

SETHA LOW

SPATIALIZING CULTURE

The Ethnography of Space and Place



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The ethnography of space and place

Setha Low

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Spatializing Culture

This book demonstrates the value of ethnographic theory and methods for understanding space and place. It considers how ethnographically based spatial analyses can yield insight into prejudices, inequalities and social exclusion, as well as offering people the means for understanding the places where they live, work, shop, and socialize. In developing the concept of spatializing culture, Setha Low draws on over twenty years of research to examine social production, social construction, embodied, discursive, emotive, affective, and translocal approaches. A global range of fieldwork examples are employed throughout the text to highlight not only the theoretical development of the idea of spatializing culture but also how it can be used in undertaking ethnographies of space and place. The volume will be valuable for all scholars interested in the study of culture through the lens of space and place.

Setha Low is Professor of Anthropology, Earth and Environmental Sciences (Geography), Environmental Psychology, and Women's Studies at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA. She is the former President of the American Anthropological Association and served as Deputy Chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations.

Praise for this book:

“Setha Low has taken an incredibly useful and conceptually comprehensive look at anthropological understandings of ‘social production’ and ‘social construction’ in the context of engagements with bodies, language, affect, translocality and their impact on how we navigate space/place. The chapters bring these ideas to life in ways that work both for students in a classroom and for general readers . . . Low’s work demonstrates anthropology’s singular contribution to theories of space, place and power today.”

John L. Jackson, Jr., *University of Pennsylvania, USA*

“Setha Low brings together in this wonderful volume the great extent of her knowledge of cities and her urban scholarship, the delicacy and richness of a visually inclined ethnography, and the conceptual sophistication of a deep historical and contemporary knowledge of theories of place and space.”

Caroline Knowles, *Goldsmiths, UK*

“Drawing theoretical inspiration from across the social sciences, *Spatializing Culture* presents state of the art analysis of contemporary social relations and cultural settings. Setha Low demonstrates the power of ethnography as both method and textual craft to examine how meanings, representations and material effects are felt and embodied in the rough and smooth of peoples’ everyday lives.”

Gareth A. Jones, *London School of Economics
and Political Science, UK*

For the future: Alexander, Max and Skye

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Introduction

The importance of and approaches to the ethnography of space and place

Introduction

The ethnographic study of space and place is critical to understanding the everyday lives of people whose homes and homelands are disrupted by globalization, uneven development, violence and social inequality. These dislocating processes encourage and, in many cases, force people to leave the communities and the neighborhoods where they grew up and to search for other meaningful places to live and place-based identities. There is a sense of urgency that the spatial effects of crises of poverty, neoliberal restructuring and global capitalism be recognized in north/south population shifts, refugee camps, urban gentrification, privatization of public spaces and profit-driven planning and redevelopment. The impact of competing claims to space and place and the ensuing territorial and cultural conflicts are transforming social relations among ethnic and religious groups, social classes, regions, states and neighborhoods. Contemporary world problems such as human-made disasters, civil wars, terrorist attacks, climate change and other environmental concerns are inextricable from the material, symbolic and ideological aspects of space and place.

Interest in the ethnography of space and place is also growing as a result of research in environmental studies, geographic information systems, urban studies, global systems analysis, migration studies, build/design technologies and other fields concerned with space, place and territory. In the field of medicine, the significance of space and place is gaining attention in response to the findings of three researchers awarded the 2014 Nobel Prize for their work on the brain's "inner GPS" that enables rats as well as humans to navigate their surroundings. Dr. John O'Keefe, in 1971, located what he calls "place cells" and "showed that these cells registered not only what they saw but also what they did not see, by building inner maps in different environments" (Altman 2014). In 2005 Drs. Edvard and May-Britt Moser discovered another component of the brain's positioning system by identifying nerve cells that permit coordination and positioning, calling them "grid cells" (Altman 2014). These studies postulate a biological basis for wayfinding and

greater focus on human space and place experience. Even in the field of architecture where built form and spatial relationships often are determined by formal design principles disconnected from user experience and preferences, there has been a renaissance of thinking about space from a cultural point of view while place concerns are reflected in the emergence of “place-making” courses and programs in architecture and design schools (Weir 2013).

