

## **Phenomenology of place: Re-grounding environmental ethics through story**

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**Abstract:** This article draws on Heidegger's philosophy to bring a phenomenological perspective to bear on the question of place. By revealing dynamic human and natural histories, narrative can be a particularly useful tool for orienting our environmental commitments. I share stories from Vieques, Puerto Rico, an island shaped by trauma, to illustrate the power of people articulating what they most value about the places they call home.

**Keywords:** Place, narrative, phenomenology, Vieques, dwelling, Puerto Rico

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In *The Riddle of the Apostle Islands*, Cronon (2003) asks a poignant question: “How do you manage a wilderness full of human stories?” He showcases Wisconsin’s National Lakeshore to demonstrate environmentalists’ tendencies to erase human impacts—whether through abuses or love—from the places we want to reclaim as wild. Furthermore, Cronon (1998) writes that the American tradition of idealizing wild places makes us less likely to value the natural world closer to home, where the everyday activities of our lives take place.

The repercussions of wilderness idealization have had far-reaching effects on conservation policies around the world, often to the exclusion of Indigenous communities living within fragile or valued ecosystems (Guha, 1998). According to Cronon (1998, 2003), when we overlook human impacts on the land, not only do we ignore social-ecological interdependencies, but we also perpetuate a myth that nature is healthy and valuable only when unmarred by people. Light (2010) says that environmentalism faced a disorienting dilemma as a result of the wilderness debate, one result of which is a new appreciation of place “not simply . . . as mere location, but a more psychologically-robust and even morally-loaded conception of location, imbued with a storied relationship between people and the things around them” (p. 143).

Cronon (1998, 2003), Light (2010), and other environmental philosophers including O’Neill and Holland (2003) offer a pathway to understanding the moral significance of our relationships to the ordinary places of our everyday lives. By revealing the dynamic human and natural histories of storied landscapes evolving over time, they argue, narrative can be a particularly useful tool for orienting our ethical commitments to place. These authors fall short, however, of presenting these commitments in an ontologically-grounded way.

In this essay, I draw on philosopher Martin Heidegger’s topology to bring a phenomenological perspective to bear on our understandings of place. I show how philosophers following him, as well as Indigenous peoples throughout the world, understand identity and meaning through a place-based, embodied, relational ontology that takes seriously the idea of place as the ground for all experience. Understanding place in this light strengthens the case that narrative can reveal situated ethical commitments attentive to the dynamic relationships between people and the places we dwell. To illustrate, I share stories emerging from Vieques, Puerto Rico – a place shaped by 60 years of military bombing that is now being managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a National Wildlife Refuge.

### *Returning to Place*

I believe Cronon (1998, 2003), Light (2010), and O’Neill & Holland (2003) are correct in pointing to place as the appropriate ground for environmental ethics. However, the argument that the wilderness ideal obscures place only begins to tell the story of the forgetting of place. As Casey (1993) writes, place has been marginalized for centuries in Western thinking. Most modern philosophers miss the significance of place; only Heidegger addresses it systematically. By examining the evolution of Heidegger’s thinking about place as the ground of all experience, I will show how place is fundamental to shaping human identity— that it is, in fact, the context of existence (Malpas 2006).

Throughout Heidegger’s work, he grapples with the fundamental question of Being, thought variously in terms of originary temporality, meaning, truth, and finally, place. Malpas (2006) highlights the ways Heidegger’s early work on fundamental ontology is grounded in the situated topology of being-in-the-world. The question of Being that motivates *Being and Time* is articulated through an analysis of the human experience, which Heidegger (2005) calls *Dasein*

(translated as being-there). In *Being and Time*, he describes *Dasein*'s relationship to the world through our involvement with the things we encounter. We make everyday things like jugs and tables and great works of art like symphonies and paintings. We build bridges, temples, and houses. We tend fields and children. We engage with things through our everyday involvement with them, and this involvement always takes place in the world, in a place. Heidegger calls the human condition being-in-the-world. As Malpas (1999) writes, for Heidegger "place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience" (p. 32).

After *Being & Time*, Heidegger expresses the "there" of Being variously as the Event, the clearing, the Open, and the location of disclosiveness. But it is in his work on dwelling that Heidegger is most clear about the relationship between Being and place. To let things appear *as things* (i.e. as they truly are), and thus to allow the disclosure of world *as world*, Heidegger (2001b) says we must respond to things through our dwelling. Dwelling has existential significance; Heidegger (2001a) writes, "Dwelling...is the basic character of Being" (p. 158). He uses both agricultural and architectural metaphors to explain our involvement in the world through place:

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man is insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord (Heidegger, 2001a, p. 145).

