

Pass it On – The Path is the Goal

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Abstract

Our history is infused with human movement – a phenomenon that has given rise to an imperative relationship between the subject, the environment, and the journeys that unfold while moving. Passing through space is therefore one of the oldest and most practiced forms of human movement. One of our great challenges, however, is the communication and documentation of that experience. This article explores the unfolding of place through the act of mapping by employing storytelling as a means of recording our movements.

Keywords: Narrative, Place, Journey, Mapping, Storytelling

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Passing through space is one of the oldest and most practiced forms of human movement. First, movement was necessitated by our need to find food and shelter. Over time, as societies became more and more specialized, our passage through space took on a different meaning – a meaning that enabled mankind to inhabit the world. Our history is, therefore, infused with human movement – a phenomena that has given rise to an imperative relationship between the subject, the environment, and the journeys that unfold through space.

One of our great challenges, however, is the communication and documentation of that experience. Some of the first recordings can be traced to the indigenous populations of Australia. They created an intricate network of song itineraries that were used to retrace territories. Each song-line was attributed to a particular territory that together formed a complex system of symbolic pathways in which distinctive markers in the landscape were considered as orientation points to construct a mental map of a place. This form of recording demanded the physical presence of a human as he or she traced and modified the story associated with a landscape

while walking through it. As the path revealed itself, perceived fragments formed a chain of shifting impressions – an activity that can be considered an act of perception and creation as the subject was simultaneously physically walking and mentally mapping the environment. It is from this vantage point that the subject interpreted, memorized, and mapped the constant becoming of place as the recoding resembles a sequence of spatial operations through which individuals forever establish the possibility to perceive and map their environment. Crossing space to the indigenous people of Australia, meant to experience over and over again the myths and legends associated with a song that was linked to a specific geographic territory without – however – leaving any visible traces or signs. It was the present, the here and now, that set the itinerary by which a journey took place – the place in which to celebrate the everyday ritual of never ending discovery.

Against this background, the indigenous people of Australia converted each moment of a journey into an absolute local zone. They responded fully to the landscape and became one with it – a notion which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explored in

'A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia'.¹ In their disquisition on Smooth and Striated Spaces, the authors make reference to two different types of space.² Whereas in striated space the path is predetermined, in smooth space the path exists as something evolving and abstract with neither outlines nor borders. In this space, the points do not determine the course of a passageway, but the (third) element lying in between gives rise to the path. Although in this space the points serve to define the course of a path, inasmuch as every movement is accomplished from one point to the next one, in smooth space "every point is a relay and exists only as a relay [...] along a trajectory"³ – a procedure by which the subject opens itself constantly to its surrounding. It merges with it. Engaging in smooth space is "at once body based and landscape oriented."⁴

Consequently, being on such a path constitutes "an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction."⁵ It is truly an abstract path – a path which one certainly wanders along and wonders about. Recording from that point of view reflects a fluid space that resembles temporary links rather than defined routes.

A similar documentation can be found in the Bedolina Map – a petroglyph engraved on a stone in the Val Camonica region in northern Italy, dating from circa 1500 B.C.⁶ This petroglyph outlines a

network of points and connections of a Paleolithic village that describe scenes of activity and circuitous pathways, linking to enclosures, fields and livestock.⁷ In many ways, the Bedolina carvings differ in methods of mapping from the documentation of the indigenous people of Australia. Although the song-lines construct place through mental association, drawn out of the succession of changing perceptions animated through the act of walking, the Bedolina petroglyph represents a frozen image of a place. Even though the petroglyph outlines a dynamic network of points and connections, it also presents a multidirectional space of natural chaos that has been transformed into a space that distinguishes between settled and unsettled territory. Within this scenario, the notion of place is equivalent to a fixed location, like that of sedentary dwellers described by Deleuze and Guattari. As illustrated by the Bedolina carvings, striated space is always linked to a static place, marked by enclosures and pathways. From this angle, the petroglyph acts like a geographical map, while the song-lines can be understood as an open *log* or *song book* containing the stories of mythical tales that have been ascribed to a particular landscape. In this regard, it is through the act of perceiving while walking that these tales were simultaneously retraced and updated – a type of ritual that is still practiced in some cultures today. This tradition of song explicating place obviously stands in contrast to the Bedolina carvings, which were engraved onto a surface as a co-mixture of symbols and pictures to document everyday life over an extended but limited period of time. This form of documentation certainly marks a first step towards the disengagement between the subject and the environment because the storyteller was no longer required to be present.

