

The Poetics of Space (in Time)

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Tell us about yourself! What role do nature and reading play in your life?

I could begin anywhere, but for starters: I am a poet, and also, I am a researcher. I used to be a Health and Human Rights Policy Analyst for Health Canada; I worked on sexual and reproductive health and rights issues for the better part of 7 years, and then – I moved to Ireland to spend a year writing poetry. I wanted to see (and more exactly, to feel) what it would be like to devote an entire year (uninterrupted) to writing and being a poet. And so, I gave myself time, and the undivided attention that establishing and deepening an artistic practice demands. In many ways, I got what I imagined, and more – so much so that I quit my job in Canada, and stayed on, in Dublin (it will be 13 years this July...and counting). In the time since I exploded my entire life, I have published two poetry collections, written several essays, and, with the support of a 2019 Markievicz award, a collaboration with poets Kimberly Campanello and Annemarie Ni Churreain is due to be published by The Salvage Press before the end of this year (something that has been a long time coming, and for which I am very excited!).

In parallel, or better still, all at the same time, I am a researcher in Trinity College Dublin (I split my time between TrinityHaus (<https://www.tcd.ie/trinityhaus/>), in the School of Engineering and the Centre for Social Innovation, in The Business School). Over the last decade, I've been involved in projects that interrogate the role of the built environment in supporting health and well-being across the lifespan. Focussed on the neighbourhood scale, projects have been in the area of dwellings, hospitals, long-term care settings, and, more recently, nature-based solutions. As a researcher, I have zeroed in on how lived experience shapes and frames our understanding of space(s) and place(s) in and across time. In all of this, the role of language (both its technical components and its emotional aspects) is of deep concern.

I have read my entire life (with a particular affinity for works in translation). One of my favourite opening lines to a novel is “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” Related to that: translators are so important (and do important work) for literature. Thanks to Greek translations of ‘Oliver Twist’ and ‘The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’ I became literate in my mother tongue at 9 years old. At 14, I encountered Leonard Cohen for the first (but not the last!) time, and through him, Federico Garcia Lorca (and through Lorca, *duende*). The Diviners, by Margaret Lawrence is one of my favourite novels. Anything by Mordecai Richler is time well spent in my book (ha!). He wrote of Montreal, and his books feel very much like time capsules now – in them, descriptions of a Montreal from another time, and by extension, a Canada from another time too).

When it comes to nature, my relationship in and to it is wrapped up in a childhood split between a fondness for cozy Canadian autumns and deep winter snow, and then, with a move to Greece, a shift of experience. To write it out is to recall smells of salty air and the sounds of summer and the sea; I remember olive groves, and fig trees, and (most importantly) orange trees that no longer exist, except in my mind – my grief of their no longer being in existence now, and into forever, is vast. As time has moved on, and I have settled into adulthood, I have found myself describing my relationship to and with nature as ‘clumsy’. I have a great story of myself that involves a 20km hike in New Zealand’s north island in flip-flops (I was so stupid – and so lucky nothing bad happened to me!). A few years ago, in the beginning months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hiked up (and down) Croagh Patrick (Ireland’s Holy mountain). Some people do it barefoot; having learned from my previous clumsiness, I did it in proper hiking boots (you live, you learn) – and I feel really proud of myself of the experience.

Which book did you pick and why?

I have picked Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space'. The reasons for this selection are many. As a reading experience, it is singular and so good. Here, I will start by saying I am speaking of joy, and the real pleasure that a physical book imparts, and more to the point, this book in particular. I love to hold this book in my hands, to run my eyes down a page, and then, with my fingers, turn the page over, and from the top, let my eyes run down another, again and again, over and over. Thinking of this book, I have always imagined my reading (the embodied experience of my reading) as mirror (a mirror that stretches across and back into time) to Bachelard's writing – my eyes running down a page (now) bring to mind (which is to say, it is easy to imagine) the movement and action of his hands writing things into existence (then).

