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# Embodied Space(s)

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## Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture

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*Embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness takes on material and spatial form. After identifying the inherent difficulties in defining the body, body space, and cultural explanations of body experience, the author traces the evolution of approaches to embodied space including proxemics, phenomenological understandings, spatial orientation, and linguistic dimensions. Embodied space is presented as a model for understanding the creation of place through spatial orientation, movement, and language.*

*Keywords: spatial orientation; linguistic dimensions; phenomenological understandings*

Within the field of space and culture there has been increasing interest in theories that include the body as an integral part of spatial analysis (e.g., see *Spatial Hauntings* in *Space and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 12). These concerns have been partially resolved through the historical analysis of the docile body to social structure and power in work of Michel Foucault (1975, 1984, 1986) and sociologically in the notions of *habi-*

**Author's Note:** This article draws on ideas first discussed and written about with Denise Lawrence. I would like to thank her for her continuing intellectual and conceptual contributions to my work. I would also like to thank Deborah Pellow for allowing me to read her manuscript on the stranger zongo in Accra, Ghana. Although still in press, it has helped me to think through many of these ideas. Finally, without the help of Tom Csordas (1988) and his work on embodiment, I do not know if I would have recognized the importance of these ideas for the space and place field. It was his invitation to write an article on nerves as "embodied distressed" that first stimulated many of the threads of ideas presented here.

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*tus* by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and “structuration” by Anthony Giddens (1984), as well as many others (Low & Lawrence, 2002). Nonetheless, many researchers need theoretical formulations that provide an everyday, material grounding and an experiential, cognitive, and/or emotional understanding of the intersection and interpenetration of body, space, and culture (Low, 1996, 2000). I have called this material/conceptual intersectionality *embodied spaces*. These understandings require theories of body and space that are experience-near and yet allow for linkages to be made to larger, social, and cultural processes.

This article reviews some of the most promising theories from anthropology as a way to begin a discussion of what is available for ethnographic use and conceptual development. The discussion is meant to position anthropological theories in a space and place discourse often dominated by geographical and sociological contributions. Although I focus primarily on what is currently useful, I also suggest directions for further research and hope that this overview will elicit greater interdisciplinary dialogue and argument.

Within anthropology, spatial analyses often neglect the body because of difficulties in resolving the dualism of the subjective and objective body and distinctions between the material and representational aspects of body space. The concept of embodied space, however, draws these disparate notions together, underscoring the importance of the body as a physical and biological entity, lived experience, and a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world.

I use the term *body* to refer its biological and social characteristics and *embodiment* as an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas, 1994, p. 12). Embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form. After identifying the inherent difficulties in defining the body, body space, and cultural explanations of body experience, I trace the evolution of approaches to embodied space including proxemics (Hall, 1968), phenomenological understandings (Richardson, 1984), spatial orientation (Munn, 1996), and linguistic dimensions (Duranti, 1997). Embodied space is presented as a model for understanding the creation of place through spatial orientation, movement, and language.

## The Body

What constitutes the space of the body is strikingly illustrated by Harold Searles’s (1960) schizophrenic patient trying to convey something of the world he inhabits: “Doctor, you don’t know what it’s like, looking out on the world through square eyes.” Searles interpreted this statement to mean the patient could not differentiate his body boundaries from those of the room—the square eyes being the windows looking out at the world (cited in Hall, 1973, p. 99). His body is the room, and all experience and social interaction are mediated by this perception.

The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship to a person’s emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions. In Western culture we perceive the self as “naturally” placed in the body, as a kind of precultural given (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). We imagine ourselves experiencing the world through our “social skin,” the surface of the body representing “a kind of common frontier of society

which becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted” (T. Turner, 1980, p. 112). The schizophrenic’s distortion challenges this accepted notion of isomorphism of the body/self/social skin by separating the relationship of the physical and biological body, the self, and the perceived boundary between the body/self and the rest of the world.

