
Nature, economy, and the space–place distinction

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Abstract. This paper reconsiders the distinction between the concepts of space and place. We argue that, rather than favoring one side of the place–space division, or dissolving the partition between them, the distinction needs to be maintained because it is a key site of Western metaphysics. Specifically, the distinction between space and place cannot be abandoned or easily altered because it remains inextricably entangled with other key concepts. Drawing upon Derrida's notion of *différance*, we illustrate two such entanglements, the relation of space–place with nature and with economy. We argue that space–place helps to constitute, but in turn is constituted by, nature and economy. The larger point is that none of these metaphysical concepts are separate and independent, but are entwined in complex and changing forms, producing effects that demand critical scrutiny.

1 Introduction

Consider Atta Kim's long-exposure photograph of the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street in New York City taken over an eight-hour period as it appeared in the *New York Times* on 12 July, 2006 (figure 1). After the image and its accompanying story were posted online, it was the most popular e-mailed article on the *Times's* website (<http://www.nytimes.com>). But what made the photograph so compelling? At least two interpretations suggest themselves.

First, the photograph might fascinate because it shows the ephemerality and hence unimportance of spatial movement. The traces left by our daily interactions appear in Kim's picture as mere wisps, no more than a thin and fleeting fog of motion set against the firm, clear, stable urban structures that dominate and frame the picture. The spatial movements are spectral, fleeting, and insubstantial. They stand in stark contrast to the fixed, durable, and material elements seen in the image: the implacability of the flags on Fifth Avenue, the stoplights, the street sign, the buildings, the lamp posts, even the scuff marks and potholes on the road surface. These implacabilities represent history, sediment, accumulated accomplishment, cultural residue. They are the facts of *place*.

Yet, this is only one way to read the photograph. A second is to see it illustrating the redundancy of place and the centrality of spatial movement. There is nothing notable as such about the intersection of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue or the material structures found there. What the photograph captures, transfixing the viewer, are the dynamic spatial flows of human activity. The importance of the intersection is as a whirligig of humanity, an intense axis of life and energy. There is motion without bodies. Whereas the ordinary shutter snap of a conventional photograph freezes human movement, Kim's freeze-frame smudges individual actions, turning them into the swoosh of spatial flows. Jack Kerouac once said, "There is nowhere to go but everywhere" (2003 [1957], page 26). And that is what we see in the photograph, the going everywhere.



Figure 1. [In color online, see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/d7707>] Atta Kim, *ON-AIR Project, 110-7 New York Series, Fifty-Seventh Street, eight-hour exposure* 2005. Atta Kim created this image with 8×10 inch slide film through an eight-hour exposure at the intersection of 5th Avenue and 57th Street. Even those indicators of spatial movement that are more solid—the red tail lights of cars passing down Fifth Avenue—are fuzzy and smudged. Courtesy by the artist. © 2009 Atta Kim.

This is what makes the photograph arresting: we see only what remains of ourselves after we have moved through the scene; that is, the traces of our *spatial relations*.

So, does Kim's photograph reveal place or space? Which concept is more appropriate for understanding this photograph? Or does the photograph show *both* place and space, disclosed together but distinct? Is that why the photograph is so evocative?

There is a vast literature on space and place, revealing the enormous variation in meaning associated with the two terms. In this paper we are not interested in the spectrum of definitions of space and place, but, instead, are concerned with how the distinction between the two is made, and how it operates in geographical thought.

In a useful review, John Agnew (2005) argues that three broad approaches to the space–place distinction are discernable in the English-language literature of the last forty years. In fact, we already used them in our discussion of Kim's photograph: (1) place trumps space; (2) space trumps place; and (3) the very distinction is superseded by instead “putting space and place together” (Agnew, 2005, page 89). As we discuss below, the last strategy is presently the most favored. It usually involves showing that space and place are not actually separate, but are mutually constituted, or dialectically related, or essentially relational, thereby deflating any supposed dualism.

While sympathetic to Agnew's scheme, our argument is different. We contend that geographers should neither take sides between space and place; nor try to dispense with the distinction as illusory. Space–place is integrally bound up with Western

thought, part of its very architecture, making it what it is. And, within this history, space and place derive their meanings in large part through their opposition to each other. Consequently, it is fruitless to take sides, to affirm space over place or vice versa. At the same time, the distinction between space and place cannot be overcome simply by showing them to be related or connected. Clearly, they are. But they are also distinct and separate. We cannot wish away this difference, drop it, or make an instant modification just because it is now our inclination. Instead, our strategy is to call into question *the effect of that distinction on our thought*. This is our task: to examine the entanglements and the consequences of space and place with other Western concepts and metaphysical distinctions. To do so is to explore, in Jacques Derrida's expression, the *différance* between space and place.

Our paper is divided into four sections. After this introduction, in section 2, we provide a brief, selective review of the literature of the last forty years on the space–place distinction following the three positions that Agnew identifies. We recognize the brevity of our literature review, but our intent is not to provide a comprehensive overview, which may be found elsewhere (eg Casey, 1997; Cresswell, 2004). Instead it is to make a larger argument about the three positions Agnew articulates. In section 3, we develop an alternative strategy by proposing to examine how the space–place distinction has played out at crucial junctures within Western metaphysics; that is, how that distinction is entangled with other metaphysical distinctions, in their play of *différance*. Our argument is that, given such entanglements, one cannot readily alter place–space in the ways that some geographers propose. In sections 4 and 5 we provide two specific illustrations of the entanglements of space–place: with nature and with economy. In both instances, we argue that space–place is reiterated and, in turn, restructured, by nature and economy. None of the terms exist on their own, separate, but they are entwined in complex and changing forms.

2 The space – place distinction

At a cocktail party at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s the spatial scientist John Hudson was asked what geographers did. He replied: “dots and lines” (interview, Hudson, Evanston, IL, November 1997). Places for him were dots, and spaces were the white areas enclosed by geometrically drawn black lines. The nongeographers at the party were nonplussed, just as most geographers would be today. In many ways the subsequent forty years of Anglo-American geography have been about revising Hudson's answer, redefining space and place and their relation.

The resulting literature around space and place is vast, so much that it may seem arrogant to suggest that there is anything new to say. But as we will argue, although theories of space and place in human geography have become more complicated, the progress has been more akin to shifting terrain in a trench war than a genuine advance. We propose a new approach, one that emphasizes the very implacability of the space–place distinction, using it productively to examine geography's core concepts. We begin by briefly reviewing the recent debate.