As time passed on, this process of separation became more and more apparent. In classical and medieval times, for example, place would come alive through the use of an image (map) and by metaphoric association. Mapping in this regard was considered an instrument of thinking. Through a process of mental association, they fostered the recording of ideas, words, and passages of text. Rather than geographical documents as we know them today, maps were regarded as synoptic volumes of knowledge

¹ Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minnesota 1987, 474.

² The model of smooth and striated space originally comes from the discipline of music and was developed by the composer Pierre Boulez. He contrasts *striated* musical forms which are ordered and fixed with *smooth* forms which allow irregularity. Deleuze and Guattari bring this conceptual pair into relation to space. Striated space embodies closed, thoroughly structured space. This space is characterized by static relationships which contain both the singular and the fundamentally constant within themselves. Therefore, it represents the existence of a settled identity (e.g. of the state apparatus, which guarantees order and stability in a regulated structure). It is always linked to a specific site which is incised between walls, enclosures, and paths. The smooth space, on the other hand, is the space with the least deviation. It is to be considered as a field which contains no *channels and conduits*, which is not to be defined centrally, metrically, or even by means of Euclidian geometry.

³ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁴ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*, Berkley 1997, 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 497f.

⁶ Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place, Landscape, Painting & Maps*, Minneapolis 2002, 133.

⁷ Clarence M. Bicknell, *A Guide to Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps, Bordighera* 1913.



that constituted the storage of information. Each map could therefore be considered in the sense of the *armaria* – the enclosed cupboards of ancient libraries – containing information that would come alive through mnemonic ritual by using the image on the map as a metaphoric association to recall the names of people and places. That means, by memorization and mental association, the observer would use the image represented on the map to recall and build a mental picture of the geographic places he or she was referencing – a virtual voyage through different loci, rather than a journey through real places. Consequently, cartographers were less concerned with the identification of a real place and more interested in mastering the specific narrative powers that enabled the viewers to link themselves to a particular place. Unlike the indigenous people of Australia who created mental maps by direct association with a particular landscape, individuals in the Middle Ages used the image on the map as a cultural projection of a specific site. In this, it is the image of a landscape, rather than the landscape itself that triggers the creation of place.

Beginning with the Enlightenment, the ritual of recording and reciting the very story of a place was replaced by the representation of an existing geographic site. Consequently, attention shifted more towards a real place, as the objective of mapping was to produce a scientifically correct model of a territory. This change was based on the assumptions that a given place needed to be expressed in systematic and mathematical terms as the application of precise instrumentation and measurement was the only route to a cartographic truth. Place, originally perceived as a vehicle and source of symbolic meaning, transformed into a quantifiable, measured, and delineated (mapped) territory, as we understand it today. Consequently, while these new procedures of constructing maps adapted to scientific practice of precise measurements, the role of the mapmaker transformed accordingly, and maps, not unlike the carvings of the Bedolina petroglyph, enjoyed an existence independent of the author.

At the same time, as cartographers treated place as a homogenous entity and understood mapping as a quantitative and analytical survey based on factual and rational observations, the viewer's active involvement in narrating the history and qualities of a particular place became an outdated ritual as well – separating the subject from place altogether. By the

end of the eighteenth century, reason finally succeeded over myth; idiosyncrasies and emotionality became marginalized matter, and the subject was considered as totally separate from the surrounding environment. This transformed the subject into a homogenized and rational entity – a state of inertia we have been unable to overcome. From that moment on, to recite Kathleen Kirby's graphically vivid portrait, the subject, was rendered as a closed circle with smooth contours to ensure it's clear division from its location, while the environment was perceived as a vacuum in which objects appeared in their own bubbles, self contained and largely irrelevant to the self-sufficient and rationalized subject.⁸

