring needed workers into Canada. She describes how she appoints her room in the home of her employer.

Mhay tells the interviewer:

I bought a picture with a frame and hung it up on the wall [of my bedroom]. Prior to this, all four walls were bare. I did this without telling them because I thought that since I paid for this room, I should be allowed to do something about it. So I arranged the room, put furniture and TV the way I wanted them. I would leave my door open so that they [my employers] would see what's in my room, that it's not dull anymore.¹⁵

For those of us concerned with the way boundaries are drawn to include and exclude, Pratt maintains that Mhay's story of making her room and via her room her identity must remind us that is important about Mhay's place-making, is that she leaves the door open so that her employer and those of us who visit her life through her interview can see a little of who she is. Mhay does not want to be kept a stranger. She has not kept us out as we threaten to keep out people like her.

Mhay's room, made within the conditions of displacement speaks to the amazing ability of people to practice place-making, and through place to stake some identity, whatever the condition. Taking account of place-making forces those of us who are concerned with displacement to recognize both the resilience and creativity of those in constant transition simultaneously with the contextual conditions that determine the necessity to recreate place. This kind of hope is exemplified when Mhay and millions less fortunate than she practice place in the conditions of displacement. The hope manifest in Mhay's place-making comes without waiting for a next life, a next place which will be her "true" home or even necessarily a return to an original place that has now changed dramatically by her absence. Mhay's room and places like it, kids in the blind school running relay, the adolescent felons in tuxedos, laughter on the psych unit remind us that while Kingdom conditions have not been achieved (the last are not first), the placial 'already' identifying both the limiting conditions and the moments of overcoming them point the way to the 'not yet.'

Thus, at the confluence of place and Kingdom voices with truths come down from the privileged vistas of mountain tops and off limitless plains to rise up from slums, creeks, 'hollers, homeless shelters, mosques, psychiatric hospitals, next door, every socio-physical place that makes the world (Mt. 5:1-2). At the confluence of place and Kingdom we will not forget that cities on hills are built and sustained by those who have been displaced, those who risk life and limb to care for our children, clean our homes, tend our gardens and build fences

around our first world fortresses (Mt. 5:14). We will remember that lighting these cities is always accompanied by shadow and that those who provide light to our cities are likely standing in the darkness at the margins of meaning. Darkness now takes the form of black coal dust choking the lungs of miners and shadows on the x-rays of Native American youth exposed from birth to nuclear waste. We will read cities on hills for the faint inscriptions of lives whose blood and bones make them possible, all but rubbed off by histories of “progress.” Looking for these traces requires the deepest spiritual commitment; finding them, speaking them, writing them is hope for the not yet within the already.

At the confluence of place and Kingdom sits Mhay’s room. In spite of every economic, social and political wrong that brought her to North America, Mhay invites us into her place, overcoming all the ways we have eliminated her from ours. My belief is that just there, in her small and simple room the banquet has begun and we are invited in.

End Notes

¹ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 326.

² Malcolm Waters, *Globalization*, second ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 7.

³ Alexander Goldsmith, "Seeds of Exploitation: Free Trade Zones in the Global Economy," in *The Case against the Global Economy: And for a Turn toward the Local*, ed. Gerry and Edward Goldsmith Mander (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996); Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*.

⁴ Harvey, *Justice*, 421.

⁵ Thanks to Melissa Stewart for this insight.

⁶ A further irony is that while we are supposed to consider ourselves a village, we shouldn’t be tribal in our beliefs.

⁷ This is evident as well in the use word such as ‘development,’ and ‘interdependence’ to describe the results of economic globalization.

⁸ Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen, *Ecofeminism and Globalization; Exploring Culture, Context and Religion* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 25

⁹ Susan Hawthorne, *Wild Politics* (Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex) 128.

¹⁰ Jeff Passel, Randolph Capps and Michael Fix, “Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures,” 12 January 2004, The Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=1000587>. See also United Nations High Commission of Refugees.

¹¹ Daisy Machado, “The Unnamed Women: Justice, Feminists and the Undocumented Woman,” in Maria Pilar Aquino, Daisy Machado and Jeanette Rodriguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 173.

¹² See David N. Livingstone, *The Geographic Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (United Kingdom: Blackwell, 1992). ‘Discovery’ is a word from colonial imperialism. Asia, Africa, China, the Americas had existed and been inhabited for hundreds of thousands of years before being seen by Europeans. The discovery of infinite space is inextricably linked other kinds of discovery. Imperial cartography, reliant on the “Gods eye” or satellite view of the world made possible the colonizing of non-Western lands and peoples during “The Great Age of Discovery.” The view from transparent space is articulated later in this chapter by post-colonial theorist Bill Ashcroft as the colonizing vision inscribed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperial cartography.

¹³ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Vitor Westhelle, in Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) 171.

¹⁵ Geraldine Pratt, “Geographies of Identity and Difference: Marking the Difference” in Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre, eds. *Human Geography Today* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999) 152.