A Sense of Place and Belonging in Lawrence Buell’s Space, Place, and Imagination from Local to Global

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Our conception of “place” often begins with our home, those four walls and that roof over our heads that form a safe cocoon that protects us when the world is threatening, and provide us with a comfortable window on the world when the world is benign. Outside our home is the wider lay of the land, “our environment,” itself something of a cocoon, a womb, a placenta that surrounds and nourishes us, a greater “home” that encompasses our home, our “place.” Such a view is reassuring, but before long we venture yet farther outward into our “range,” which soon begins to conform to a larger image of environment, in an ever-larger weave of known and unknown paths, a network of overlapping dendrites, buzzing with information that we employ in our negotiations as we make our way in the world. A classic view of environment working outward this way is that of concentric circles, and this image is certainly applicable—after all, the root word of environment, in Latin, means “in” + “around, circle, to turn.” To alter our view a bit, and borrowing from Lawrence Buell, this view of an enlarged environment can be seen as an “archipelago” of connected islets—an image perhaps befitting our globe-hopping lifestyles. From there our environment gets even larger, and soon we are in the thralls of properties and locales, suburbs and borderlands, commons and preserves, regions and bio-regions, landscapes and countrysides, territories and nations (and any number of other designations, laced with ethnic, cultural and political overtones). Eventually we find that we are downright global and then…who knows when we may feel impelled to decamp planet earth…and start all over again?
Providing guidance during all of this travel is something like a mental map, which locates the “centers of felt value” in our environment(s) (Tuan in Buell 63), the given “individual effect[s] or bond[s]” of all the places and spaces we visit (Buell 63), and, even more intricately, the matrices of a range of imagined places (real or fictitious), memory traces (a “palimpsest of [our]…place-experiences” [Buell 73]), and the sum total of the “socially produced” places and spaces of our life (Buell 74).

From the above we can see that Lawrence Buell has been thinking about a more complete definition and understanding of our understanding of “place and space” in our environment(s). In this paper I will examine Buell’s views, considering some of the forward-looking and also some of the curiously retrograde implications of his expansive ideas. As something of a country boy, raised in the vivid, intriguing environment of the American southwest, Buell is asking the right questions for me. The American southwest—more than just a pretty place, mind you, but a region with a built-in “contradiction” that teases the imagination of all who live there—is the high desert a wasteland, a region of brown dirt, dry arroyos and sagging, leafless, cottonwoods—or does it teem with life, activity and diversity?—and also one riven with debate about the manifold uses, of and human impact on, the local environments—with farmers, ranchers, hunters, east-coast and Hollywood dilettantes in Santa Fe, backpackers and ecologists, space scientists, military professionals, and other Albuquerque denizens, American Indians, Anglos and Mexican Americans all contributing to the discussion. The questions Buell asks include: How does environmental imagination register, judge, and seek to affect the significance of environment as the self-conscious sense of an inevitable but uncertain and shifting relation between being and context?¹ What are the meanings of "place" in a world at once very local and very global? How do aesthetic, ethical, and political motives interact in our understanding and analysis of the environment? I shall examine these questions and more in this paper.