Bryan Turner (1984) pointed out that it is an obvious fact that human beings “have bodies” and “are bodies.” Human beings are embodied and everyday life dominated by the details of corporeal existence. But he cautioned that biological reductionism keeps us from focusing on the ways in which the body is also inherently social and cultural. Terence Turner (1995) argued that although the body is an individual organism that biologically depends for its reproduction, nurturance, and existence on other individuals and the environment, even this biological individuality is relative, depending on other social beings. Thus, the body is best conceived as a multiplicity: the “two bodies” of the social and physical (Douglas, 1970); the “three bodies” of the individual body, social body, and body politic (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987); or the “five bodies” with the addition of the consumer body and the medical body to the three (O’Neil, 1985).

## Body Space

An early theory of the psychological relationship of the body to space is Eric Erikson’s (1950) attribution of genital modes with spatial modalities. In his research on child development, young boys build tall block structures to heights that topple over, whereas young girls create places with static interiors and enclosed spaces. He concluded that in young children, representational space is structured by an interpenetration of the biological, cultural, and psychological aspects of gender expressed externally in architectural form.

Erikson’s (1950) spatial analyses have been criticized by anthropologists who offer other psychoanalytic interpretations of bodily spaces (Pandolfo, 1989). For instance, Robert Paul (1976) agreed with Erikson’s contention that there is a relationship between the psyche and built spaces by revealing how the Sherpa temple can be seen as an objectification of the subjective, internal experience of the Sherpa experiencing his religion. He modified this understanding, however, to read temple architecture as a guide to Sherpa’s secret psychic life. Maria Pandolfi (1990), on the other hand, suggested that although there is a “minimal” identity that finds in the experience of the body a way of describing and expression of self, that identity is defined by historical social structures that inscribe the body and naturalize a person’s existence in the world. It is not biology/psychology that produces gendered body spaces and their representations but the inscription of sociopolitical and cultural relations on the body.

Feminists take this critique even further by exploring the epistemological implications of knowledge as embodied, engendered, and embedded in place (Duncan, 1996). By disrupting the binary mind/body by positionality (Boys, 1998) and focusing on the situated and colonized body (Scott, 1996), states of mind become loosened from the location of social and spatial relationships (Munt, 1998). Donna Haraway (1991) argued that personal and social bodies cannot be seen as natural but only as part of a self-creating process of human labor. Her emphasis on location, a position in a web of social connections, eliminates passivity of the female (and human) body and replaces it with a site of action and of agency (Haraway, 1991).

The majority of anthropologists emphasize the intrinsically social and cultural character of the human body. Marcel Mauss (1950) argued that acquired habits and somatic tactics, what he called the “techniques of the body,” incorporate all the “cultural arts” of using and being in the body and the world. The body is at the same time the original tool with which humans shape their world and the substance out of which the world is shaped (Mauss, 1950; see also Csordas, 1994). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) expanded this idea to develop a more structuralist argument that explains how body habits generate cultural features and social structure. He employed the Latin term *habitus* to characterize the way the body, mind, and emotions are simultaneously trained, and used this concept to understand how social status and class position become embodied in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1984). *Habitus* also explains how moral virtues are acquired through the coordination of bodily acts and social demeanor with emotional states, thoughts, and intentions (Mahmood, 2001).

Mary Douglas (1971) theorized the body as a medium of communication positing a direct relationship of spatial arrangements and social structure beginning with the symbolism of the body and body boundaries. In later work, Mauss (1979) analyzed the importance of the human body as a metaphor, noting that architecture draws its imagery from human experience, whereas Douglas (1978) and Bourdieu (1984) explored how body symbolism is transformed into spaces within the home and neighborhood.