2.1 Place trumps space

Humanistic geographers of the 1970s, reacting precisely against the Hudson view, were unambiguous in their allegiance to the second half of the space–place distinction. Place was good; it meant humanism, and opposed to a cold, heartless science represented by spatial science, by “dots and lines”. Yi-Fu Tuan's work was especially important. As he wrote in 1977: “What begins as *undifferentiated space*, becomes *place* as we get to know it better and endow it with human value. ... *Place is pause*; each pause ... makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (1977, page 6, our italics). The pause allows

an infusion of humanistic values and sentiments, turning location from a set of abstract coordinates into a site brimming with universal sentient ideals. In this view, space provides the raw material for place, or, as Edward Relph writes, “space provides the *context* for places” (1976, page 8, emphasis added). But space remains inferior to place because the origin of meaning originates only with place: space “derives its meaning from particular places” (page 8). Relph goes so far as to claim that in those cases where space appears to have meaning, such as with sacred space, it is because they are disguised places. It is a game space can never win because under Relph’s definition meaningfulness is generated only in place.

2.2 Space trumps place

While place trumped space in humanistic geography, in early radical geography place was subordinated to space. However, this was *social* space, space constructed through social practices and structures. David Harvey’s studies of the creation of distinct spaces of capitalist economic circulation and accumulation were central (Harvey, 1982). In Harvey’s earlier work on the geography of accumulation, space clearly trumped place. Space was where the action occurred, and places were only staging posts for spatial transformation: “Familiar places and secure places ... are ... annihilated in the ‘whirligig of time’” (1985, page 28). Furthermore, places were not even places, but “structured coherences”, sites characterized by “a dominant technology of both production and consumption and a dominant set of class relations” (page 126). The very term ‘structured coherence’ stripped place of an experiential dimension, homogenizing it as a phenomenon. As Richard Walker (2001, page 171) says, structured coherence “comes with a curious diffidence towards the peculiarities of place”. Places were interchangeable, just so many dollops of capital and social class relations exuded from the more fundamental spatial circulations of capitalism.

By the mid-1990s Harvey moved to a more nuanced theory of place—formulated most explicitly in Harvey (1996). Places were now internally heterogeneous (1996, pages 313–316), potential sites of resistance to capital, producing ‘militant particularism’ (pages 19–45). Especially germane for our purposes is Harvey’s claim that place should be seen in a dialectical tension with space: “What goes on in a place cannot be understood outside of the space relations which support that place any more than the space relations can be understood independently of what goes on in particular places” (page 316). In this latter formulation, place appears on an equal footing with space, not subservient to it. But other language that Harvey also uses undercuts that dialectic, sustaining space’s dominance. Harvey uses the lexicon of ‘temporary permanences’ to explain the persistence of place. He writes:

“[T]he process of place formation is a process of carving out ‘permanences’ from the flow of processes creating spatio-temporality. But the ‘permanences’—no matter how solid they may seem—are not eternal but always subject to time as ‘perpetual perishing.’ They are contingent on processes of creation, sustenance and dissolution” (1996, page 261).

That phrase ‘perpetual perishing’ is key, implying in Harvey’s scheme that place continually disappears. In contrast, spatial change is constant, primary, resurgent, and following from space’s involvement in capital mobility. Place’s role, though, is secondary, beholden to the needs of the changing spaces of accumulation. Places are effects of the spatiality of capital circulation within which they are produced. Given the unequal weighting of space and place in Harvey’s scheme, the process seems less a dialectic than a mismatched fight. The final outcome is fixed, even if the number of rounds in the bout is not.

Another ostensibly dialectical approach to space and place, but which in the end also gives priority to space, is Andrew Merrifield's (1993) 'Lefebvrian reconciliation'. In this case, he asserts that the "the space of the whole... takes on meaning through place", while, in turn, the 'interconnection' of places "engenders the space of the whole" (page 520). Space, for Merrifield, means flows of capital—that is, Harvey's spaces of accumulation—and places are the sites at which capital stops moving, and becomes "thingified" (page 525). Such a conception, however, makes place the result of movements that have gone on in space. Place is only that site where spatial flows temporarily cease, the inflexion where movement slows down sufficiently to secrete fixed capital. Despite trying to treat place and space as a unity, it is only the space of capital flows that does the work, depositing or washing away places as capital courses.

Finally, more extreme than Harvey and Merrifield is Manuel Castells's (1996) work that postulates the complete annihilation of place by space. As bounded meaningful sites, places are "superseded by spaces characterised by velocity, heterogeneity and flow" (Hubbard, 2006, page 43). There is no longer even the dialectic of place and space, but only spatial flows.

2.3 Relational space and place: 'splace'

The third body of literature seeks to move beyond taking sides by erasing the very distinction between space and place and recasting the discussion in terms of *relationality*. There are links between relationality and a dialectical approach to space and place that Harvey and Merrifield aspire to. The common concern is in overcoming dualisms, denying essences, and explaining geographical patterns as a consequence of changing social relations. But there is also a difference. Those who pursue relationality—our exemplars are Doreen Massey and Marcus Doel—want to extirpate the very space–place divide by invoking a new vocabulary and conceptual frame. They want the end of space and place as we knew them.

Massey has worked with relationality since the early 1990s in her writings on "a global sense of place" (1991). On the one hand, she recognizes that places are open and porous, that they are shaped by outside space. On the other hand, she does not wish to repeat the arguments of Harvey and Merrifield by privileging the power of space that appears as "somewhere else... unlocated; nowhere" (2005, page 101). The problem is that space and place are given as two separate positions from the outset. But Massey asks, "what if we *refuse* that distinction... between place... and space?" (2005, page 6, our italics). Space and place are relational, the consequence of the "connectedness of things" (page 10). It is the connections that are fundamental. There is no clear division between space and place because both are cut from the same cloth of multiplicitous relations. Their difference is one of degree, not kind. As Massey (2005, page 68) explains:

"Space... [is] an emergent product of relations, including those relations which establish boundaries, and where 'place' in consequence is necessarily a *meeting* place, where the 'difference' of a place must be conceptualised more in the ineffable sense of the constant emergence of *uniqueness* out of (and within) the specific constellation of interrelations within which that place is set... and of what is made of that constellation. This latter is a specificity which... indicates the dubiousness of that duality—so popular and so persistent—between space and place."

Massey's core contribution here is to argue that places are made from the same kinds of relations that produce space. This is why Massey is dubious about the duality, why she does not subsume space to place or vice versa: she denies any essential difference between them. It also clarifies why she uses the expression, 'space/place', throughout her text (although it does not explain why she titles her book *For Space*).

Doel reaches similar conclusions. To express them he invents his own neologism: “One must also be incredulous about the polarization of place and space, which hinges on the glaciation of events in perpetual process. If it were not such an inelegant neologism, I would be tempted to say that there is nothing but *splace*, taking space—*splacing*. And there would be nothing negative about this: no possibility of a catastrophic or negatory displacement insofar as splacement would always already be disjoined, disadjusted, and unhinged; both space and place would be special—illusory?—effects of splacement’s inaugural duplicity” (Doel, 1999, page 9, emphasis in original).

