

Space

From "Keywords for American Cultural Studies"

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In order for history to take place, it takes places. American studies and cultural studies scholars have drawn on the ideas and insights of critical geographers **Henri Lefebvre (1991)**, **David Harvey (2000)**, **Yi-fu Tuan (1977)**, **Cindy Katz (2004)**, **Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007)**, **Laura Pulido (1996)**, and many others to explore the creative possibilities and the moral meanings attributed to particular spaces and places. The politics and poetics of space permeate the culture of the United States as a nation through moral values that get attached to the open ranges of the western frontier and the far reaches of empire overseas; that contrast the barrio, the ghetto, and the reservation with the propertied and properly gendered suburban home; that juxtapose the finite limits of social space with the infinite possibilities of cyberspace and outer space. In both scholarly research and everyday life, the moral meanings attributed to these spaces and places have often been resolutely and creatively contested.

For European political philosophers during the Renaissance, corruption came from time—from the particularity of historical events—while the universality of space was presumed to promote virtue and morality. After the discovery and conquest of the Americas, these ideas helped fuel the hope that the virtues of the ideal space they associated with what they called “America” could provide escape from the corruptions of European time. As historian David W. Noble argues, idealized fantasies about pure and virtuous space have permeated the political and expressive cultures of the United States from the era of colonization and conquest up to the present day. The idea of a free “America” especially excited European thinkers because they had come to believe that free nations needed to be composed of homogeneous populations with strong ties to the national landscape, to “timeless spaces” where citizens could dwell in harmony with one another. European Americans who imagined that the purity of “American” space might offer them a refuge from the corruptions of European time developed what Noble calls “the metaphor of two worlds”—the idea that the territory of the United States would be an island of virtue in a global sea of corruption (2002, xxxiv). Later institutionalized inside U.S. national culture, this metaphor depends on binary oppositions between the pure spaces of New World freedom and their contamination by despised and demonized groups overseas or at home marked as “other.” In order to have pure and homogeneous spaces, “impure” populations have to be removed or marginalized, destroyed or dominated. Noble argues that belief in a redemptive national landscape performed important cultural work in constituting the United States as an imagined community grounded in white masculine property and power.

Imagined utopian spaces have long served as idealized escapes from the problems of real places. Images of the pastoral rural landscape and the rugged western frontier permeate works of expressive culture by writers, painters, and composers (**H. Smith 1950**; **Kolodny 1984**; **L. Marx 1964/2000**). In the nineteenth century, literary and philosophical works by Transcendentalists and paintings of the Hudson River school imbued the national landscape with democratic possibility. In the twentieth century, musical compositions by Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland echoed writings by historians **Frederick Jackson Turner (1893/1920)** and **William Prescott Webb (1931/1981)** that identified the open spaces of the western frontier as unique sources of democratic regeneration. These imagined free spaces were constructed discursively in opposition to the constraints that settled society seemed to impose on freedom-seeking U.S. Americans. **Herman Melville's Ishmael in Moby-Dick in 1851** and Mark Twain's Huck Finn in 1885 may be the best known of many fictional heroes who have been eager to take to sea or to “light out for the territory” to avoid facing the

contradictions of settled society (**Melville 1851/1971**; **Twain 1885/1985**).

Of course, neither Ishmael nor Huck fled “civilized” space alone. Both were accompanied by people of color on whom they depended for moral instruction and guidance. People from communities of color could not access the metaphor of two worlds because it required their subordination, humiliation, exclusion, sometimes even their annihilation. The putatively empty and timeless North American discursive space that settler colonists expected to serve as a space of refuge from the corruptions of European time was actually a physical place inhabited by indigenous people with long histories and distinct customs. The heroism of conquest, settlement, and westward expansion depended on genocidal wars against Native Americans, slavery imposed on Africans, lands seized from Mexicans, and the exploitation of laborers in and from Asia and Latin America. Rather than imagining the national landscape as common ground to be shared, the moral geography of settler colonialism required conquest, slavery, and empire. As white civilization and its corruptions penetrated the West, it became increasingly difficult for people in the United States to believe that they inhabited the democratic landscape of their dreams. The end of slavery, the rise of the interracial egalitarian coalition formed around what **W. E. B. Du Bois (1935/1998, 184)** called “abolition-democracy,” mass immigration from Europe, and working-class mobilizations for justice all challenged the homogeneity and harmony central to the dominant national spatial and social imaginary.