Normally, I would begin anything I mean to start at the beginning of itself – but, it was not so (and it has never been so) with this book. My reading of 'The Poetics of Space', over time, has been framed not so much by the 'order of things' – as presented in the structured table of contents – but rather, as a function of my mood and desire, across space and time. And space is important to note here too, because, of any book, this is the one that travels with me. Mostly, my dipping into and out of this book has coincided with my Christmas trips from Ireland to Canada. Over the last several years, sitting on planes (and always in a window seat), I have read "The Poetics of Space" as I pleased, and it suited me to read and experience it this way – so disconnected, so out of touch, and so out of order while in transit, from one place to another (also, the happy accident of flying from Ireland to Canada also being a way to 'travel back in time' is not lost on me). Chapters on the phenomenology of roundness, nests, and the miniature, and so much more, all zeroing in and out on how we experience space(s), and the function of language (and by extension, the role of poets) in helping us 'see' into (and also out of) the world.

Can you share a specific moment from the book that resonates with you personally? How does it connect to your work with Nature-based Solutions projects?

Because I find myself thinking **a lot** about time – in both horizontal (meaning: durational) and vertical (meaning: deep) terms – I have returned, most recently, to re-reading the 'Intimate Immensity' chapter. Time is everywhere in 'The Poetics of Space' and for me, this passage resonates, not only for how it treats time (to and from a point of perspective – 'with-me / with-us') but also time (expanded) beyond the point of it/the self/this perspective, in order to acknowledge the 'before-me / before-us'. Look at this!

"But who knows the temporal dimensions of the forest? History is not enough. We should have to know how the forest experiences its great age; why in the great reign of the imagination, there are no young forests. I myself can only meditate upon things in my own country, having learned the dialectics of fields and woods from my unforgettable friend, Gaston Roupnel. In the vast world of the non-I, the non-I of fields is not the same as the non-I of forests. The forest is a before-me, before-us, whereas for fields and meadows, my dreams and recollections accompany all the different phases of tilling and harvesting. When the dialectics of the I and the non-I grow more flexible, I feel that fields and meadows are with me, in the with-me, with-us. But forests reign in the past. I know, for instance, that my grandfather got lost in a certain wood. I was told this, and I have not forgotten it. It happened in a past before I was born. My oldest memories, therefore, are a hundred years old, or perhaps a bit more."¹

¹ pg., 188, Bachelard, G., The Poetics of Space (1958)

There is so much to get excited about here and then, unravel. I love the idea that within each of us there exist memories that are older than us, that are *before-us*, and yet, also, because Bachelard is making pointed effort to draw a line of connection between himself and his grandfather, these memories are also part-of-us, in so far as we (can) imagine ourselves not apart from time, in neither the horizontal nor vertical dimension; yes, I think this is the point being made here, and it has real implications for place-making, and more precisely, how we think and go about the practicalities and processes of long-term stewardship in fostering and making sense of place, over time. His noting of things having happened ‘before he was born’ speaks to the value of knowledge that is already in existence and gets passed down and along family (and by extension, community) lines over time. With time, we come to know things, and sometimes, we come to know them deeply, intimately; over time, I have come to see **intimacy** as a necessary and fundamental aspect of long-term stewardship. And as for how and where he ends his thought – ‘or perhaps a bit more’ feels like a nudge towards the infinite, and the dreamer in me can’t help but imagine this is Bachelard’s subtle nod towards the inter-connectedness of all things: after all, in and across time, we are all made of stars (it is immense and wonderful to think about oneself/ourselves in this way).

Despite the shortness of this passage, the passage of time expressed is significant, and it is worth taking stock of it. The engagement with the past does not feel in any way nostalgic; rather, he goes to great lengths to establish **a relationship** between the past and:

- **himself** (‘it [his grandfather getting lost in certain wood] happened in a past before I was born’) – for me, this feels like an anchoring, to some reference point (a zero?) from which the foundation of his lived experiences spring forth, and unfurl;
- **the non-I of fields and meadows** and “the different phases of tilling and harvesting –here, with very little effort, Bachelard draws my attention to the **qualitative aspect** inherent in **the experience of time**, what the Greeks refer(red) to as ‘kairos’; and, finally
- **the temporal dimension of the forest**, where both the qualitative (‘kairos’) and the quantitative (durations) (what the Greeks refer(red) to as ‘chronos’) aspects of time are given space to expand and contract: “History (read: chronological record of events) is not enough (contract!). We should have to know how the forest experiences its great age (‘great age’ is qualitative experience of time, expanding out)”.