An awareness of the importance of ethnography as a methodology for addressing sociospatial problems and public policy is also gaining ground. Within the social sciences, there have been appeals for a more engaged ethnographic practice and commitment to social justice objectives (Low 2011, Low and Merry 2010), the development of a public anthropology committed to uncovering racial bias and racism (Mullings 2015) and a public sociology that reaches beyond traditional quantitative policies studies (Burawoy 2005). Didier Fassin argues that “ethnography is particularly relevant in the understudied regions of society” and “illuminates the unknown” while it “interrogates the obvious” (2013: 642). Ethnographic research is becoming respected even within the international justice system through its use in tracking human rights violations and documenting an escalating sense of world insecurity (Goldstein 2012, Merry et al. 2015). The ability of ethnography to produce precise descriptions and nuanced analyses from multiple perspectives provides the flexibility and creativity to address the complexity of contemporary social relations and cultural settings. The ethnography of space and place as a subset of these methodologies contains all of these attributes as well as the ability to integrate the materiality and meaning of actions and practices at local, translocal and global scales.

Overview of Union Square, New York City

One way to appreciate what the ethnography of space and place offers is to consider an existing site and the kinds of research questions and intriguing interconnections that emerge. For example, what captures your attention when looking at this photograph of Union Square in New York City (Photo 1.1 Union Square)? Do you see an urban square surrounded by high-rise buildings designed by major architects, broad sidewalks lined with trendy stores and streets filled with automobiles? Or do you focus on the people gathered there and their many activities? Are you intrigued by the variety of textures and furnishings – some areas are lined with trees and grass and others defined by monuments, kiosks, vendor stalls, tents and different kinds of paving and steps – or are you more interested in the boundaries of the space, the infrastructure of the existing physical systems or whether there are Internet hot spots and video surveillance cameras? Are you reminded of an experience in a similar place at another time and location, or do you wonder what it would feel like to be sitting there now? How would you start to explore, examine or reimagine this public space?



Photo 1.1 Union Square (Gregory T. Donovan)

There are many ethnographic approaches to answering these questions. Are you particularly interested in the history of the place and want to know when it was built and under what circumstances? Did you perhaps reflect on the politics involved in financing and designing it and whether it was publicly or privately funded and maintained? These types of questions constitute a social production approach to its analysis.

What if, instead, you are intrigued by why so many people are congregated at some locations rather than others and you want to learn who these people are and what they are doing and thinking? Or are you more interested in knowing what this urban square means to those using it and to others who live nearby or even in the suburbs? Are some people comfortable in the space while others feel excluded? Questions about groups of people, their social activities and everyday meanings make up a social constructivist approach to its understanding.

There are other kinds of questions that illuminate how a place transforms a visitor's experience. Does this square feel different to local residents, tourists or youth of color? Does what people say about the square alter their perception of it? How does meandering through versus walking purposefully in one direction influence the experience of the place? How does physical space

become part of the social world and, at the same time, how does its sociality become material? Affective, discursive, embodied and translocal approaches to the study of space and place address these kinds of questions.

This book offers multiple ways to answer these questions that draw on various genealogies, theoretical perspectives and ethnographic projects. These ways of thinking about space start with two well-established approaches: the social production of space and the built environment, and the social construction of space and place-making. But the book goes beyond these approaches by also examining space through theories of embodiment, discourse, translocality and affect. A basic assumption is that space is socially constructed as well as material and embodied, and the aim is to develop a conceptual framework – spatializing culture – that brings these ideas together.