Rather than reckon honestly and openly with the internal contradictions and conflicts that rendered domestic society unable to produce the freedom and democracy that had been promised, many white U.S. Americans looked outward, seeking in the global marketplace the perfect harmony and happiness they had failed to produce in the national landscape. If the United States of America could not be an island of virtue in a global sea of corruption, the sea had to be transformed to be like it (**D. W. Noble 2002**). But the United States itself also had to be made more homogeneous. In the face of the increasing public presence and growing power of communities of color, the imagined free spaces of the frontier had to be fabricated in the segregated suburb, in the normative, properly gendered, and prosperous household (**E. May 1988**; **Massej 1994**; **Marsh 1990**) A distinct spatial imaginary propelled the creation of subdivisions designed to secure comparative advantages from what political economist **Robert Reich (1991)** calls “the secession of the successful” into gated exclusive communities governed by ever smaller subunits of government set up to hoard amenities and advantages for their residents (**McKenzie 1994**). Just as pastoral North American space was once viewed as the ideal escape from the corruptions of European time, the rewards and privileges of whiteness have configured U.S. suburbs as the means of escape from the responsibilities and obligations of national citizenship. In segregated white communities, the intersection of race and space produced a radically restricted spatial imaginary, one that reinforced the rewards, privileges, and structured advantages of whiteness through commitments to hostile privatism and defensive localism (**Lipsitz 2011**).

Because aggrieved communities of color could not access for themselves the amenities and advantages of places shaped by the white spatial imaginary, they have often manifested a different approach to discursive space and physical place that has had enormous cultural and political appeal for people of all races. As the philosopher Charles Mills notes, the white spatial imaginary tells people of color that they belong “somewhere else,” that “you are what you are in part because you originate from a certain kind of space, and that space has those properties in part because it is inhabited by creatures like yourself” (1997, 42). Yet populations living in ghettos, barrios, and reservations have turned segregation into congregation through social movements that depict space as valuable and finite, as a public resource for which all must take responsibility. The competing spatial imaginaries of the national political culture have influenced a variety of works of expressive culture. The art of John Biggers and Betye Saar, the fiction of Paule Marshall, plays and essays by Lorraine Hansberry, and the creation of collectives of musicians by Horace Tapscott and Sun Ra all exemplify this alternative to the dominant spatial imaginary (**Lipsitz 2011**). The American studies and ethnic studies scholars **Robert Alvarez (2005)**, **Arlene Dávila (2004)**, **Raul Villa (2000)**, and **Mary Pat Brady (2002)** have delineated the complex cultural consequences of racialized space for Latinos, while **Linda Trinh Vo (2004)**, **Leland Saito (2009)**, and **Chiou-ling Yeh (2008)** have produced similar studies of Asian American communities.

The Black spatial imaginary has been a particularly generative force for new spatial and racial ideas exemplified in the work of the jazz pianist, composer, band leader, and political visionary Sun Ra. The dual

meaning of “space” as both a continuous empty expanse of territory and the physical universe beyond the Earth's atmosphere enabled Sun Ra to expose how relations among races in the United States are also relations among spaces. In the early 1970s, he picked the phrase “space is the place” as the title for a song, an album, and a feature film. As part of a long-standing effort on his part to use flamboyant self-dramatization and performance to make a serious point, Sun Ra presented himself as a visitor from outer space appalled by the racism he discovered on the planet Earth. The jazz musician's mischievous play with the words “space” and “place” contained obvious implications about race. In these works, Sun Ra imagined utopian travels in space as a direct contrast to and a direct rebuke of “Earthy” spatial imaginaries: housing segregation based on a long history of restrictive covenants, racial zoning, mortgage redlining, steering, block busting, and mob violence that relegated people of different races to different spaces. Sun Ra's target audience had firsthand experience with the more than sixteen hundred urban renewal projects starting in the 1930s that destroyed the economic and emotional ecosystems of minority communities (Fullilove 2004, 20). The spatial imaginary that guided Sun Ra's eccentric art and public persona had more to do with the problems of segregated spaces on the planet Earth than with the utopian possibilities of travel through the universe. His artistry emerged from and spoke to a Black spatial imaginary based on mutuality and solidarity that developed over decades in Black communities where residents turned divisive segregation into celebratory congregation.

