3.1: Imagined Space and Lived Space, Alienation and Destruction, Singularity and Specificity

Testing Three Oppositions To Find Out What (Lived) Space Means [1]

Isabel Hoving

"The woods were unmoved, like a mask … they looked with their air of hidden knowledge… mysterious stillness watching me…"

--Joseph Conrad--

"Once upon a time

there were trees on Parade

.........................

Jerusalem Thorn crown me

Almond nurture me

Guango shade me"

--Olive Senior--
The trees are close around us. They are watching us. Their still, mysterious watching may indicate the colonial anguish around the beginning of the twentieth century, as in Joseph Conrad’s imagination of an inimical African otherness that is watching the guilty European intruders. The trope of trees as eyewitness to human history, to its horrendous events and momentous changes, is central to the common imagination of trees as the patient witnesses of human transience.

However, the second motto, by the Jamaican-Canadian poet Olive Senior (1941), acknowledges another interaction between human beings and trees: there seems to be an arrangement of a much more practical nature between the two. The trees crown, nurture and shade the narrator.

I want to take the difference between these two imaginations of trees as my starting point for a discussion about the social relevance of the debate into which I inscribe myself here: the academic debates on space. The relation to social concerns has been central to these debates from their beginnings in the second half of the twentieth century in cultural geography, anthropology, and philosophy; they often had a definite critical dimension. A few decades before the spatial turn, time, not space, was still considered to be the central point of any critical approach, as Henry Lefebvre has it: ‘In the wake of this fetishization of space in the service of the state [as analyzed in the Hegelian tradition, IH], philosophy and practical activity were bound to seek a restoration of time’ (21), and Marx, Bergson, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and the Deleuze of l’Anti-Oedipe are part of that tradition (1991:22).

In an interview published in Simon During’s Cultural Studies Reader Michel Foucault remembers the extent to which time was understood as the sole object worthy of study:

I recall having been invited, in 1966, by a group of architects to do a study of space (…) at the end of the study someone spoke up – a Sartrean psychologist – who firebombed me, saying that space is reactionary and capitalist, but history and becoming are revolutionary. This absurd discourse was not at all unusual at the time. Today everyone would be convulsed with laughter at such a pronouncement, but not then. (Foucault quoted in During 1993: 140)

New theories of space contested the dominant focus on time and history, and again in the name of a cultural and social critique. Postcolonial theory, for example, insisted on the anticolonial potential of a focus on space. Caribbean and/or postcolonial scholars suggested space as the preferred, or sole remaining discourse available to colonized peoples whose histories were erased (Benitez-Rojo, Brathwaite, Glissant, Harris). This focus on space came with the dismissal of Eurocentric views of glorious genealogies as the foundation of a superior identity, and of Eurocentric historiography as the triumph of the white imperial self (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 34). Not all spatial approaches were seen as critical, though. The postcolonial interest in lived, practiced space emerged from the critique of the colonial view that colonial spaces were uninhabited, uncultured, and therefore available for appropriation and restructuring. For space is never ‘just there’ – is never neutral and mappable. It is here that we find the critical potential of spatial theory.

To fully understand this critical potential, it is helpful to consider the difference between the concepts of real, imagined, and lived space. Tim Cresswell’s introduction offers a good overview, with a focus on the critical dimension in the theorizing of space. Let us begin by tracing his narrative on the differentiation between (what others called) real and imagined space. In the 1970s, he argues, humanist geographers articulated a critique of scientific approaches of space as an abstract, empty location (real space). They began to develop the notion of place to theorize the emotional significance places have for people (Cresswell 2004: 18-24). Cresswell shows how a good decade later, critical geographers – influenced by cultural studies – questioned the essentialism and exclusionary nature of many of these notions of place; the significance of a place is not the same for all its inhabitants; people of different classes, ethnicities,
ages, etc. will experience it in different ways, that may often be at odds with the dominant representation of that place (for example, a nationalist, ethnocentric representation of a nation as the natural dwelling place of people of a certain race and ethnic identity only). Places were now theorized as ‘socially constructed … these constructions are founded on acts of exclusion’ (Creswell 2004: 26). The critical aspect of this constructivist approach lies in the insight that what has been constructed can also be changed; an essentialist, exclusionary, naturalized construction of place can be demystified and turned into an inclusionary place (Cresswell 2004: 26-30).