For similar reasons to Massey, Doel thus proposes that we abandon the space–place distinction. Place like space is a process, “unfolded across a myriad of vectors” (page 7). They are events, “verbal rather than nounal, becoming rather than being”. And while “sedentary thought enforces a difference in kind” between space and place, “nomad thought affirms a mere difference of degree”. Space and place are one and the same: they are *splace*. However, in our view this is only a strategy for avoiding the problem.

3 Metaphysics, *différance*, and the space–place distinction

3.1 Edward Casey and the fate of place

Although we are sympathetic to the poststructural strategies of Doel and Massey, we depart from their positions. Our counterargument stems from the view that space and place are not so easily dismissed, compressed, or combined. Given the long history of these concepts and their centrality to Western thought, space and place cannot be made to disappear by coining neologisms, inelegant or not. Yet, we have already noted that it is meaningless to take sides between space and place. How then to proceed? Is there any other way to approach space and place?

We hope to clarify a new position in this debate. Our starting point is the recognition that we are bound by space and place and their opposition. The question is how to conceptualize that opposition. On this question, we argue that the space–place debate has more to gain from reconsidering Derrida’s now classical writings on *différance*. Confronting the history of philosophy, Derrida (1982a [1971], page 177) argues, requires “displacing the pairs of concepts which constitute philosophy”. Such a displacing is neither a disavowal, nor a refusal to engage: “Whoever alleges that philosophical discourse belongs to the closure of a language *must still proceed* within this language and *with the oppositions it furnishes*” (page 177, our italics). We argue that geographical discourse has furnished a set of oppositions around space and place that continues to produce real effects. These effects motivate the debates. Consider the following lists of terms affiliated with space and place (table 1). On the basis of this set of oppositions,

Table 1. The space–place distinction. Though admittedly limited and overly didactic, this table suggests common terms used to distinguish space and place. Derrida writes: “This derivative opposition (of *physis* to *tekhne* ...), is at work everywhere” (1982b [1971], page 220).

space	place
motion	pause
extension	community
position	history
totality	particularity
infinity	identity
exteriority	interiority
<i>physis</i>	<i>tekhne</i>

we may reaffirm an argument that Yi-Fu Tuan made long ago, that “‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition” (1977, page 6). They require each other because they are different in ways that shape how we think them. Rather than prioritizing place as Tuan did, we ask: what gives the space–place distinction its steadfastness and importance? And what have these oppositions meant for the limits of geographical thinking?

We contend that the distinction between space and place is neither transcultural nor transhistorical. In making this contention, however, we do not propose to elaborate its cultural dimension by anthropological methods. Nor do we wish merely to historicize the distinction. A philosophical history of space and place has been ably written by Edward Casey in his book *The Fate of Place* (1997), which seeks to “thrust the very idea of place...into the daylight of philosophical discourse” (page xi) and to show how place has been repressed to space in Western philosophy. Casey’s history of the space–place distinction redeems place from this fate by bringing place into the center of Western philosophy. In an astute exegesis, Casey traces the lines of thought on space and place for two millennia. Yet, for all its richness, in our view this project runs into difficulties.

Consider the central narrative of the book. The book is framed as an “intellectual history... of philosophical thinking about place” (page xi) and structured chronologically, with a narrative that moves from origin stories to Greek thought, the Enlightenment, to the present. It is a somber philosophical history of the ways that place has been slowly misplaced or lost (although Casey concludes by arguing that place has been partly recuperated in post-Kantian thought via the body). *The Fate of Place* is history that aims to change fate—to confront the loss of place by narrating the history of this repression. For Casey, “the question is, can we bring place out of hiding and expose it to renewed scrutiny?” (1997, page xv). He answers: “A good place to start is by a consideration of its own complex history” (page xv). Such an approach, it seems to us, inherently requires an analysis of the concept of historical narrative, since historicizing is here presented as the means to renew place. That is, we need to know how historical narration might allow us to change the trajectory of the subject of the narrative. This is all the more necessary because the very concepts of history and temporality are implicated in concepts of place and space and their distinction. The implications of this lacuna are neatly captured in Timothy Morton’s reading of Casey’s narrative:

“Casey’s *The Fate of place* tells of how place went from being a fully fledged philosophical concept, wholly different from space, to a non-thing, an empty or arbitrary demarcation, at most a subjective experience rather than a concrete entity. It started with the idea of infinity, promoted in medieval Neoplatonic thinking on the nature of God. The evacuation of place reached its apex in the idea of space as a system of mathematical points (Newton, Descartes, and Locke). The rise of commercial capitalism, with its necessary abstractions of time and space, and the development of technologies such as mapping, transformed objective place into a pie in the sky, at best a dream to which Romantic poetry could longingly aspire” (2007, pages 169–170).

It is the book’s profound sense of longing that piques Morton’s critique:

“It seems we have lost something. But what if the story were more complicated? What if we had not exactly *lost* something? ... What if... we couldn’t *lose* place because we never *had* it in the fi[r]st place? ... What if globalization... revealed that place was never very coherent *in the first place*? Notice the difference here between stating that place as such does not exist at all, and saying that its existence is not as an independent, definable object ‘over there’ somewhere” (page 190, emphasis in original).

In fairness to Casey, we should note that place is not treated in *The Fate of Place* as an “independent, definable object”. Yet, what Morton rightly identifies here is a tension in the tone of Casey’s argument—a tension that rends the text between historical–analytic description (what happens to space–place in the heads of different thinkers) and nostalgic longing (the fate of place ever to be forgotten). This ambivalent tone is met with a striking paradox. Place is supposed to be fundamental, even essential, to Western thought, and Casey finds it everywhere. Yet, it is forever getting lost or repressed. Consider the opening lines of the book:

“Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact?” (Casey, 1997, page ix)

“To be at all”—that is, being—implies “to be in ... place”. What then defines place? Place is where we “live... relate... die”. Thus, being is always em-placed; place is the stage of being. There is something tautological about these statements. Even if this is not an empty tautology, we cannot accept the idea that place is an essential, “primal fact”. We argue that geographers cannot adequately understand space and place on the basis of a *presupposition* of ‘primal’ categories. For us, Casey’s question, “How could it be otherwise?”, presumes too much fixity and universality. We argue, borrowing language from Derrida, that we would do better to conceptualize the space–place distinction and its effects within the “closure of metaphysics” (1973 [1967], pages 127–128), which we now elaborate.

3.2 Jacques Derrida and *différance*

“In the history of... the reflection on space, ... the discourse and the subject of discourse have always tended to be localized. Even when they moved toward the theme of nomadism, instability, delocalization, dislocation, they claimed to proceed from a site, from a fixed place, and always to maintain a mooring. They wanted to know where they came from and where they went ... Is the opposition between nomadic and sedentary still current? Is there place to refer to a place, to a unity of place, be it even this earth, from which to measure a determination or indetermination? How can this question become again or remain a political question?” (Derrida, 1994, page 21).