Heidegger gives the example of a bridge as a thing which creates a place, a bounded site for the revealing of the world. Malpas (2006) argues that the presencing of Being is always a situated revealing, particular to a bounded locale. In this way, Ingold (2000) writes that we can understand the places we inhabit as "the familiar domain of our dwelling" (p. 191). He writes,

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds, and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And those, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is from this relational context of people's engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance (Ingold, 2000, p. 192).

How, then, can we imagine our relationship to nature as emplaced beings? Through Heidegger's notion of dwelling, we arrive at a phenomenological framework for articulating a reciprocal, co-constitutive relationship between people and the land. As Seamon (2014) writes, "A central ontological assumption in phenomenology is that people and their worlds are integrally intertwined" (p. 11). Phenomenologists help us see the true depth of our interdependence. It is not simply that we are interconnected, but that our very essence is uniquely shaped by the places we inhabit. We co-evolved in intricate ways – our respiratory system depends on the air respired by plants, which themselves convert energy from the sun's rays and the soil's fertility (Ingold, 2000; Fisher, 2012). Everything about the human body evolved in response to our environment – from our ability to breathe the air in our atmosphere, to our ability to see and hear the perceptual resonances of our world.

### *The Role of Narrative*

Again, Cronon (1998) suggests that we ground environmental ethics in our relationships to place. To help us reach this goal, I would like to examine how narrative can be used as a tool for revealing the ways humans dwell in our places. I am intrigued by the idea of storied landscapes presented by Holland & O'Neill (2003) as an answer to Cronon's (2003) challenge not to erase human histories from the places we value and to value the places human lives shape. Holland & O'Neill (2003) tell the stories of places where conservationists and communities faced decisions about how to manage lands with complex human histories. Their stories expose the intricacy of our lived relationships with the land. Like Cronon (2003), they ask readers to consider ways to develop ethical and scientifically-sound perspectives that take into account a place's historical context and ask what obligations we have to honor historic relationships to place.

Bringing a phenomenological perspective to bear on these issues can deepen our sense of interdependence with place. Phenomenology illuminates the roles places play in shaping our sense of home, our memories, and our very identities. We don't dwell 'in' places, like we live physically 'in' a house. We dwell *through* places. Our everyday experiences in place, and the stories we tell about them, are integral to shaping who we are (Casey, 1993; Malpas, 1999; Perkins and Thorns, 2012).

The relationships between human cultures and the environments that sustain them have long been expressed through story. Narratives serve to construct and share meaning, build individual and community identity, and create bridges of information across space and time – all expressions of dwelling. Malpas (2012) presents a compelling case that memory, narrative and place are all co-constitutive of identity. He writes that “there could be no...engagement with place were it not for the narrative” (p. 19). It is through narrative that we remember what we value, choose what to pay attention to or ignore, and express the significance of our relationships with the world.

Remembering the past and bringing it into the present is also a central component of place-making (Basso, 1996; Malpas, 2012). As Meinig (1979) wrote, it is a “powerful fact that life must be lived amidst that which was made before” (cited in Ingold, 2000, p. 191). Malpas (1999) writes that “the idea that human identity is somehow tied to location...is an idea that has both a long ancestry over the centuries and a wide currency across cultures” (p. 2). Basso (1996) shows how stories, tied to the land through place-names, serve as living reminders of all past habitation in Apache tribal areas. He describes Vine Deloria, Jr.'s observations that most American Indian tribes embrace “spatial conceptions of history” in which places and their names—and all that these may symbolize—are accorded central importance. For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think. Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person (Basso, 1996, p. 34).

Silko (1981) also describes the role of stories in Native American cultures. “Stories ‘function basically as makers of our identity,’” she writes.

‘The stories cannot be separated from geographical locations, from actual physical places within the land. ...And the stories are so much a part of these places that it is almost impossible for future generations to lose the stories

because there are so many imposing geological elements...you cannot live in that land without asking or looking or noticing a boulder or rock. And there's always a story' (as cited in Basso, 1996, p. 64).

The question then remains: what stories of place do we carry into the present? Ingold (2000) advocates for what he calls a dwelling perspective to understand places as an "enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (p. 189). This brings us close to the goal forwarded by Cronon (1998, 2003), Light (2010), and Holland & O'Neill (2003) of articulating the past in order to shed light on the values embodied in our particular places. Basso (1996), too, says that the task is to discover what places "brimming with past and present significance, can be called upon to 'say,' and what, through the saying...can be called upon to 'do.'" (p. 75).