The next step in this discussion on how theories of space can contribute to understanding the politics of space, and help to realize an emancipatory act of demystification, is the redefinition of the concept of lived space. While this concept is already discussed in the introduction to this book, I now want to situate it explicitly within the context of the contemporary efforts to develop a truly critical approach to place and space. In the wake of Cresswell, I identify the critical potential of the concept of *lived space* in the approach to space proposed by urban theorist Henry Lefebvre and political geographer Edward Soja (who prefers the term third-space to indicate a comparable concept) to revise the restricting dualisms of the earlier anti-positivist theories of space discussed above, that only opposed real and imagined, objective and subjective space, as Tim Cresswell explains (2004: 38; Lefebvre 1991: 39). ‘Thirdspace is practiced and lived rather than simply being material (conceived) or mental (perceived) … Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialised ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways’ (Cresswell 2004: 38-39). Lived space, then, with its emphasis on everyday conflicts over ownership and meaning, allows for an even more radical anti-essentialism than the earlier concept of imagined space did, and as such it may counter any essentialist, homogenizing exclusionary understanding of the cultural meaning of places.

Postcolonial ecocriticism pushes this reflection a bit further. Though the concept of lived space is not often explicitly used in ecocritical debates, we could say that the radical, ecocritical understanding of lived space is the starting point for a whole new series of socially committed inquiries. One of the reasons why ecocriticism is such a booming field lies in the fact that it promises an approach that is both academically and socially relevant; it might even contribute, according to some, to the struggle against global environmental destruction. Postcolonial ecocriticism, therefore, brings up questions such as the following: If space is always lived, that is, shaped by the discourses and practices of the people and institutions that inhabit it, even when a colonial eye would deny that active presence, should we then not also take into account the agency of the animals and plants that shape that environment? Could an open eye for their agency lead to a critique not only of older forms of imperialist exploitation but also of the present-day destructive processes of globalisation that jeopardize both the natural environment and the communities that depend on it?

In this paper, I want to use the lens of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism to explore the question of how the concept of lived space retains its critical force. A Marxist-inspired tradition would seek its critical potential in its capacity to reveal the specific agents and interests at work in the conflicting processes that dominant, conservative discourse would describe as universal, inevitable, and natural. Is this indeed the way in which postcolonial theory and ecocriticism – two of the most explicitly socially and politically committed fields of inquiry the academy has on offer, nowadays – use the critical potential of the concept of lived space? I will seek an answer through a discussion of the way in which different poems and novels evoke spaces that are shaped by human, animal, and plant life.

**Olive Senior: Agency, Destruction**

I will begin by presenting the case of Olive Senior’s ironic poetry, which interweaves political issues with reflections on...
life's violence [3]. It can be read as an extensive exercise in the evocation of lived space. Senior's references to nature function as a means to convey and explore the concrete specificity of a space; not an essential authenticity, but a specificity that is understood as intensely historical and interactive. Her spaces are marked by violence, poverty, and exploitation. But there is not just one human source of that violence.

Plants are deceptive. (…)

……………………………………………

(…) from the way they breed (excuse me!)

and twine, from their exhibitionist

and rather prolific nature, we must infer

a sinister not to say imperialistic

grand design. (1994: 63)

Senior’s natural images identify the violence of the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean as bound up with its very environment. 'Gardening in the Tropics, you never know/what you’ll turn up. Quite often, bones' (1994: 85). These may be the bones of the ‘desaparecidos’, political activists and dissidents who were killed by a dictatorial regime, or they may be the remains of a young man who just got lost in the inimical territory. ‘I buried him again so he can carry on/growing’ (1994: 85). Senior speaks about the potential of growth and expansion offered by death – as death mediates the return to nature's materiality. But Senior does not see that promise as certain: a gardener can expect to suddenly dig up human bones of those killed in political violence in her garden, but will then have to act to let those dead bones lead to growth. Here we discern a non-transcendental, local response to post- or neo-colonial violence: it is pragmatically and oriented towards the future. In this sense, we can describe her evocation of postcolonial, corrupted environment by the felicitous term proposed by anthropologist Timothy Ingold: as task space. The task space, which could be seen as a specific instance of lived space, is a space that has to be unsentimentally and continuously laboured to counter the external and internal violence that threatens to destroy it.