Casey concludes *The Fate of Place* with a chapter discussing Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray, grouping them together under the ‘urgent task’ of rethinking “space *as* place” (1997, page 309, our italics). But Derrida emphatically did *not* argue for thinking space *as* place (nor did the others, to our knowledge, but certainly not Derrida). Rather than emphasize the priority of place, or suggest that we favor one side of the place–space debate, Derrida’s approach to philosophical texts opens a way to reconsider the very distinction between space and place. This is to explore the play of *différance* between space and place—to examine the nonplaces and nonspaces in which their difference is derived and thought in our tradition.

Our turn to Derrida to reconceptualize space and place is best explained by his 1968 essay, *Différance* (admittedly complex and difficult to paraphrase) (1982c [1968]). Let us begin where Derrida explains the relation between Ferdinand de Saussure’s ‘differences in language’ and the more radical ‘*différance*’:

“[T]he signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. ... [E]very concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but is rather the possibility of a conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general” (1982c [1968], page 11).

We understand *différance* as a play of differences that sets apart, that ‘spaces’ (page 11), and distinguishes concepts such that they can become concepts. Think of the space–place distinction: however much we might argue that either space or place is preferable to the other for conceptualizing a particular geographical condition, the very purchase of *that* conceptualization is derived in part from its difference with the other. Space is meaningful as not-place, and vice versa.

Yet, *différance* is more than simply structured difference. If it were just that it would be no different from how difference was conceptualized by Saussure in his *Course on General Linguistics* (1983 [1916]), a text that Derrida discusses in *Différance* (1982c [1968] pages 5–12). Paraphrasing Saussure, Derrida writes, “in the *system* of language, there are only differences. Therefore a taxonomical operation can undertake the systematic, statistical, and classificatory inventory of a language” (page 11, emphasis in original). In other words, it may be possible to analyze rigorously the totality of differences between signs within a language, or concepts within a philosophical tradition, to produce an inventory of their structured relations. Yet, this is not Derrida’s aim. This is because:

“[O]n the one hand, these differences *play*: in language, in speech too, and in the exchange between language and speech. On the other hand, these differences are in themselves *effects*. They have not fallen from the sky fully formed, and are no more inscribed in the *topos noētos* than they are prescribed in the grey matter of the brain. If the word ‘history’ did not in and of itself convey the motif of a final repression of difference, one could say that only differences can be ‘historical’ from the outset in each of their aspects. ... What will be written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that ‘produces’—by means of something that is not simply an activity—these differences, these effects of difference. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences” (page 11, emphasis in original).

Note that Derrida is not saying that differences are inert structures, like architectural forms that we live within. Rather, they play, they change—and, yet, they persist. They are inherited as effects of difference, and they have effects.

But, on this basis, how may we rethink the distinction between space and place? (How) can we think space–place as effect of the play of *différance*? Although the remainder of the paper will be taken up with these two questions, it may be useful to offer here a direct, if provisional, answer. To rethink space–place as effect of play of *différance* implies bracketing the purported differences between space and place (such as we have summarized in table 1). By ‘bracketing’, we mean suspending the presumed truthfulness of the differences in order to ask how these oppositions are sustained, and to what effect. This is our provisional answer to the two questions posed about place, space, and the play of *différance*. We have no illusions that this is all there is to say, however. Quite the contrary. Still, we believe that it is enough to allow us to pose a related question that we take up in the remainder of the paper: how are we to examine the “playing movement that ‘produces’... effects of difference” (Derrida, 1982c [1968], page ii) in geographical thought? Indeed, it was this question that inspired our paper in the first place. Following Derrida, our sometimes hesitant and groping response was to explore fault lines where space and place move, become extruded.

In particular, on the one hand, we searched for concepts that *derive*⁽¹⁾ from the space–place distinction, meaning that they cannot be thought apart from these concepts; and, on the other hand, we sought concepts that help to sustain the distinction between space and place, their difference.

The remainder of this paper may be read as a report on these efforts. Our reading led us to focus on two important and troubling concepts: nature and economy.⁽²⁾ We settled on these concepts because in their play space and place become extruded; as we will show, each concept derives from the space–place distinction, and each sustains the distinction between space and place. That is, ‘nature’ and ‘economy’ *presuppose* and *produce* the effect of difference between space and place. By examining these exchanges, we better understand how geographical thought works.

Our approach may seem circular. After all, we are trying to examine an uneasy pair of geographical concepts (space and place) by positing their necessary interrelation (read circularity) in order to understand their closure and effects by analyzing a third term (nature, economy). But, to quote Derrida, it is “out of this circularity and uneasiness that we want only to raise some preliminary indications” (1973 [1967], page 109). In this case, they are “some preliminary indications” of the limitations in geographical thought.

4 Nature

“In order to have an *idea* of an environment, you need ideas of space (and place).”
Morton (2007, page 11, emphasis in original)

One of the more animated contemporary debates in human geography concerns the critique of the concept of nature. This critique has been called ‘political ecology’ by Bruno Latour (2004), ‘ecocritique’ by Morton, and ‘denaturalization’ by Castree (2005, chapter 3) (following Derrida). We may characterize these contributions as the critique of nature because, notwithstanding different philosophical commitments, each of these authors calls the purported naturalness of ‘nature’ into question. In *Politics of Nature*, Latour (2004, page 231) argues that we must abandon the concept of nature as an asocial, objective source of truth because it is nothing except “the result of a political division” that identifies nature with “what is objective and indisputable”, and collects all that is “subjective and disputable” under the guise of the *social*. The Enlightenment conception of nature, where nature is the external, real world, creates a political order with several important restrictions: nonhuman actors cannot speak, and only scientists and metaphysicians (in different ways) may speak for nature.

⁽¹⁾ In a series of texts, Derrida plays with the etymological joinings of ‘deriving’ (*dérivée*): to leave a bank, to drift, to derive (see Malabou and Derrida, 2004, pages 1–2 and *passim*).

⁽²⁾ It is beyond the scope of this paper to contend with time, though we recognize that this is a major limitation for our argument. Time is related to space and place fundamentally; their relation cannot be thought apart from their relation *in time*. If we attempt (and fail) to sidestep the issue of time, it is also because the debate in geography has tended to be defined by the relations between place/space and time alone. Thus, space is affiliated with a temporality that is infinite, divisible, ever present, the space in which the infinite flow of ‘nows’ streams by. By contrast, place is associated with memory, cyclical time, seasonality, birth, and death. Place is where time is *deposited*, where time collects. Tuan writes, for instance: “Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning” (1977, page 136).

This is an old argument. In his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel argues that space and time are bound in a dialectical relation; he writes of place as “the *union* of space and time”, or, “the *posited identity* of space and time” (1970 [1830], page 254, emphasis in original). For Hegel, space and time unfold dialectically; place is among their syntheses. Although this dialectic is conceptualized differently, Harvey and Merrifield reach two conclusions with Hegel: space is more fundamental than place; place is more ‘historical’. From these conclusions, we may derive the notion that places are lost by the ascendance of space.