(I know, I know - I’ve gone backwards; his ordering of things zeros in, until he lands on himself; my order zeros out – from him, I expand out until I reach the forest, again – but I think this is the work he is asking me to do, or else he wouldn’t have chosen to close the passage with ‘or perhaps a bit more’.)

This short collection of sentence does good work in establishing the spatial dimensions of (deep) time – and again, it makes me think about what this means for long-term stewardship and sustainability. Nothing is static; change is constant. Urban spaces, buildings, and the living (human and non-human) things that inhabit them are always growing, ageing, changing, and evolving over time² (Grey, T. et al, 2023). So, it isn’t (and it shouldn’t be) hard to imagine the oldest memories (most of them older than any of us) helping to make sense of the places in which we dwell and aim to live good, meaningful lives. Implicit in this passage, and indeed much of what makes ‘The Poetics of Space’ such a pleasure, for me, is that everything is connected to everything else. For me, the consideration of time in these ways is necessary for the kind of transformative change we imagine and aspire to achieve via nature-based solutions.

² Grey, T., Xidous, D., O’Neill, D. et al. Growing Older Urbanism: exploring the nexus between ageing, the built environment, and urban ecosystems. *Urban Transform* 5, 8 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42854-023-00053-z>

In what ways do you see the themes or lessons from the book aligning with the goals of conservation and the challenges we face in combating biodiversity loss today?

Building on the above, I am yet to feel fully convinced we understand what we are truly up against (it is easy to feel overwhelmed as we come to grips (or not) with what is happening); however – to draw a line between the past of this book (it was first published in 1958, 13 years after the end of World War II) and some present-day thinking that centres around how our values shape our understanding(s) and influence our relationship(s) to and with nature, there are interesting parallels in thinking/in imagining between ‘The Poetics of Space’ and the work of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

To begin, from the IPBES Values Assessment Typology (2022)³:

“People perceive, experience, and interact with nature in many ways. This results in different understandings of the role that nature plays as the foundation of people’s lives and in contributing to their Quality of Life, leading to a diverse range of values related to nature...The values of nature vary greatly across knowledge systems, languages, cultural traditions, and environmental world views, considered as separate from one another. Diverse understandings of nature are expressed in different ways (e.g., via symbols, rituals, languages, and data and models)”.

From there, the IPBES sets out a frame for establishing a typology of values⁴ – one that:

“requires a values perspective that encompass the richness of people’s relationship with nature: world views, the ways in which people conceive and interact with the world; knowledge systems, bodies of knowledge, practices and beliefs such as academic, indigenous, and local knowledge systems embedded in world views; broad views, the moral principles and life goals that guide people nature interactions specific values, judgements regarding the importance of nature in particular contexts, grouped into instrumental values (means to a desired end often associated with the notion of ecosystems services); relational values (i.e. the meaningfulness of human nature interactions) and intrinsic values (independent of people as valuers); and, value indicators, the quantitative measures and qualitative descriptors used to denote nature’s importance in terms of biophysical, monetary or socio-cultural metrics.”

All summed up, then, the IPBES values assessment provides a useful way of framing our relationship(s) to nature:

“**living from nature** emphasizes nature’s capacity to provide resources for sustaining livelihoods, needs and wants of people, such as food and material goods; **living with nature** has a focus on life ‘other than human’ such as the intrinsic right of fish in a river to thrive independently of human needs; **living in nature**

³ Summary for policymakers of the methodological assessment of the diverse values and valuation of nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (July 2022)

⁴ Summary for policymakers of the methodological assessment of the diverse values and valuation of nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (July 2022)

refers to the importance of nature as the setting for peoples' sense of place and identify; and finally, **living as nature** sees the natural world as a physical, mental, and spiritual part of oneself⁵.