Senior’s specific understanding of lived space counters metropolitan understandings of globalisation by presenting the local effects of globalisation, it highlights conflicts (such as those between those who were murdered for political reasons, and their murderers) and identifies specific agents within the field of neocolonial/ postcolonial violence, but these are not its only critical effects. Her work also highlights a tension between those who see alienation as the main issue in ecocritical approaches to place and those who focus on destruction and poverty as the main issues to address. Metropolitan ecocriticism has been traditionally concerned with the wish to heal 'humankind’s alienation from the natural world' (Buell 1992:8). Its challenge seems to lie in the re-imagination of the world as interconnected, as a network in which humans, animals, and plants are all engaged. But what is the productivity of this dominant focus? The concept of alienation implies that there would be a real, authentic world to reconnect to, a world that would be unmediatedly accessible. Poststructuralist thinkers have already problematized this assumption for decades [4]. I might add that a Marxist intervention would suggest that alienation itself is not the problem to address, but rather the political causes of the gaps and chasms. This is Senior’s position too. Her work, focusing on the specificity and destruction of place, seems not only to dismiss alienation as a relevant concern but also to problematize the recent theories of globalisation, that
subscribe to the Deleuzian emphasis on the dynamics of globalisation, as if this dynamics would be an autonomous process (instead of being caused by specific agents).

The Deleuzian theories that are evoked in a postcolonial and/or Caribbean context do not necessarily oppose Senior’s specific approach to lived space, but they do represent another approach to space that I can best describe with the help of Peter Hallward’s differentiation between an understanding of the world as specific, and as singular space. Hallward explains this distinction in his much-debated study *Absolutely Postcolonial*. He departs from the observation that, since Edward Said’s work in the late 1970s, postcolonial studies have always been concerned with specificity. In Said’s wake, postcolonial scholars generally hold that they want to foreground the specificity of non-metropolitan voices (in an emancipatory act that wants to defend diversity against appropriating universalizing gestures), and the specificity of the cultural, economic and political agents that work to erase that diversity. Hallward’s innovative argument is that, in spite of its explicit aim, the work of these postcolonial scholars is in fact often accomplishing an opposite goal: it focuses on developing generalizing vistas of the dynamics of globalization, that would not be energized and shaped by any specific external agents, but that would be independent and self-supporting. In Hallward’s unusual terms, he holds that these postcolonial scholars, therefore, evoke a singular process of becoming.

Hallward argues that some of the later work of Caribbean scholars such as Edouard Glissant (and we could add Antonio Benitez-Rojo) shows this emphasis. In as far as Deleuze’s work inspires their work, it is often more interested in the question how the body, or a culture or community, acts and connects to its surroundings (as a machine, in Relation), than how it experiences it. In this sense, these Caribbean scholars are equally concerned with lived space as Senior. However, their work risks understanding lived space primarily as non-specific, as shaped by a ‘singular’ global dynamics and, as such, it positions itself differently on the axis between specificity and singularity.

Thus, Senior’s poetry shows that (relatively) dominant spatial approaches (such as the ecocritical approach that is inspired by the need to overcome alienation from nature or the ‘singular’ theories of globalisation) are not necessarily critical in the specific sense of the term I proposed above: they do little to analyse the specific agencies and conflicts that shape global and local spaces.

Senior’s work occupies an illuminating position in relation to the tensions between specific and singular approaches, between the approaches organized around the notion of alienation, and those around the notion of destruction, and between lived space and imagined space. We have discussed the first two tensions. The centrality of the trope of the watching trees in metropolitan writing is a good starting point to elaborate the third tension (lived space/imagined space), that I have only begun to sketch in my introduction.