However, we are born in interaction out of patterns of interactions.⁹ We consequently need to see ourselves not separated from the world we live in. To concur with John A. Schumacher: there is no real separation of “body and world, self and other; they are always together and ‘are’ only when they are together.”¹⁰ That means, particular to this body, to this life, our very body is the source and mediator through which one absorbs the environment – a notion explored also by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The body, he writes in ‘Phenomenology of Perception’¹¹ is “a mass of tactile, labyrinthine and kinaesthetic data [...] which is needed to perceive a given spectacle.”¹² In this process, to restate Deleuze and Guattari, human beings experience the surrounding environment without any immediate distance or contour. Yet, there is an extraordinarily fine topology upon which they rely, “like sets of relations (wind, undulations of snow or sand, the song of the sand or the cracking ice, the tactile qualities of both.”¹³ The subject is therefore considered to be a “mosaic of given sensation”¹⁴ in which the body is inundated with a continuous stream of various visual fields, different sounds, smells, and tactile stimulations.

⁸ Kathleen M. Kirby, *Cartographic Vision and the Limits of Politics*, in: Nancy Duncan (Ed.), *Bodyspace*, ed., London 1996, 45.

⁹ Nigel Thrift, *I Just Don't Know What Got into Me: Where is the Subject?*, in: *Subjectivity* 22. 2008, 82-89.

¹⁰ John A. Schumacher, *On Human Posture - The Nature of Inquiry*, Albany 1989, 6.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London 1962, see chapter ‘Space’.

¹² *Ibid.*, 290-293.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari, *Minnesota* (see note 1), 668.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *London* (see note 10), 249.



Within this, directions are always seen, heard, and felt. In other words, even though the subjects are “on the high sea or in the windswept desert, one listens to directions,”¹⁵ and one feels them as much as one sees them. It is the space of immediate “contact, of small tactile or manual actions,”¹⁶ This means, life can only be experienced through the use of one’s own individual body as it is the body that affirms, interprets, and evaluates.¹⁷ To concur with Friedrich Nietzsche: the body is therefore the source and the interpreter that senses, feels, and evaluates environment.¹⁸ What remains for the subject then is to open itself and to respond to the locally occurring signs and symbols. Not unlike the rituals of the indigenous people of Australia, individuals establish continually new possibilities of perceiving their environment, since by taking short cuts, selecting deviations, or improvising itineraries, each individual then “privilege[s], transform[s], or abandon[s] spatial elements.”¹⁹ In this, perceived impressions form a sequence of mental constructions through which individuals establish the possibility to perceive and simultaneously map their environment. That means, through direct association with a particular landscape, the individual uses his or her impressions to construct a mental map of a place, analogous to the song-lines of the indigenous people of Australia.

At the same time as a subject constructs a mental map of a place, it also creates a new story line – a story that has never been told before. Together, these narratives then form a complex system of our everyday lives. They cannot be traced, monitored or controlled by others, like by an institution or a governmental apparatus – a notion that was also pursued by Jean François Lyotard. In ‘The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge’²⁰ Lyotard differentiates between the *grand narratives* and the little narratives. Grand narratives equate to a chain of static and pre-structured principles; they (in)form the

foundation of a given society.²¹ Whereas little narratives break with the credentials of the grand narratives because they consist of an intricate game of constantly changing situations, assembled by the subjects’ everyday lives. Each of these little narratives slip silently through the cracks of the grand narratives since they cannot be detected or monitored. These micro-narratives are polyvalent in character, as Michel de Certeau observes.²² They form a cacophony of uncontrollable and ever emerging new story-lines. By accepting our everyday engagement with the environment as a localized and changing situation, we again, may start to take an active role in creating polyvalent stories of places. These stories could then ceaselessly open up the stage to celebrate the existence of place through our (inter)actions. While we translate fragments of our environment into personal snap-shots, mapping place from this point of view is considered to be a powerful source through which we will be again able to collect stories – stories that will give rise to a different understanding and perception of how place comes into being.