Cultural groups often draw on the human body as a template for spatial and social relations. The Dogon describe village spatial structure in anthropomorphic terms spiraling down in scale to the plan of the house representing a man lying on his side, procreating (Griaule, 1954); and the Batammalibans endow their social structure and architecture with body symbolism (Blier, 1987). Many anthropologists use metaphor analysis to interpret the ways the human body is linked to myths and cosmology and describe how spatial and temporal processes are encoded with body symbolism (Hugh-Jones, 1979; Johnson, 1988). Other studies explore the body as isomorphic with the landscape, where the landscape provides a metaphor that is an expressive, evocative device transmitting memory, morality, and emotion (Bastien, 1985; Fernandez, 1988). A recent study of “closet space” uncovers how the “performativity” of space, through its metaphorical properties, constrains and defines the body and personal identity (Brown, 2000).

These ethnographies of body spaces do not theorize the body, *per se*, but utilize it as a spatial metaphor and representational space. Even though the body is implicated as a tool in the production of cultural forms (Bourdieu, 1977; Douglas, 1971; Mauss, 1950), it is treated as an empty container without consciousness or intention. Douglas, Mauss, Bourdieu, and others are more concerned with the body as a metaphor for social and cultural conceptualization than with the organism itself, and the effect of cultural influences on it and its operations.

## Proxemics

Edward Casey (2001) contended that the emergence of place as a productive notion only occurs with the recognition of the importance of the body in spatial orientation and ordinary perception. Yet as early as 1955, Irving Hallowell identified cultural factors in spatial orientation, affirming that spatial schema are basic to human orientation, a position from which to view the world, and a symbolic means of becoming ori-

ented in a spatial world that transcends personal experience. It would take a number intervening years, research projects, and a shift in epistemological perspective before anthropologists would bring this idea to fruition.

Edward Hall (1966, 1973) is best known for studying the influence of culture on spatial perception and behavior, establishing the field of proxemics, the study of people's use of space as an aspect of culture (1966). He postulated that humans have an innate distancing mechanism, modified by culture, that helps to regulate contact in social situations. Conceptualized as a bubble surrounding each individual, personal space varies in size according to the type of social relationships and situation. Hall proposed four general kinds of personal space ranging from intimate (which permits very close contact) to public. Because these spatial aspects of behavior are tacit, actors usually become aware of the boundaries only when they are violated, often in culture contact situations. Appropriate spatial variations in social relations are learned as a feature of culture, and patterns vary by culture.

Hall (1968) laid out the linguistic underpinnings of his work, arguing that "the principles laid down by Whorf and his followers in relation to language apply to all culturally patterned behavior, but particularly to those aspects of culture which are most often taken for granted" (p. 84). His research casts doubt on the assumption of shared phenomenological experience: People not only structure spaces differently but experience them differently and inhabit distinct sensory worlds. There is a selective screening out of some types of data accomplished by individuals "tuning out" one or more of the senses or by architecture.

In proxemics, the body is a site of spatial orientation with multiple screens for interacting with others and the environment. Hall is concerned that phenomenological theories of the universality of experience and language do not correspond to his findings of cultural difference at the individual level. He concluded that any assumption of shared human experience distorts a precise understanding of the cultural dimensions of space and spatial relations.

## Embodied Space

The phenomenological turn in spatial theorizing originates with the application of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) discussion of the primacy of perception in the experience of the body. From this philosophical perspective, the body becomes the ground of perceptual processes that ends in objectification (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Miles Richardson (1982, 1984) addressed how body experience and perception become material by considering how we transform experience to symbol and then remake experience into an object, such as an artifact, a gesture, or a word. He suggested that we use objects to evoke experience, thus molding experience into symbols and then melting symbols back into experience. In his work, embodied space is being-in-the-world, that is, the existential and phenomenological reality of place: its smell, feel, color, and other sensory dimensions.