In literary texts such as the poems and prose quoted above, it is seldom suggested that the watching, redeeming gaze of the trees would be enough to effectuate a healing return to nature. Some writers, such as Joseph Conrad, question the possibility of a reconnection, not in the least because they situate the trope of the watching trees within the context of an exploration of the painful chasms and divisions brought about by historical violence: the unbearable gap between traumatic past and present, the anxiety-provoking chasm between colonial Europe and those that it has exploited, murdered, and declared utterly other. For this reason, it would be silly to suggest that this writing would not be socially relevant. Nevertheless, these political and social issues are here evoked as issues of guilt and alienation, which then become a problem of visuality: the frustrated or satisfied desire to be watched (and understood, or redeemed) by transcendent, superhuman beings. This desire to be seen, or the anxiety of being seen, is oddly one-sided, even when it is understood as the desire for contact; the context of guilt and anxiety seems to preclude any follow up that includes...
reciprocal interaction. It begs the question to what extent the trope of the watching trees engages with the critical potential of the concept of *lived* space that is at the heart of both the postcolonial and the ecocritical project, and that implies interaction. On a positive note, we could point at the fact that this writing perceives trees as the living representatives of a non-human universe, that watch human life from their untranslatable perspective, from their own world in which we, doomed humans, are only visitors; the trope seems to acknowledge nature's agency. But at second sight, the trope of the watching trees is not concerned with the evocation of a *lived* space in which living organisms interact. Rather, they evoke an imagined space, through the theme of visuality. They respond to the desire to be *seen* – not to the environmentalist desire to engage into a more complex, sustained interaction with this meaningful, lived environment. For this reason, the trope can be said to evoke perceived space (or imagined space, Soja), rather than a lived space. However, as I have already argued, from a sociological point of view the problems of guilt and alienation that lie behind the trope of the watching trees are not primarily problems of the imagination; the problems concern complex social conflicts, and they cannot just be solved through a different imagination of, say, the relation between human self and space. Here, then, the evocation of imagined space might lack the critical potential (in the sense of effectuating a demystifying identification of agencies that would free space for a change) that an evocation of lived space could have [6].

In metropolitan literatures that address the darker sides of globalisation in this manner, the theme of alienation looms large. As a consequence, this writing is often shot through with the more general desire to touch base again with material reality, the real, or, in Lacanian terms, the Real. From a poststructuralist perspective, this desire is problematic. In a 2001 essay, Slavoj Žižek explains that the psychoanalytical concept of the Real brings out the futility of this socially motivated desire for the real; the Real is not some stable, material ground that offers a firm foundation, but it should rather be seen as that what threatens our sense of self – the Real is the point where the Symbolic fails. The term indicates the horrifying moments of the collapse of our social order and our identity. In this sense, the Real highlights the irreparable gap between us and the world [7]. I will contribute to this discussion by analysing the way in which poets and writers – champions of the imagination – grapple with the paradoxical endeavour to heal alienation and return to the real by means of the imagination. Though the project to return to the real might seem doomed, its significance lies less in its relative success, than in its capacity to foreground the conflicting desires that motivate the wish to return to the real.

In this discussion of the way in which literature might respond to the desire to heal alienation, I want to bring together two of the three tensions central to this essay: alienation/destruction; imagined space/lived space. My main concern is to find out to what extent a literary work that desires to return to the real evokes a sense of space as perceived/imagined – in that case, I would expect the evocation of a coherent, homogeneous space, an emphasis on visuality as the dominant way of knowing, and perhaps the sense of control and mastery that comes with it – or as lived – and in that case, I would expect an emphasis on interactivity and a multiply sensual engagement with space, and a sense of a heterogeneous, dynamic, interactive environment. This discussion will shed light on two of the three pairs of concepts that are the topic of this essay (alienation/destruction, imagined space/lived space), and that will finally allow me to explain the critical function of *some* of the possible literary evocations of space.

In the next section, then, I will discuss two literary texts, written on the margins of the metropolis, that are organized around the desire to return to the real, and that both contain a critique of visuality. Both help us to grasp the critical potential of certain representations of space.
Cándani and Malouf: Is Death the Cure for Alienation?

The poetic novella by Surinamese-Dutch poet Cándani, *Huis van as* (House of Ashes), 2002, addresses the psychological and sensual disorientation of both those who emigrated from Surinam, and those who stayed. In this sense, the novel is very much concerned with the postcolonial exploration of (diasporic, transnational) space. The novel’s naïve narrator, a Hindustani Surinamese girl who returns for a visit to Surinam from the Netherlands, discovers that her own late father conceived a son with her adored bosom friend, Señorita, when she was only thirteen years old. It is suggested that the bosom friend was her father’s illegitimate daughter – which makes him both the father and the grandfather of his illegitimate son.