Accordingly, each narrative resembles improvised bricolage, somethings that comes together from diverse sources, assembled into an overlay of various impressions, whose constellations cannot be controlled. They are articulated in their lacunae that are composed of shattered particles of the world. One might say that individuals possess in this process a kind of magnetic energy capable of attracting and reassembling “fragments of an exploded system,” enabling them “to bind energy freely available within a given field.”²³ As we pass through, we do not see the world “behind the back of our ‘consciousness,’ [...] but in front of us, as articulations of our field”²⁴ through which itineraries are constantly changing, according to a particular moment, mood, and spatial configuration in which we find ourselves in.

¹⁵ Eduard Casey, Berkley (see note 4), 304.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari, Minnesota (see note 1), 371.

¹⁷ Ibid., 371.

¹⁸ Sander L. Gilman et al., Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language, New York 1989.

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, Walking in the City, in: The Practice of Everyday Life, Berkeley 1988, 98.

²⁰ Jean François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge, Minnesota 1984.

²¹ Examples of such types of narratives could manifest themselves as planned messages (road signs) or cultural trends (promotional billboards).

²² Michel de Certeau, Die Kunst des Handelns, trans. Voullie Ronald, Berlin 1988.

²³ Jacques Derrida, «Point de folie – Maintenant l’architecture», essay accompanying the portfolio Bernard Tschumi, La Case Vide, La Villette 1985, London 1986, 73.

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The visible and the invisible, Evanston 1968, 180.



Our geography consists therefore of porous and multilayered formations with a shifting ensemble of various (emotional) states – through which we receive and pass through. That means, the geography of an individual is made of an unaccountable number of changing states – conditions that make us transition from one state to another. This perspective may be generalized into a core principle of reality where life, as the paleontologist Stephen J. Gould has suggested, consists of a series of stable states punctuated by unpredictable events whose occurrence helps to establish the next stable plateau.²⁵ When translated into our everyday encounters with the environment, this theory implies that our engagements are made up of structurally stable moments in which we are part of an evolutionary system of changing relations. This means that our existence in this world consists of a ceaseless process of unforeseeable changes where we continually find ourselves in new situations that coincide with different spatial configurations.

The individual, therefore, is neither here nor there, neither one nor the other. As Michel Serres put it, the subject positions itself always subliminally, on a threshold – “[n]either excluded nor included [...] in the fuzzy realm”²⁶ of this blurred hiatus. Always on the move, always intent on change, it is headed for new shores to forge links with its contexts. As such, the subject is analogous to the seaborne ship described in Foucault’s study ‘Of Other Spaces’.²⁷ Intended for translocation and ceaseless transition, the vessel pits itself against the infinite ocean – an ocean over which, in unflagging motion, boundaries are permanently redrawn and transgressed. And, as de Certeau observes, because these shifters never tire of charting new boundaries, they assume the role of a transgressive itinerant who “is the *primum mobile* [...] from which all the action proceeds”²⁸; similar to the commuting itinerant whom Gerald Raunig has in mind when he invokes the figure of Charon for his study of the aesthetics of

transgression in ‘Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung’.²⁹ Whereas Virgil depicts Charon in the Aeneid as a cheerless character whose task, for a small charge, is to ferry the dead in his boat across the river Acheron, the river of the underworld and the entrance to Hades, the realm of the dead, Raunig sees this ferryman as a translating entity who “does not [scan] the dividing line between this world and the hereafter”³⁰ but who opens up a space of transition or intermediacy on the very boundary separating the two. This point of transit creates the difference that weaves a connection between entities and enables transformations to occur. This not only makes the ferryman the link joining the two shores, but also an “intermediary space located within a difference.”³¹ As the subject dwells between formative systems, it occupies an operative interstitial space where various differences begin to oscillate in a transformative place of transit. Like Charon, the subject plays a mediating role between various intensities. It translates, literally, carries over, inasmuch as it takes snapshots of its surroundings in passing. The subject, then, is analogous to a liminal being who, as Victor Turner has written in ‘The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure’, is situated between positions.³²

We consequently not only transition from one moment to another, we also continually re-position ourselves – a notion where our locale is to be found in the idea of changing positions, animated by our interaction with the environment. Crossing space means to reinstate one’s position. This procedure is analogous to the journey’s of the indigenous people of the Australia, who establish their locale by simultaneously walking, perceiving and mentally mapping their immediate environment. In this, the subject (re)creates continually a mental construct of place, through which it narrates a non-recurring journey through space. Herein, we do not acknowledge the existence of a preconceived geographic site, but create almost a virtual place that enables us to invent

²⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History*, New York 1992.