In recent years a raft of research has been produced that demonstrates how social views or discourses of particular natures are made in ways that have definite effects (cf Braun, 2001; 2004; Castree, 2005; Kosek, 2006; Morton, 2007).⁽³⁾ Although the ‘social construction of nature’ school seems dominant at present, some geographers have asked whether its analytic usefulness has been as great as we hoped in the 1990s (see Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Demerit, 2002). For instance, one version of this argument holds that social practices shape our conceptions of nature, and yet the materiality of nature in turn shapes social relations in ways that help form these discourses. Such discussions only underscore that there has been a shift away from the view that nature is mere external materiality, accessible to us in some unmediated or prediscursive form.

It is not our aim to parse this debate here. Rather, our intention is to clarify how the concept of nature relies upon conceptions of space and place. In our view, the nature–society debate is wholly tied up with, and cannot be separated from, the matter of space and place. Conversely, space and place take their meaning, for us, in part through the way we conceptualize nature. In Morton’s words, space and place are implicated in the question of “how nature has become a transcendental principle” (2007, page 5). Let us explain.

The critique of nature is intended to upend the concept of nature as something that is simply *there*—inert, object-like, external to a knowing subject. This is implicitly a critique of René Descartes, for whom nature is all that is, defined as *res extensio*. For Descartes, the very nature of things was defined by corporeal substance, constituted by their spatial extension in three dimensions: “length, breadth, and depth” (Descartes, *Principia* 1, cited in Heidegger, 1996 [1927], page 401). Things *are* their spatial extension. Here, space is thought of *as* nature. Space is nature as a totality, a totality defined by the presence of matter (in all its forms) distributed through an infinite spatial field. The quality of naturalness is defined by spatial extension. The infinite opening of space is nature; natural objects are all in space. (Perhaps this is why Morton says, in the epigram, that to think nature you *need* space, and then says the same of place but parenthetically.) Of course, this set of ideas is not specific or exclusive to Descartes. In the *Encyclopedia*, where Hegel outlines his philosophy of nature, he defines space as “the abstract universality” of nature’s own “self-externality” (Hegel, 1970 [1830], ¶254). Space *is* nature itself. The concept of nature here equals ‘environment’, thought as the totality of space that surrounds us. Not only is the environment *in* space, but spatiality is the very condition of being environmental. A relation is asserted between the concept of nature as the totality of beings (‘environment’) and nature as ontological condition (the nature of things). Everything natural is as it is in space, which is nothing but the total extent of nature itself.

Just as the critique of nature challenges the notion that ‘facts of nature’ speak for themselves, so too does it implicitly question the view that nature is an infinite spatial field of objects that we encounter, measure, know, and represent. The critique of nature, insofar as it calls into question the notion that nature is experienced as the totality of things in space (a view Martin Heidegger characterizes as ‘merely ontic’ (1996 [1927])), also implies a critique of the concept of nature *as* spatial, the thought that space equals nature. In other words, a critique of nature is simultaneously a critique of a conception of space as the natural, infinite totality within which we exist.

⁽³⁾ Morton (2007) inspired a lecture on nature by Slovenian philosopher Žižek (2007). Žižek celebrates the argument—central to Morton’s book and also found in Latour’s *Politics of Nature* (2004)—that the biggest problem facing environmental politics is our very conception of nature. Our argument is that this concept of nature is buttressed by space and place. Reexamining space and place is therefore a necessary step for radical environmental thought.

Lest it seem that this approach to conceptualizing nature is timeless or transhistorical (and therefore simply true), we should remember that the oldest meaning of the word ‘nature’ is neither something environmental nor something spatial. It refers to *essence*. When Aristotle, for instance, defines ‘nature’ in the text we know of as *Metaphysics* (1952), he writes of six different, interrelated senses of ‘nature’:

“Nature means (1) the generation of ‘growing’ things. ... (2) It means also an inherent something out of which a thing begins to grow. (3) It means that in natural beings there inheres a source of their motion. Things are said to ‘grow’ when they increase because they are in contact with something that causes them to develop together with it or ... adherently. (4) Nature also means the primary material of which an artifact is made and which cannot in its raw state be transformed by its own power; ... (5) ‘nature’ means the primary being of natural beings. ... (6) Hence, by an extension of meaning any primary being whatever has come to be called a ‘nature’; because the nature of anything is in some sense its primary being” (1952, pages 91–93).

Note that these six senses refer to the first two meanings of our English word, ‘nature’, as summarized by Raymond Williams (1976): the *essence* of any thing, and an *inherent force*. Nature in the sense of ‘environment’ came much later. Because English has only one sign to refer to a set of such radically distinct and fundamental concepts, Williams concludes that nature is “perhaps the most complex word in the language” (page 184). Part of the challenge taken up by the critique of nature is to desediment these different elements and to understand the implications of their arbitrary cohabitation in one sign. We elaborate below, but, before we move on from Aristotle, let us emphasize that nature did not at his time refer to ‘space’ in the post-Enlightenment sense. Nature was that essence inherent in things that make them what they are, and also “the primary material of which an artifact is made” (Aristotle, 1952), a concept that lives on in the varying distinction nature–artifact (also natural–artificial, nature–art, nature–culture, and so on). To take one more recent illustration among many, consider Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lines from the introduction to his famous transcendentalist essay, “Nature”:

“*Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man [sic]: space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture” (no date [1836], page 8).

Insofar as Emerson defines nature as “essences unchanged by man”, he merely repeats Aristotle. And, yet, by Emerson’s time the first concrete ‘essence’ that Emerson gestures to as an illustration of nature in its concreteness is space.

We emphasize that Emerson, by contrasting nature with art in this way, repeats the classic distinction between *physis* and *tekhnē*, that which merely is in itself and that which is as a product of practical human activity (see table 1). But, after the Enlightenment, this very distinction became ‘geographical’ in a different way than it was for the Greeks. Nature became *spatial* as the totality of all that there is: the universe, that limitless container that simply *is*, Emerson’s “essences unchanged by man: space”.

Yet, nature can also be thought entirely otherwise, as place. Here, nature is not conceived as the cosmos, but, rather, as a particular site or region that is characterized as being a natural place. Conceptualized in this way, nature is often treated as a place that surrounds us somewhere as a *particular socialized environment*. This may be seen intuitively in the way that we imagine ‘going to nature’. Although (understood as space) nature is everywhere, we speak of going outside to be in nature. And one does not find nature just *anywhere*: we imagine going to a forest, a lake, or some other ‘natural place’. What defines a place as such is, in part, its very environmentality: its setting,

surroundings, and particular qualities (view, climate, vegetation, and so on). It is so difficult to separate our conception of nature from this equation of ‘place’ and ‘environment’ that these terms are often treated as synonyms.