Richardson (1982) used ethnographic descriptions of Cartago, Costa Rica, to conclude that the experience of being-in-the-plaza is about the concept of *cultura*—appropriate and socially correct behavior—which contrasts with *listo*—the smart, ready, and clever behavior encoded in the experience of being-in-the-market. For him, the way these spatial realities are experienced communicates the basic dynamics of culture. Although he did not specifically discuss embodied space, he laid the method-

ological groundwork for this concept by focusing on how “being there” becomes cultural. He concluded by asserting that it is through actions that Spanish American culture forms, or better, becomes. This “becoming” takes place, literally and socially, in the construction of the two realities and through the dialectical tension between the two.

This phenomenological approach to embodied space is modified and elaborated by other scholars interested in how individuals make place as well as social structure. The geographer Allan Pred (1986) is interested in how the spatial becomes social and the social becomes spatial. He traced the history of microgeographies of daily life in Southern Sweden to determine how everyday behavior and movements generated spatial transformations in land tenure resulting in changes in the local social structure. He concluded that place always involves “appropriation and transformation of space and nature that is inseparable from the reproduction and transformation of society in time and space” (p. 6). De Certeau’s (1984) insightful analysis of the spatial tactics of orientation and movement contributes to this discussion in his focus on the mundane act of walking.

Anthropologists also have noted the importance of movement in the creation of place, conceptualizing space as movement rather than a container (Pandya, 1990). Melanesian ethnographers work in a cultural context that accentuates the importance of spatial orientation: in greetings, the passage of time, the definition of events, and the identification of people with land and/or the landscape (Kahn, 1990; Rodman, 1985).

Nancy Munn (1996) brought aspects of this work together by considering space-time “as a symbolic nexus of relations produced out of interactions between bodily actors and terrestrial spaces” (p. 449). Drawing in part on Lefebvre’s concepts of “field of action” and “basis of action,” she constructed the notion of a “mobile spatial field” that can be understood as a culturally defined, corporeal-sensual field stretching out from the body at a given locale or moving through locales.

Munn’s (1996) ethnographic illustrations are spatial interdictions that occur when Aborigines treat the land according to ancestral Aboriginal law. She is interested in the specific kind of spatial form being produced, “a space of deletions or of delimitations constraining one’s presence at particular locales” (p. 448) that creates a variable range of excluded or restricted regions for each person throughout their life. For instance, in following their moral-religious law, Aborigines make detours that must be far enough away to avoid seeing an ancient place or hearing the ritual singing currently going on there. She argued that by detouring, actors carve out a “negative space” that extends beyond their spatial field of vision. “This act projects a signifier of limitation upon the land or place by forming *transient but repeatable boundaries out of the moving body*” (p. 452). Munn applied this idea to contemporary Aborigines encounters with powerful topographic centers and “dangerous” ancestral places.

The importance of this analysis is the way Munn (1996) demonstrated how the ancestral Law’s power of spatial limitation becomes “embodied” in an actor-centered, mobile body, separate from any fixed center or place. “Excluded spaces” become spatiotemporal formations produced out of the interaction of actors’ moving spatial fields and the terrestrial spaces of body action. Her theory goes beyond Hall’s concept of proxemics with culturally constituted spatial orientations and interpersonal distances and Richardson’s phenomenological understanding of being-in-the-world by constructing the person (actor) as a truly embodied space in which the body, conceived of as a moving spatial field, makes its own place in the world.



Stuart Rockefeller (2001) modified this notion of actors' mobile spatial fields into a theory of public places formed by the individual movement, trips, and digressions of migrants crossing national boundaries. Starting with Munn's (1996) idea that the person makes space by moving through it, he traced how movement patterns collectively make up locality and reproduce locality. Places, he argued, are not in the landscape but simultaneously in the land, people's minds, customs, and bodily practices. By tracing the crossings of labor migrants between Bolivia and Argentina and when "at home," Rockefeller used this formulation to theorize how actors' embodied spaces occupy and create transnational space.