Like other artists, activists, and intellectuals from aggrieved communities, Sun Ra attempted to make the familiar realities of racialized space appear unnatural and therefore unnecessary. His adopted public persona as a purported interplanetary traveler from Saturn blended long-standing strains of Afro-diasporic tricksterism with emerging currents of Afro-futurism. He invoked the cosmos to contrast an imagined freedom in outer space with the confinements confronting Black people on the planet Earth (Szwed 1998; Kilgore 2003). Similarly important spatial imaginaries have been developed through political mobilizations to forge new spaces of inclusion and opportunity. The Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s united citizens and noncitizens through brilliant deployments of the mythic and poetic “land of Aztlán” as a discursive space uniquely suited to positioning group struggle within and across borders. This spatial imaginary recruited people of Mexican origin in both Mexico and the United States without condoning the conquest and suppression of indigenous peoples by both nations. It positioned Chicano activists to battle for both national civil rights and global human rights (Bebout 2011). The intercommunalism of the Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton created a cognitive mapping that connected Black struggles for self-determination in Oakland, California, to peasant resistance to imperialism in Vietnam. In Newton's view, the United States was not a nation into which Blacks should assimilate but rather an empire that they should oppose (Singh 2004). Queer Latina activists mobilizing in San Francisco's Mission District in the 1990s in response to official indifference to the AIDS epidemic converted a storefront on a busy street into a welcoming space for progressive and culturally sensitive political education and organizing among people from different national-origin groups (J. Rodríguez 2003).

Insurgent struggles have often made history take place by seizing space and deploying it for unexpected purposes. On Thanksgiving Day in 1969, activists identifying themselves as Indians of All Nations seized and occupied the abandoned prison on Alcatraz Island. The name Indians of All Nations turned aggregate anti-Indian racism into a new form of solidarity by asserting a unified panethnic identity. The activists cited a provision of a treaty between the Lakota nation and the federal government as a guarantee that members of all tribes had the right to seize unused government land (Smith and Warrior 1996). They used the sentimental appropriation of Indian history in this national holiday to call attention to the original seizure and occupation of North America by white settler colonialists that preceded the first Thanksgiving. They dramatized the desperate situation facing indigenous people by becoming the first people in history to break into jail. The action underscored the culpability of the federal government by seizing national park property as reparations for lands confiscated from Indians elsewhere. Similarly, the American Indian Movement desacralized the physical places of westward expansion through the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan from Alcatraz to Washington, D.C., in 1972. Signifying on the forced removal of the Cherokee and Choctaw people to Oklahoma on the brutal Trail of Tears in 1831, the caravan traveled in the opposite direction of westward expansion, foregrounding white duplicity in the title of the march. It stopped along the way in the racialized spaces of reservations and urban ghettos, turning them from forgotten and abandoned places into spaces supplying new recruits for the campaign.

There are lessons to be learned from these activist mobilizations. By organizing in actual locations over the discursive meanings of space and place, they have drawn attention to the ways in which new relations among races require renegotiation of relations among places. They signal that space is not merely a barren expanse, the universe around the Earth, or an empty temporal interval. It is a dynamic place where important discursive and political work can be done when people recognize that space is the place in which to do it.

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Lipsitz, G. (2014). Space. In B. Burgett & G. Hendler (Eds.), *Keywords for American cultural studies*. New York, NY: New York University Press. Retrieved from <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/nyupacs/space/0>

MLA

Lipsitz, George. "Space." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York University Press, 2014. *Credo Reference*. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.

Chicago

Lipsitz, George. 2014. "Space". In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York University Press.
<http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/nyupacs/space/0>

Harvard

Lipsitz, G (2014) Space. [Online]. In B Burgett & G Hendler (eds.). *Keywords for American cultural studies*. New York, NY: New York University Press. Available from: <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/nyupacs/space/0> [Accessed 14 January 2016].