Many geographers and political ecologists have examined the ways that conceptions of place and nature are intertwined, or how environmental struggles reflect or change particular places (eg Berthold-Bond, 2000; Davis, 2005; M’Gonigle and Starke, 2006; Smith, 2001; Tuan, 1974). Reviewing this literature in the mid-1990s, Harvey concluded that “it is almost impossible to consider environmental issues without ... confronting the idea of place” (1996, page 303).⁽⁴⁾ Harvey elaborates:

“Place is the preferred terrain of much environmental politics. Some of the fiercest movements of opposition to the political economy of capitalistic place construction are waged over the issue of the preservation or upsetting of valued environmental qualities in particular places” (page 303).

This place-affirming tendency often combines a critique of the concept of nature as space (totalizing and dehumanizing) with a critique of the narrative of globalization (which erases difference and the distinctiveness of places).⁽⁵⁾ For many, the alternative—politically and theoretically—is to see in the particularity of place a way to confront both the hegemony of capitalist globalization and the Enlightenment conception of nature. For instance, in a programmatic statement for a ‘political ecology of difference’ framework, Arturo Escobar (2006) calls upon us to affirm the politics of place in subaltern communities:

“The aim of the framework is to demystify theory that ignores subaltern experiences and knowledge of the local economy, environment, and culture in order to relocate their politics of place as key to our understanding of globalization. Many subaltern struggles can be seen today in terms of place-based yet transnationalized strategies—or, more succinctly, as forms of place-based globalism” (page 11).

Yet, an approach to nature that privileges place faces at least two potential problems. First, as Harvey and others have demonstrated, the concept of place seems often to contribute to atavistic nostalgia and essentialist notions of identity (1996, pages 302–326). It is not for nothing that conservative ideologies often attempt to root their theories of identity in the metaphysical attachments between race qua ‘blood’ and nature qua ‘soil’. And, second, in this conception of place, the notion of nature as a totality of things-in-space is often ironically preserved (see Doel, 1999). For instance, Escobar’s political ecology framework asks us to interpret disparate political struggles as “place-based globalism”, which seems to presuppose in advance an overarching *global* project (see Escobar, 2008, page 67). We are back to thinking of place as perpetually perishing within an endless expanse of space—unless place is defended by subaltern groups.

How, then, may we conceptualize nature vis-à-vis space and place? Is there a way to avoid the dehumanizing conception of nature as limitless space and also the potentially essentialist, localist treatment of nature as place? One strategy involves affirming

⁽⁴⁾ Although ‘natural spaces’ are thematized as particular environments—as specific places with names and boundaries—this is not to presume that the work of defining environmental places within ‘nature’ always goes well. Think of the sea, that open space, which humanity works everywhere to define and name by discerning between particular waters. Perhaps no other biome is subjected to as much effort to produce the distinctiveness of place.

⁽⁵⁾ The conception of nature as place is often related to the body, since it is the experience of the human body surrounded by a particular environment that constitutes place (see Harvey, 1996, page 303). Thus, many who have criticized the concept of nature for its alienating or essentialist conception of the human body have turned to conceptualize nature via place.

place in a counterintuitive way: by experiencing it as an event space—which is to say, finding place where it is not. In his critique of nostalgic representations of the interior of British Columbia, Bruce Braun writes in this vein:

“The ‘outside’ of place is always already ‘inside’. It is there in the tools and the nails, in the movement of capital and commodities, in the dreams of distant actors, in the folding of time and space. It can be no other way. Places *take place*, they *happen*, they cannot exist apart from the flows that constitute them, that call them into existence” (2001, page 20, italics in original).

Braun’s specific impetus for these claims is to spark a new conception of British Columbia—typically represented as a region of rugged nature and rugged capitalism—that does not consign the essence of particular places to an ever-receding, nostalgic past. Such an approach not only brackets the question of the essence of place *temporally*—by suggesting that the history of place erupts in the present—but also demands that we reconceptualize ‘place’ as an event that happens. In other words, Braun argues that the distinctiveness of the interior of British Columbia is not essentially *of* that place, but is constituted elsewhere. The distinctiveness of place turns out to be not really *there*. This is a call to rethink the nature of place so that we can reconceptualize nature. Perhaps Braun is right that there “can be no other way” to understand place and nature. We are not so sure. But, no doubt, thinking this way is both promising and difficult, since it moves against the tide of our inherited conception of nature, space, and place.

This leads to our conclusion: the fact that the critique of nature cannot hide from its imbrications with space and place may seem like a trap, as if environmental politics were hostage to a philosophical debate. Yet, this condition may hold a clue to find stronger ways of rethinking nature. It suggests that we have inherited a particular and peculiar tradition of understanding nature—*what* it is, *where* it is—which invariably involves space and place. While both space and place constitute nature, they do so in radically different respects. Nature is at once infinite and totalizing (as space) yet everywhere infinitely particular and differentiated (as place). As nature in this dual respect, space and place are articulated, joined in difference, and frame our experience of nature and existence.

5 Economy

“[T]he economy was *made*. The economy was an artifact and, like all things artifactual, was made out of processes that were as much ‘material’ as they were ‘cultural,’ and they were as ‘real’ as they were ‘abstract.’”

Timothy Mitchell (2002, page 82, emphasis in original)

As with nature, a fracture line runs through the concept of economy. It is there right from the beginning in Ancient Greece as a divide between the household economy (*oikos*) linked to place, and commercial trade (*kapēlikē*) linked to space. And it continues through to the present in discussions within economic geography, and elsewhere, as a debate between the local and the global, between a cultural economic geography and an economic economic geography. How the economy is conceived and represented, like nature, is inextricably bound up with the space–place distinction.

The word ‘economy’ comes from *oikonomos*, ‘one who manages a household’, derived from *oikos*, ‘house’, and *nemein*, ‘to manage’. The *oikos* was the basic unit in which economic activities were practiced, administered, and arranged. As Aristotle conceived *oikos*, it was as an estate composed of an extended family, including slaves, and committed to the production of sufficient goods for community sustenance. Ian Morris (2002), for example, suggests that in Ancient Athens at least 80% of output was

consumed by the primary producers—that is, within the *oikos*. As a result, there was no economic division between the polis and its agricultural hinterland, no bifurcated exchange system between town and country. Rather, “the *polis* lived off the produce of its hinterland and its citizens fed themselves and their slaves largely off the output of their own lands” (Schoenberger, 2008, page 669).

The physical site of the *oikos*, “the household with its tangible environment”—that is, the *place* of the economy—was fundamental (Polanyi, 1957, page 72). To use Karl Polanyi’s (1957) term from his essay “Aristotle discovers the economy”, economic practices found in that place were *embedded* in the noneconomic institutions of Ancient Greek society turning on “kinship, marriage, age groups, secret societies, totemic associations, and public solemnities” (page 70). Consequently, there was no distinct object called the ‘economy’. As Polanyi says, “the term ‘economic life’ would here have no obvious meaning” (page 70). Rather, economy was inseparable from the social institutions, technology, and ecology of the *oikos*—that is, its place.