### *Narratives from Vieques Island*

To return to Cronon's (2003) question: "How do you manage a wilderness full of human stories?" I'd like to briefly discuss an example emerging from Vieques, Puerto Rico. Vieques is a small island community eight miles east of mainland Puerto Rico and is home to approximately 9,000 people. From 1941 until 2003, the U.S. Navy owned two-thirds of the island, and Viequenses lived between ammunition storage bunkers and active military training sites. After successfully ousting the Navy through grassroots protests, Viequenses are now working for economic, social, and environmental justice.

When the Navy left Vieques in 2003, jurisdiction for the majority of the formerly-occupied land was given to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The land and sea, heavily impacted by decades of aerial, land, and marine bombardment, as well as ground maneuvers and other training exercises by U.S. and NATO forces, was designated for protection as a National Wildlife Refuge. If ever there was one, this is a wilderness full of human stories.

The conversion of decommissioned military lands to wildlife preserves is increasingly common practice. Wildlife biologists negotiate with decontamination contractors about how much spent munitions and unexploded ordinance can be removed without harming protected habitat. As the case of Vieques demonstrates, the relationship between human inhabitants of the island – and their claims to the land – are often excluded from the new stories being told about these places.



In the summer of 2014, in an act of remembrance exemplifying Viequenses' dwelling, about 30 people gathered in a cavernous concrete bunker that was once used to store ammunition on land that, before that, was home to Vieques' sugar cane plantation workers. The bunker doors were covered with a life-sized photograph of a family on their doorstep the day -- in 1941 -- that they received their 24-hour eviction notice from the Navy. Inside the bunker, the recorded sound of a broom played, symbolizing attempts to sweep inhabitants and their stories away from the

land. The descendants of the family pictured on the door joined their voices with those of their neighbors', reading aloud the names of the people who once lived there, their resonance echoing in the now empty space of the munitions bunker.

If we embrace Ingold's (2000) dwelling perspective to understand this event, this story of displacement, remembering, and reclaiming opens a space for understanding the intricacies of the human and natural histories borne out in this place. Each name spoken represents an individual whose life was intimately embedded in the place now occupied by the abandoned military structure, and who was abruptly torn away from their home. Each name read aloud evoked a story that was forever shaped by the events that unfolded there.

### *Homecoming*

Heidegger helps us to see the task of philosophy as a homecoming, an effort to remember what has been covered over through the scientific and dualistic thinking so predominant in Western discourse. Malpas (2012) writes,

The movement back to place—back to that which otherwise remains unnoticed and unremarked (as place itself often remains in the background of our activities)—can also be understood as a movement of recollection, of remembering again, and Heidegger draws directly on this idea alongside that of return or homecoming (pp. 19-20).

Remembering and revealing the narratives of place is a fundamental task of dwelling when we are tuned to the rich, nuanced, and multiple stories of the land and its inhabitants. Cronon (2003) challenges us not to erase human histories from the places we value in our desire to re-imagine them as wildernesses. Holland & O'Neill (2003) suggest that telling the stories of lands with complex human histories helps us understand ethical commitments to build on what has come before. Their work raises significant questions about environmental narratives such as: In places with multiple stories, how do we evaluate which stories are most authentic, valuable, sustainable, or relevant? Is it ethical to remove evidence of one story in order to construct a more environmentally-benign narrative?

On Vieques island, wildlife biologists, ecologists, fishermen, teachers, and community development experts are all telling their stories of Vieques' past, present and future. The complexity of the island is reflected in the diversity of the narratives told. All voices serve a role in teasing out the moral path forward in these places. By telling their stories, Viequesens begin to develop place-based ethics appropriate to their community. As de Beauvoir (1947) writes, "It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged."

A phenomenological perspective helps deepen the relevance of storytelling in efforts to articulate environmental ethics and understand the varied relationships Viequesens have with their embattled island. Without this vital ontological grounding, I argue, it is difficult to navigate morally-significant relationships with the world in an appropriate light. Malpas (2012) explains that when we remember we give our attention to "the dynamically unfolding character of place" (p. 14) in a way that is fundamentally ethical. As we see in the case of Vieques, it is also an opportunity for environmental and social justice. This is an exciting challenge, and one that I believe phenomenologically-attuned narratives of place can help us to answer in morally-significant ways.

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