## Language and Embodied Space

In a letter that accompanied the publication of "Proxemics" (Hall, 1968) Dell Hymes (1968) criticized the use of linguistic theory to understand body space. He commented that if current linguistic theory was taken as a model, it would not place primary emphasis on phonological units but on grammatical relationships, and chided linguists for not undertaking transcultural proxemic ethnography as well as transcultural descriptive linguistics. More recent critiques of the use of language models dispute whether experience can be studied at all because experience is mediated by language and language itself is a representation. This tension between "language" and "experience" and the subsequent dominance of semiotics over phenomenology is resolved by Paul Ricoeur (1991) in this argument that language is a modality of being-in-the-world, such that language not only represents or refers but "discloses" our being-in-the-world (Csordas, 1994, p. 11).

Alessandro Duranti (1992) corrected these omissions through his empirical investigation of the interpenetration of words, body movements, and lived space in interactional practice in Western Samoa. He examined the sequence of acts that include bodily movements in ceremonial greeting, explicating that the words used cannot be fully understood without reference to such movements (Duranti, 1992). Furthermore, the performance of ceremonial greetings and the interpretation of words are understood as located in and at the same time constitutive of the sociocultural organization of space inside the house (Duranti, 1992). His theory of "sighting" embodies language and space through "an interactional step whereby participants not only gather information about each other and about the setting but also engage in an negotiated process at the end of which they find themselves physically located in the relevant social hierarchies and ready to assume particular institutional roles" (p. 657). In his analysis, Duranti reinterpreted proxemics within a linguistic model that includes language, spatial orientation, and body movement.

Duranti (1997) focused his analysis on transnational communities where "speaking about space can be a way of bridging physically distant but emotionally and ethically close worlds" (p. 342). He asked whether a relationship can be contained, represented, and enacted in the act of sitting and whether there is a particular mode of coexistence between one's body and an inhabited surface—between embodied space and inhabited space across translocalities. Duranti answered this question through a detailed examination of the Samoan expression *nofo i lalo* (sit down), comparing its use in a Western Samoan village and a suburban neighborhood in southern California. In the Californian setting, this indexical expression is used to establish a resting place for children's bodies but also as an attempt to recreate a distant kind of space,



one without furniture and walls, and with different rules of cultural behavior. This establishment of a social and cultural space through language and body movement “binds the participants by constituting an emotional and a moral commitment to a culturally specific way of being and moving in a house inhabited by other human beings (parents and visitors) who deserve respect” (Duranti, 1997, p. 352).

Duranti’s (1997) integration of language, body movement, spatial orientation, inhabited space, and distant homelands as expressions of cultural connectedness and socialization synthesizes many aspects of embodied space(s). His ideas, when combined with the spatial orientation insights of Munn (1996), provide a productive and fleshed-out theory of embodied space for anthropologists to build on.

## Conclusion

Anthropological theories of body, space, and culture draw on a wide range of philosophical and epistemological traditions—from the positivism of Hall’s desire to measure the size of the cultural spaces surrounding the body in this theory of proxemics to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in Richardson’s (1984) conception of the body being-in-the-plaza or being-in-the-market. Furthermore, anthropologists utilize a number of theories from other fields, for example, Munn’s (1996) use of Lefebvre’s notion of “field of action” to develop her own more grounded sense of a mobile spatial field. Even Duranti (1997) derives many of his ideas—of indexical speech and speech communities—from linguistic anthropology and integrates these notions with movement and speech in space.

What is more significant in terms of this analysis, however, is they have brought these diverse perspectives into the realm of the anthropology of space and place, where the body has been so often overlooked. Furthermore, they present their understanding of body/space/culture in new and creative ways that allow us to theorize and imagine the body as a moving, speaking, cultural space in and of itself. This evocative and theoretically powerful concept of body/space/culture marks a radical shift in anthropological thinking that previously separated these domains and resolves many of the dilemmas that plague those of us who cross the micro/macro boundaries from individual body and embodied space to macroanalyses of social and political forces. This integrated notion of embodied space addresses the metaphorical and material aspects of the body in space as well as body/space to communicate, transform, and contest existing social structures.

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