But changes were afoot. The first birth pangs of a different economy defined by a market were witnessed by Aristotle, explaining Polanyi’s essay title.⁽⁶⁾ The market did not originate in the household economy, and its places, but in commerce and the associated spaces into which early states like Athens attempted to expand imperially. In a recent paper, Erica Schoenberger (2008) suggests that the first signs of a market economy were driven by military quest for empire in the 5th century BCE in ancient Greece. Before that time, military campaigns were restrictive, sometimes involving only a single battle, with individual combatants having to outfit and sustain themselves using their own resources. By the later half of the 5th century BCE, this was changing, with city states such as Athens amassing a standing army, as well as a navy of 200 vessels. Both were for large-scale military campaigns for the acquisition of imperial space. In the process, money was introduced and markets created: for the construction and maintenance of the ships, for military provisions (there were 40 000 slave rowers to feed and keep, for example), and for labor as paid militia.

There was not only a market created at home, but a market abroad to sustain the military in foreign spaces, outside the *oikos*, outside place. Sending an army on a campaign required considerable upkeep. Pillage and plunder only got you so far. To keep a standing army standing it was necessary to persuade the occupied peoples to provide it with surplus product over and above their own needs of sustenance. Money, the market, and the threat of force provided the means of persuasion. Imperial Rome, the second of Schoenberger’s examples (like Athens but more so), during its period of power variously occupied almost all the world’s known spaces. In this case, it was much easier to bring money from Rome to create markets for generating provisions than to bring the provisions themselves. As Schoenberger writes, “the state-building tasks of territorial conquest and control ... [required] markets ... to facilitate

⁽⁶⁾ We are making a distinction between an economy without a market, which in the Ancient Greece case is the *oikos* of household-own subsistence, and an economy with a market, in which producers sell their products rather than consuming them, and which is bound up with trade, prices, and money. This distinction was at the center of the *oikos* controversy during late-19th-century Germany, and extended into the 20th century partly influencing Polanyi. It is also linked to the *Methodenstreit* pitting the pioneering neoclassical Austrian economist Carl Menger against the historical institutional economist Gustav Schmoller (see Nafissi, 2005; and the commentary by Hindess, 2007). The details of the controversy are complex (although summarized brilliantly by Moses Nafissi 2005, chapter 1), and turn on whether the *oikos* economy was a ‘primitive’ stage with its own autonomous rules, or whether it was already ‘modern’, containing a version of the market. Nafissi (2005, part 3) argues that Polanyi accepted a version of ‘primitivism’ although there was historical evidence to support the modernist contention which Polanyi may well have deliberately ignored.

the mobilization of resources and their management across space and time” (2008, page 663).

For Polanyi and Schoenberger, Ancient Greece and Imperial Rome remained embedded economies, predominantly defined by place-based household (the *oikos* in Greece, the landed estate in Rome). But even here there were tentative signs of something different emerging: a separate economy defined by the market, money, and operation in space. For Polanyi this was the importance of Aristotle—he provided “an eye witness account of some of the pristine features of incipient market trading at its very first appearance in the history of civilization” (1957, page 67). For it is while Aristotle is living in Athens, observing, analyzing, recording, that this alternative form of the economy begins to make an appearance.⁽⁷⁾ There is the earlier one centered on household practices, embedded in specific local social institutions, and defined in place. But now there is a second, still embryonic, but already different. It is focused on money, on exchange for its own sake, and connected to the state’s spatial ambitions. Indeed, this form of economy helps to realize those very ambitions of spatial enlargement.

Polanyi and Schoenberger do not stop with antiquity, but are concerned to understand how the story unfolds. For Polanyi (1968; 2001 [1944], chapter 7), the market dramatically and determinately shrugs off society during the 19th century, becoming autonomous and self-regulating. The economy is now separate, untethered to society or place. Hand-in-hand with the emergence of this separate economy, suggests Polanyi (1968, pages 126–138), is the rise of a separate abstract discourse of economics (Tribe, 1978). The latter starts with Adam Smith, moves through the classical economists and reaches its zenith with late-19th-century neoclassicism, which assumes the existence of an independent universal economy. The market—which Polanyi calls ‘self-regulating’ because it operates according to its own logic of accumulation and expansion—knows no geographical constraints, but exists anywhere and everywhere *across space*. Its end is the homogeneity of global commodity relations: “One Big Market” in Polanyi’s words (1968, page 31).

The 19th-century discourse of the discipline of economics, which produced a disembedded market, also seeped into the emerging institutional incarnation of geography as an academic subject. A version of the self-regulating market is literally mapped in the first formal economic geographical texts at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in George Chisholm’s (1889) *Handbook of Geography* and in Joseph Russell Smith’s (1913) *Industrial and Commercial Geography* (see Barnes, 2001). The economy is portrayed in those works as global, with the market percolating into the four corners of the world like globalization *avant la lettre*. The market is everywhere, in every cranny of international space. And, where goes the market, so goes the material means of its facilitation, receiving especial attention by the early economic geographers as maps of steamship lines, railway networks, systems of canals, and telegraph cable routes, and as sepia photographs of boats in dry docks, of parcel post shipments, and of overburdened Shetland ponies.

The larger point is that the disembedded version of the market becomes joined with the first half of the space–place distinction. The disembedded form of the market cannot be conceived without treating the world as pure economic space. Space and economy form a knot of metaphysical entanglement.

⁽⁷⁾ Aristotle in the introductory chapter of his *Politics* makes the distinction between householding proper and moneymaking. Moneymaking is the new game in town; it is the market and space. Aristotle was against this new form, believing it would destroy the *oikos*. Polanyi (1968, page 17) calls Aristotle’s recognition “the most prophetic pointer ever made in the realm of the social sciences”.

But the economy cannot be only space, only market. Place figures too. Until Aristotle, according to Polanyi, there was only place, only oikos. But from the 19th-century place was seemingly eclipsed as the world moved to the “One Big Market” in space. But, as Polanyi (2001) [1944] argued in *The Great Transformation*, the self-regulating market and its spaces are in the end not sustainable. Society and forms of regulation need to be brought back in. There needs to be embedding. There needs to be place. Writing in the early 1940s Polanyi thought that reembedding was finally occurring albeit in both good and bad political forms: in Hitler’s fascist Germany; in Stalin’s communist Soviet Union; in Roosevelt’s New Deal America. Each of these cases, he thought, represented a correction to the 19th-century self-regulating market.