The book draws on the premise that ethnographers have an advantage with regard to understanding space and place because they begin their studies in the field. Regardless of whether it is a long-term study or rapid ethnographic assessment of a place, a multisited analysis of a region or a comparison of circuits of mobility and movement, there is an engagement with the inherent materiality and human subjectivity of fieldwork. Conceptualizations of space and place that emerge from the sediment of ethnographic research draw on the strengths of studying people *in situ*, producing rich and nuanced sociospatial understandings. While disagreements over epistemology, what constitutes data and forms of representation sometimes magnify differences in conceptual positions, it is no small matter to recognize that the common experience of fieldwork and its grounded imperative pervades ethnographic research.

Within this general framework, a sociocultural perspective on space and place is employed that draws upon social science and design profession understandings and definitions, but retains some definitional boundaries. It privileges a fluid and context-dependent concept of culture, the use of ethnography as a foundational methodology, and a preference for grounded theory that emerges from the data in dialogue with dominant conceptual frameworks. Although the book offers a complex array of theories of space and place, there are threads that hold this body of work together. Articulating these threads and predispositions offers opportunities for expanding the way one can look at and frame questions about space and place that distinguish ethnographic research from that of our interlocutors who face different challenges. For example, David Harvey in *Spaces of Global Capitalism* struggles to define space by positing that it has such a complicated set of meanings that we risk “losing ourselves in some labyrinth” (Harvey 2006: 119). Harvey’s challenge is moving from Marxist concepts of abstract space to relational concepts – theoretical articulations that are often difficult to resolve. Dolores Hayden wrestles with defining place as “one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (1995: 15). She probes the social, historical and architectural properties

of place by employing methods that emphasize the evolution of building techniques, planning strategies and the politics of design to understand its meaning.

Ethnographers are situated in between these intellectual traditions and able to draw fruitfully from both. They are equally facile at grappling with the political economic forces of Marxist approaches that produce physical space, as with historical accounts of the built environment and the lived experience of individuals that result in place-based meaning. While the analysis of space and place is not a simple task and is complicated by ongoing disagreements about the prioritization of space or place and the nature of their relationship, ethnographers are nonetheless uniquely anchored in fieldwork in a way that is particularly useful. Without empirical grounding, it is easy to get lost or end up with a full suitcase that cannot be closed. The goal of this book, therefore, is to demonstrate how ethnographic research and methodology have been deployed to understand space and place and to argue that ethnography offers a unique and valuable approach to this interdisciplinary endeavor.

Space as a location of culture was important to early ethnographers who wrote descriptions of the built environment such as H. L. Morgan's (1881) ethnography *Houses and House Life of the American Aborigines*. Studies of spatial forms and settlement patterns also were included in comparative inventories of material culture as part of cross-cultural research compilations, including the *Ethnographic Atlas: A Summary* (Murdock 1967). As a manifestation of culture, indigenous architecture, village spatial organization and house design were considered part of a complex of material traits that enabled adaptation to the physical environment (Rapoport 1969).

Space was also part of the ethnographic foundations of anthropology and sociology from the perspective of Durkheim (1965) and Mauss (Mauss and Beauchat 1979 [1906]) that considered the built environment as integral to social life (Lawrence and Low 1990). The salvage ethnography of Boas (1964 [1888]) and his students, for example, Spier (1933) and Kroeber (1939), provided extensive documentation of the use and meaning of spatial arrangements. These spatial descriptions were seen as a backdrop to daily activities providing data for culture-area theories linking cultural traits through symbolism, geographical locale and pathways of migration.

One reason for the hesitancy that some contemporary ethnographers initially felt about using spatial concepts was an assumed indexicality of people and place, making it difficult to discuss space or place in a way that did not confine the inhabitants. Arjun Appadurai (1988) and Margaret Rodman (1985, 1992) correctly criticized ethnographic depictions of place and space that provided taken-for-granted settings to locate their descriptions or reduced the ethnographic to a locale that "imprisoned" natives. As pointed out by Alberto Corsín Jiménez, "'natives' who stay put in a particular area move as much as people who are displaced or migrate" (2003: 140), and he has criticized the implied indexical relationship of a cultural group and its geographic