¹ From Buell 62.
Buell—a complexifier, a maker of multiple indices and overlapping definitions, themselves making something of a palimpsest of meaning and implication in his work—begins by indicating that the nature of environment “gestures in at least three directions at once—toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual effect or bond” (63). Simply put, these directions delineate one of Buell’s central concerns in this work—the difference between “place” and “space” in our interaction with the environment. In what is a useful, but perhaps simplistic and over-determining definition, places for Buell are (as noted) “centers of felt value” (63) and “associatively thick” (63). Space, in contrast is “thin” and “merely” connotes “geometrical or topographical abstraction” (63; quotation marks surrounding “merely” by the author). However, in the same description, one of Buell’s descriptions of place is that it is “inseparable from the concrete region [that is, its space] in which it is found,” (Casey in Buell 63; additional text by the author). In any case, space can be “sublime” and “sacred’ and therefore…infinitely resonant” (63). Given views like these, it seems that space may not be so thin after all, and trying to draw a clear line between space and place may not be useful (I suspect that we will find both conceptions are equally important in human life, ontology, and epistemology). Buell apparently sets up this dichotomy in order to introduce a brief history of place and space in human life, moving from space as little more than void through the creation of place by way of human inhabitation (including the “production of abstract space” by politicians and financiers, so that they can then exploit the then-developed “spaceness” or “placeness” as the case may be); into 20th century philosophy, which begins to attach subjectivity itself to place-attachment and “situatedness” of self and understanding; to post-modern conceptions that really do thin out the meaning of place, burdening us with such non-starters as “bodies-as-places.” Thankfully, Buell does not spend any time with such abstractions, which is understandable. It is not hard to see that frank and constructive discussions of important environmental issues including human habitation (with all of the “associative thickness” that
that entails), environmental degradation, future development on planet earth, etc. can do without these extravagances. Instead Buell immediately begins to examine the details of his conceptions, including “certain intractable ambiguities inherent in the concept of place” (66). This I suppose is not hard to imagine: anytime people begin to “emplace” themselves in a given environment, problems and challenges will quickly arise. Buell’s note here of the necessary reciprocity of nature and culture seems almost mundane, but he does hint in an important direction when he reminds readers that animals and other “nonhuman somebodies” will have to be considered in the big picture we are examining (see 66-67). Further, here he describes the “nested quality of space—the disparate modes of attachment” (67) that will become a central idea in his argument (more below), and he also first notes how eco-criticism and other environmental writing of years past has “tended to favor…local or regional” attachments—an observation that first hints at a central plank of environmental perceptions in the United States. This is an important point I will here stop to examine.

This local/regional tendency is very, very American in its flavor and approach. The United States has been nothing if not an environmentally conscious country (for better and for worse). From the early rumblings of farmer’s rebellions in the 1700s; to American nature writings in the 19th century; to the first major back-to-nature/Transcendental movement in the early 19th century (a movement which has returned again and again in different incarnations in the United States, up to the present day); to local-color/nativist American philosophies (many of which have primitivist, back-to-nature leanings); through the Nashville Agrarian movement in the 1930s and widespread anti-industrial and back-to-nature activism and literature throughout the rest of the 20th century; and up to current anti-globalization movements (which too, are very environmentally focused), the Green movements, and recently-developed environmental and eco-criticism. In short, America has been a country very much involved in environmental and nature movements of all kinds.
This tendency in America is at once forward-looking and backward; progressive and deeply conservative. On the one hand, we have to tip our hat to the many environmental activists who have worked so hard and who have been doing the right things and fighting the atrocious abuses and exploitation of human and natural environments in the United States. These are the progressive folk. On the other hand, American environmental sentiments have often been linked to grossly conservative (ah, “conservative,” a term with such divided and simultaneously constructive and injurious definitions!) and anachronistic policies (take a look at the Nashville Agrarians, mentioned above, for such an archaic picture).

Buell quickly realizes and acknowledges that the local/regional approach—broad and benign as it potentially is—is not going to stand as we really start to think about environment in a globalizing world, and he also notes how “place-attachment tends to thin out as the territory expands” (68), and even questions whether environmental citizenship really hinges on “staying put” at all (68). We might ask it this way—are humans essentially nomadic, and is the idea of thoroughgoing “placeness” a misperception? And ever further, note how the placeness that humans have constructed for themselves is in large part constituted of a concatenation of “non-places”—those sterile malls, clubs, 7-11s, airports, etc. that seem to comprise so much of what we are and “where we are” nowadays. At this point a post-modernist would meander down a cul-de-sac and begin to quote (horrors) Baudrillard and simulacra-ness, but again, to his credit, Buell bypasses this, and continues to a main point in his essay—that is, the requirement of “thinking more rigorously about place as physical environment—whether mainly ‘built’ or ‘natural’—constituted simultaneously by subjective perception and by institutionalized social arrangements” (71). From here Buell (rigorously) outlines his “five-dimensional phenomenology of subjective place-attachment,” which, I agree with Buell, “makes sense” (72). We have discussed these concepts in class, and so I will not list them here, and will instead jump ahead to where Buell sums up these points by stating that perceptions of place and space are in need of undergoing “an alchemical
transformation…into places of lived experience worthy of care” (76). Note how Buell has here cleverly echoed his conception of “centers of felt value” in terms of space and place, and if I now no longer question the validity of his “dichotomy,” well, allow me that. As for Buell’s sentiments here, it's time to offer to him my first “here here.”