In this light, Polanyi (1968, page 37) speaks of “a double movement”. On the one hand, there was a momentous release generated by 19th-century self-regulating markets producing effects “all over the face of the globe”. On the other hand, the resulting “chaos”, “dislocation”, and “annihilation” required “protective countermoves” (Polanyi, 1968, pages 36–37). Society needed to “protect itself against the perils inherent in a self-regulating market system” (page 37). The countermove meant asserting a different kind of economy, the economy as social regulation, as embedded, and in place. Those embedded forms could be pernicious like National Socialism in Nazi Germany, but the movement towards embeddedness could not be thwarted. The 19th-century self-regulating market was ‘unnatural’, and could not endure—and indeed, did not.⁽⁸⁾

So, Polanyi’s argument is that unadulterated market expansion in space cannot be maintained; it leads to a counterpunctual social regulation in place. Interestingly, it is the recording and analysis of the counterpunctual social regulation in place that dominates contemporary economic geography, at least ever since publication of Massey’s (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour*.⁽⁹⁾ It was pursued subsequently in Michael Storper and Allen Scott’s (1989) “politics of place”, in locality studies (Cooke, 1989), in the rediscovery of industrial districts, in technopoles and high-tech milieus, and in regulation theory (Tickell and Peck, 1992). In all of these works, there is the assertion that the economy is not just spaced but placed. Place is not merely local background color; it is part of the economy’s woof and weave.

It is an argument to which Schoenberger in other of her writings has contributed—particularly, those on the culture of large multinational corporations (MNCs) (1997). On the surface, such firms appear as the very embodiment of expansionary market spaces operating across the face of the globe (Polanyi’s epitome of the self-regulating “One Big Market”). But Schoenberger argues that MNCs are also about place. The upper echelons of managers who operate them are people with lives and experiences embedded in particular locales. By extension, the behemoth firms they direct come to personify that same geography; they are placed. And that place shapes how global corporations subsequently operate in global spaces.

It should be clear that the space–place distinction has governed the thought of economy and our way of speaking about it from Ancient Greece onwards. The economy is utterly entangled with space–place. As a distinction, it helps constitute the economy, inflecting it in various forms, making it possible to be grasped, and producing particular effects.

⁽⁸⁾ It is tempting to apply the same analysis to neoliberalism, which according to Polanyi’s argument should not endure either (and as of December 2008 appears to have collapsed). The social bites back.

⁽⁹⁾ Massey’s (1984) book represented a watershed in the recent history of Anglo-American economic geography by its assertion of the importance of place. Further, it was a reaction precisely to the then disciplinary dominance of space as found either in spatial science (Hudson’s ‘dots and lines’) or in Marxism (Harvey’s spaces of accumulation).

While there is no point in taking sides or trying to displace the distinction, following Derrida there is an obligation to comment on *différance*, to attempt to loosen it up, while at the same time realizing the difficulty, if not impossibility, of doing so. In part, that was what the protracted oikos controversy (see footnote 6) was about, and why, as Barry Hindess (2007) puts it, “the battle of the ancient economy” still matters. The debate was not just about classical scholarship (although it was also about that), but about trying to think through creatively conceptual distinctions, such as the market and nonmarket, so as to imagine different and maybe better worlds.

In this vein, and within contemporary scholarship, Mitchell’s (2002; 2005a; 2005b; 2007a; 2007b; 2008) writings on economy and geography are exemplary. His rich body of work draws on detailed knowledge of the Egyptian economy from the 19th century (2002), and, more recently, on contemporary Peru and its land retitling projects (2005b; 2007b). Mitchell’s research shows literally how lines are drawn in space between economy and noneconomy, market and nonmarket. For Mitchell, the discipline of economics is performative. Its “strength lies not in [its] representation of an external reality but in the usefulness for organizing socio-technical practices, such as markets” (2007b, page 245). Mitchell provides detailed studies of spaces where the distinction between economy and noneconomy is inscribed. In Peru, for example, the division between the economic and the noneconomic was made manifest on the land by a set of economic practices prescribed by the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto. Those practices ensured, “contracts were made, ... field work was undertaken, goals were established, political alliances were formed, elections were won, [and] technologies were put in place to survey properties and record their ownership” (Mitchell, 2005b, page 309). Consequently, a new “broad terrain” of a market economy was created along with “new moral claims, arguments about justice, and forms of entitlement” (2007b, page 247). It is precisely those moments that are ripe for unsettling. The distinction between economy and noneconomy, market and nonmarket, may remain, but its loosening up, an awareness of its *différance*, might, for Mitchell, provide also the hope of quite different conceptions of morality, justice, and entitlement.

6 Conclusion

We argued that the distinction between space and place is ensnared with other concepts, including nature and economy. It follows that space and place, or, more precisely, their *différance*, cannot be understood except by disentangling other Western metaphysics that lie outside the immediate space–place distinction. Putting it in these terms shows both the tenuousness of embracing or celebrating only one half of the space–place distinction, as well as the impossibility of eradicating the distinction by recasting the two terms ‘relationally’. If our argument is right, each of Agnew’s three main approaches to space and place is fruitless.

The implication is not intellectual paralysis, however. Instead, it is a particular reopening of the question of space, place, and geographical thought. For, although we necessarily work within an inherited language and its oppositions, we can still read texts to clarify our thinking and to loosen geographical concepts from their seeming entrenched itineraries. In Derrida’s terms, we may do justice to the *différance* of space and place.

Uppermost in this reopening is the ethical responsibility to take into account oppositions and their effects, which attendance to *différance* reveals. Space and place have no essential truth to tell, but nonetheless produce powerful effects, framing geographical thought. Perhaps it is their distinction that produces the difficulty in thinking about socionatural relations which fall outside the *physis*–*tekhnē* bifurcation that

frames our conception of nature and society. Or again, perhaps their distinction causes the intellectual division of labor around investigating the economy, with economics charged with space and nation, and economic geographers charged with place and locale. We cannot say.

But we can say we need strategies for approaching space and place that are analytically capable of allowing us to rethink concepts such as nature and economy. Geographers on all sides have been calling concepts of nature and economy into question. But those concepts are entangled with ideas of space and place. Consequently, different notions of nature and economy will require a conception of place–space amenable to radical critique. To this end, we argue, the taking sides, relationality, and ‘splace’ will not do.

Clearly, our paper has not resolved these problems, which require further thought. Such thought is not directed towards replacing one set of oppositions with another. It is more complicated. Derrida demands that ethically we think at the limits of what is possible, to recognize the limits of our thought, not in order to wallow in our ignorance, but to remain open to what we cannot think otherwise.

This ethical impossibility even pertains to the corner of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue, New York City, or at least to Kim’s representation of it. We necessarily bring to bear on his image the *différance* of space and place. We have no choice. It is what we have. But, in seeing within the frame provided by the space–place distinction, we nevertheless experience something of the play of *différance*—that is, of other ways of conceptualizing space and place that are unnamable *as* space or place, or even ‘splace’. Perhaps this is what explains what is so striking about Kim’s image, what makes it so powerful. We sense in it a creative loosening of space and place.

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