²⁶ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, transl. Lawrence R. Schehr, Minneapolis 2007, 246.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, Baltimore 1986, *Diacritics* 16, 1.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, *Railway Navigation and Incarnation*, in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1988, 113.

²⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, transl. Sarah Ruden, New Haven 2008.

³⁰ Gerald Raunig, *Charon, Eine Ästhetik der Grenzübertragung*, Wien 1999, 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³² The term *liminal* is derived from the Latin *limen* and means *threshold*, also implying transition across a boundary from one state to the next.



and narrate new stories, comparable to the narrative structures of the indigenous people of Australia, the voyages of Hamish Fulton, and the psychographic maps of the Situationists. While the indigenous people of Australia use song-lines to produce a virtual place through direct association with a particular landscape, Hamish Fulton applies a geographic syntax, composed of phrases and signs that he associates with a particular journey he took in order to evoke the simulation and (re)production of a particular place.³³ And the Situationists connected virtual and the actual fragments of various experiences to form a psychographic map of a place.

For this process, events are the *conditio sine qua non* as they bring the virtual into connection with the actual. In this, however, the *virtual* should not be understood as something unreal. To quote Sanford Kwinter:

“It exists, one might say as a free difference or singularity, not yet combined with other differences into a complex ensemble or salient form.”³⁴

This means that the virtual does not need first to be realized but must simply be actualized, for it already possesses a transition capable of being developed. Accordingly, the virtual element (within an event)

“is gathered, selected – let us say incarnated – it passes from one moment-event [...] in order to emerge – differently, uniquely – within another.”³⁵

Events are thereby components of dynamic referential systems which constitute themselves out of a flowing multiplicity. And a world constituted out of diversity and flows

“comprises not pre-given, ideal forms but metastable shapes floating in a river of ever-generating differences”³⁶ – differences “that [are] produced at some point along a particular flow [...] to induce a difference.”³⁷

³³ Fulton was aware of never being able to represent and recreate a path on a map. He therefore utilized the image and graphic text that were associated to a particular experience to recreate place. That means, he would use phrases and signs to recreate a journey through space. The resulting text is fact for the wanderer, but fiction for the observer as every journey is unique to the person who took it.

³⁴ Sanford Kwinter, *The Complex and the Singular, Architectures of Times, Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*, Cambridge 2002, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

Every event then creates a difference inasmuch as it transports information that is always of a *site-specific* nature. And because, in that process, events do not occupy the surface but instead pass over it without ever touching it, the energy is not localized on the surface but is linked to formation and re-formation. In other words, life lives along the border of itself, along its delimitation, in the act of displacement.

From that point of view, the notion of place may no longer be considered independently from human interactions, or as something that is motionless and fixed to a permanent location. Rather, place materializes in a continuum of temporal relations wherein an assortment of different energies unite. As a consequence, the notion of place needs to be considered as a provisional aggregate – an emerging field – embedded between the interacting conditions of stability and instability. In other words, the process by which place appears originates in the differentiating restlessness of the becoming of something and the fading away of something. Only then, between these two circumstances, may place (r)emerge. In this, the subject is free from all substantial determination. The endless processuality of a route and the ensuing disappearance of a substantial closed nature prevent anything from subsisting.

What we, therefore, require is the general insight that place results from processes; it does not possess a single, immutable identity. Instead, it is the medium through which human interaction assumes a material presence and is therefore subject to a reality that is generated and modified by the encounters of people interacting with their surrounding – a process by which we actively create our own mental map of the world we inhabit. As we translate fragments of our environment into personal snap-shots, maps from this point of view are considered to be a powerful source through which we collect stories – stories that will give rise to a different understanding and perception of place. As noted by Andre Breton:

“The earth beneath my feet,
is nothing but an immense open newspaper.”