At this point Buell begins to hone in on the central concern of his essay—the whole idea of how we are to organize and reorganize our changing perceptions of placeness and spaceness, and of course, just as importantly—everything in between and out from there. Simply put, we must “challenge assumptions about border and scale” (from 76) as we redraw our environmental maps. In this respect, for Buell there have been three important projects that environmental activists have undertaken in recent years as they have strived to recreate the maps of our existence: “the reimagination of localized places,” “the reconception of place at the ‘bioregional’ level, and “experiments in imagining planetary belonging” (76-77).

In terms of the “localized places” noted above, we are again on the horns of a dilemma (sort of), as discussed. And yet, by golly, it seems that we do feel a natural attachment to a kind of “localism” and associated “regionalism.” Heck, maybe John Crowe Ransom had it right when he mildly contemplated his beloved region, the southern United States: “The South is a place in which it is generally pleasant to be in the open air, and nature blooms and waxes prodigiously” (Essays 123). Downright placid, isn’t it? Indeed, all of the “local color” and “self-sufficient small communities” (Buell 78) that have been imagined in the United States over the years have that comforting feel. Yes, regionalism—and the more modern term, bio-regionalism (with its watersheds and riverine systems, aquifers and high plains, lake regions and basins, coral reefs and seaboards) just feel right, they really do seem to “[refer] both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness” (Berg and Dasmann in Buell 83).

For Buell, these conceptions offer promise to counter nationalism and ethnocentrism, through a sort of “deconstruction” and redrawing of drawn boundaries and political four-color maps. Indeed, for Buell, the bio-regionalists have offered up what may be no less than “the most
distinctive contribution to the taxonomy of place-scales” (83). Well, if this is true—and I am not one to seriously doubt Buell here—then I would like to make my own contribution to this growing discussion, to be discussed forthwith.

I believe we can link the bioregionalists’ contribution to the ideas of Edward O. Wilson, whose _Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge_ offers insight into an expanded environmental criticism. For Wilson, consilience is simply an effort to link up the various branches of human knowledge and endeavor through what he calls a “common groundwork of explanation,” a “seamless web of cause and effect” (266, 8). Classically trained scientist that he is, Wilson sees the principal ground of this seamless web as evolutionary science and biology (and pretty much all of the other sciences, working outward from these two at the core). From this ground, we can discover the inner workings of virtually any social science or humanities discipline, by way of “the evolved structure of the human psyche” and humans’ “species-typical motives” and “domain-specific reasoning” (Carroll 162). For my discussion here, I will simply give Wilson’s ideas the benefit of the doubt, and note that we can apply his essential idea to some of Buell’s thinking about bioregionalism. As noted above, a bioregion “refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness.” Such a conception fits neatly with consilience, as a possible link between biology and environmental science (the “hard sciences”), and understandings of consciousness and identity (which range from the philosophical [a “soft” or social science], to psychology [which ranges between “hard” and “soft”] to brain science itself [another “hard science”]). Looked at this way, the “hard sciences” (biology, evolutionary psychology, etc.), and the social sciences (philosophy, anthropology, human environment and habitation studies, etc.) can inform one another and contribute to the solutions that bisect the various disciplines. That aesthetics and other humanities could play a role here seems very possible, also fitting in with Wilson’s overall aims at a unity of explanation (as well as Buell’s literary analysis). Buell’s other thoughts here—that bio-regionalism is “an attempt to ‘integrate ecological and cultural affiliations
within the framework of a place-based sensibility’ (Thomashow in Buell 83; emphasis added), and that “interaction with topography, climate, and nonhuman life direct not only how people ought to live but also the way they do live without realizing it” (note the modal “ought”; Buell 84), also accord with Wilson’s manifold explanation.