Returning to the passage on the temporal dimensions of forests, I want to show some thinking – reflecting on how each line (or part of) might align with one or more ways of thinking and relating to nature (it may not be perfect, and each line of thinking is a springboard into deeper writing but, still – food for thought!):

“But who knows the temporal dimensions of the forest? (**living in / living as**). History is not enough (**living from**). We should have to know how the forest experiences its great age (**living from / living with / living in / living as**); why in the great reign of the imagination, there are no young forests. I myself can only meditate upon things in my own country (**living in**), having learned the dialectics of fields and woods (**living with**) from my unforgettable friend, Gaston Roupnel. In the vast world of the non-I (**living with**), the non-I of fields is not the same as the non-I of forests (**living with**). The forest is a before-me, before-us (**living with / living as**), whereas for fields and meadows, my dreams and recollections accompany all the different phases of tilling and harvesting (**living from / living in**). When the dialectics of the I and the non-I grow more flexible, I feel that fields and meadows are with me, in the with-me, with-us (**a shift from living from and in, to living with**). But forests reign in the past (**living in**). I know, for instance, that my grandfather got lost in a certain wood (**living in**). I was told this, and I have not forgotten it (**living in**). It happened in a past (**living in**) before I was born (**living as**). My oldest memories (**living in**), therefore, are a hundred years old, or perhaps a bit more (**living as**).”

Both the researcher and poet in me are satisfied with where I have landed. For now. As an exercise in thought, I have attempted to draw things together – to make and perhaps also, to reinforce a point: I like the values typology developed by the IPBES (and I have used it to better understand the ways in which the tangible and intangible aspects of the world are gathered (into), carried (within), and expressed (out) of each of us as part of workshops that I have run where we explore our relationship and reflect on our connections to nature with / in time⁶). In all of this, (and here, I repeat myself from before) the role of language (both its technical components and its emotional aspects) is of deep concern. Over time, I have laboured to draw the poetic gaze and research gaze together, into a collective ‘way of being and seeing’ in and with the world; for me, the function of (and the need for) both is crucial for doing good work towards addressing current challenges (of diversity loss, among others), and beyond (how better to **live as a part of nature, instead of separate from**).

If you were recommending this book to a colleague or a friend within the conservation community, what key takeaway or message would you highlight?

Spending time with this book is to reflect deeply about the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of things, the distinction and the dissolution between the interior (sense of being) and the exterior (relationship in and with the natural world) with and in time; in a manner of speaking, everything comes from nothing, and, having come

⁵ See: https://www.ipbes.net/media_release/Values_Assessment_Published#:~:text=The%20typology%20highlights%20how%20different,with%2C%20in%20and%20as%20nature (Accessed: July 26, 2024)

⁶ The EM|Path approach zeroes in on and highlights the lived experiences of the participants; using methods that not enable the participants to reflect on their experiences of and across different points in time (i.e. the past, the present), but also invites them to share their experiences in their own words, from their own perspective of knowing, this approach creates the conditions wherein the co-production process can be used to consider future goals and objectives. Furthermore, this approach can help identify and/or re-affirm the values to guide the overall planning, delivery, and stewardship of nature-based solution. For more: EM|Pathways, visit: <https://www.empathway.org/>

from nothing, everything then, is connected to everything else – all it takes is a small shift in perspective (the tiniest one you can possibly imagine), and all the world transforms.

About

Dimitra Xidou has a master's in international health from Queen Margaret University, Scotland. She has a background in public health policy, with a focus on health and human rights and has worked with multi-lateral organisations and stakeholders, including WHO, PAHO, and the UN. As a Research Fellow with TrinityHaus for the last decade, she has been involved in various health and design research projects, including dementia friendly dwellings and hospitals, and has significant experience in participatory design and stakeholder engagement. She also has extensive experience in nature-based solutions, having been a WP lead in Connecting Nature, and involved in NBSEduWorld, and is currently part of UNP Plus (2024-2026). She is also a poet and writer and has published two poetry collections (www.dimitraxidou.com). She is an Executive Editor of SPROUT, an eco-urban poetry journal, run in partnership with The Nature of Cities. She is a co-founder and Director of EM PATH WAYS, a spin-out of Connecting Nature, is not-for-profit social enterprise that uses a range of people-centred co-production and engagement techniques to support sustainable community development and environmental protection.