The above said, for my part, although the bioregionalists have certainly been at the forefront of environmental concerns and consciousness in recent years (see, for one example, _Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water_ by Marc Reisner) I will again sound my alarm about the way the regional focus has been misused by reactionary conservative voices during American history. That said, however, we must again follow Buell outward (ever outward), and remember that our goal here is to trace placeness from our home nest, through our range proper, and then out even further out to—everywhere, it seems—and then back again, spinning back through memory, history and imagination—and finally back (I certainly hope) to home. Allow me to conclude this paper with Buell’s move toward such “planetary belonging.”

The stage is now set for the global view—a view no doubt beleaguered with difficulties, such that not a few people would like to simply give up, throw in the towel, and admit that we are doomed to live on, at best, a moonscape of our very own—a chain of barren non-places and mammoth mega-cities, mercilessly eradicating any traces of life vying in their polluted environs—or, worse, a “permanently destabilized” earth (90), a Philip K. Dick-esque anti-world of cyborgs, androids and Roy Batty/combat-ready replicants (I exaggerate). Shall Buell take such a view? Of course not, he is nothing if not an optimist, and though he acknowledges that nobody and no locale can “shut itself off from translocal forces” (88), and thus must be careful about its overall placement and placeness in the world, he sees that rather than a blasted moonscape (admittedly we’ve come frighteningly close to such an eventuality on planet earth), a more likely outcome is a “centered yet also migratory world” (95) that is
“multivocal and ‘multilocal’” (92). Buell’s is a world that will, I suspect, be built on sense of hybrid places and spaces, a diasporic world in which we will strive to create a realistic, constructive, balanced diaspora framework within which we may be able to build or recover fruitful, inclusive models for cosmopolitan communities, flexible trans/nationalities, creative coexistence, and combinatorial human potential. (Pendery 36-37)

Over-optimistic you say? Well Buell himself encourages us that “something like a global sense of place is coming into existence” (92). From this point, Buell turns to literature to illustrate his ideas, with Derek Walcott’s epic poem Omeros ideally conveying the move from a sturdy home base, outward through “widening circles” (or, perhaps, Buell’s “archipelagos”) of consciousness, with, ultimately, a “polyphonic voice” emerging not just from the “people” of Walcott’s world (important though they no doubt are), but from a tapestry of “canonical poetics” (93), a veritable world music. As noted, Buell has been wary that “as scale and mobility expand, placeness tends to thin out” (91), but with his examination of Omeros we can see, perhaps, that literature might just thicken things up again, creating a “placeness in multi-scalar terms: local, national, regional, transhemispheric; topographically, historically, culturally” (96). To which we can only say (again) “here here.” But can it be so? In my own examination of this topic, I had hoped to come up with an Omeros of my own, in order to back up Buell’s expansive outlook. And yet I couldn’t. I was instead drawn inward—into a Buell-esque imaginary of constructed placeness and spaceness—say Ray Bradbury or Greg Bear (it seems that science fiction catches my fancy here). Or, alternatively, novels of “accrued palatial experience” and “eventmental” development (73)—perhaps Mary Lavin fits the bill, or non-fiction like Russell Baker or John McPhee (himself, needless to say, a fairly environmental writer). Finally I found myself back at regionalism, in literature that tries to find that certain “true” placeness of our lives—not a little laced with cultural, familial, national, ethnic and even racial shadings—say, Toni Morrison or Richard Rodriguez. Well, none of this is to say that Buell’s model and analysis are not applicable to environmental
studies, for of course they are. My examples are simply islets in the vast archipelago of
(literary) experience and environments, as envisioned by Buell. In the final analysis, we are
faced with understanding our placement in our environs better than we ever have before. We
do have to manage a world of hybridity (spatial and psychic). We will one day construct
environments that we can now only imagine. So let's test ourselves, moving outward into our
ranges and beyond, always treading oh-so-carefully as we go, learning how to live in this, our
new world

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