Cándani’s naïve, lonely heroine’s intense need for reconnection makes her see the world as organized around the binary opposition of closeness/isolation only, so that adultery and incest become meaningless words. For her, the bosom friend who was impregnated by her father embodies the bliss of connectedness, rather than the horrifying transgression of incest that is an effect of the havoc wreaked by colonial exploitation. This view is mirrored in the seductiveness of the Surinamese landscape that is presented as a sensual, but corrupted space that does not acknowledge any boundaries and therefore invites continuous (sexual) transgressions. The destitute women who live here mirror each other’s suffering. They are trapped in a lush, visual, imaginary universe. But it is only in the eyes of the lonely, returning daughter that this imaginary space appears as the space where the desire for a reunion can be fulfilled.

There are other ways to read this imagination of Surinamese space. The celebration of Surinamese nature can also be read as the narrative of joyful expansion, in the DeleuzianGlissantian sense (Glissant 1990: 53). From this perspective, the incest-survivor appears as a sensual organism that actively connects to a sensual network of plant, animal, and human life, which could be understood as the place of becoming itself. Rather than understanding the endless game of mirroring and doubling as a play within the imaginary order, it is possible to see the game as an effort to pluralize the body, through its endless active engagements. Ultimately, it is the incest-survivor’s actions that will save her, not an alternative imagination. She engages in the effort of transforming herself in different ways: not just by sensual relations to others; at a decisive moment, she decides to go out and seek an education. Her pragmatism productively disturbs the mesmerizing evocation of the landscape as a coherent imagined space. She represents a strong critique of this particular imagined space, which is structured by the device of mirroring, and therefore by visuality: it functions as imaginary confinement, and as an obstacle to action, to life.

Though this materialist reading brings out the story’s celebration of vitality and survival, while emphasising the multiplicity of one’s sensual interaction with the environment (and not merely one’s visual relation), I do not want to argue that the story is an exemplary celebration of Lefebvre’s lived space. Cándani’s narrative represents a phenomenological evocation of lived space, not the social and political concept coined by Lefebvre. Besides, the story has its darker undertones that invite a psychoanalytical reading. The only characters that fully succeed in realising a return to nature, for example, are dead – a bitterly ironic resolution of the problem of alienation. Thus, the novella suggests that the desire for the real, that animated the anguished protagonist, is not merely the desire for reconnection, but the desire to return to matter, and as such – as Freud proposed – it would be bound up with the death wish. The novel, then, foregrounds both the problems that are associated with the effort to reconnect with one’s native space as perceived/imagined space alone, and the difficulties of evoking lived space as the site of reconnection.

A comparable critique of the visual imagination as the privileged space to heal alienation can be found in David Malouf’s
wonderful novel about Ovid’s last years in exile, *An Imaginary Life* (1978). While at first Ovid deplores his exclusion from not so much the city itself, but rather his language, his meeting with an inarticulate wild boy brings him to be guided ever farther away from the symbolic order, into the imaginary and even beyond.

Many of the essays that are devoted to the novel offer a psychoanalytical approach, and rightly so. For the wild boy is clearly Ovid’s imagined double. The first paragraphs of the novel tell about his first acquaintance with the wild boy:

"When I first saw the child I cannot say. I see myself – I might be three or four years old – playing under the olives at the edge of our farm, just within call of the goatherd, and I am talking to the child, whether for the first time or not I cannot tell at this distance. (...) Bees shift amongst the herbs. The air glitters. It must be late summer. There are windblown poppies in the grass. A black hegoat is up on his hind legs reaching for vineshoots.

The child is there. I am three or four years old. It is late summer. It is spring. I am six. I am eight. The child is always the same age. We speak to one another, but in a tongue of our own devising. My brother, who is a year older, does not see him, even when he moves close between us.

He is a wild boy."

If the wilderness is the other to civilisation, the wild child is the psychic other to the civilized self, signifying the imaginary to the self that has entered the symbolic order. Ovid’s interest in the child ultimately leads to his reconciliation with his exile, as it leads him to acknowledge the transformative potential of the imaginary. He learns the value of silence, as the language in which he can fully communicate with the wild child and the nature around him. Slowly, happily, healed, he leaves language behind and enters the space of the real – and his death.

What interests me here, is the manner in which the wild child mediates Ovid’s relation to space. Different readings of the novel’s representation of space offer themselves. Some critics see here an analysis of the postcolonial condition (and therefore as the evocation of a postcolonial space). Bill Ashcroft, for example, argues that a post-colonial consciousness ‘accepts the boundless mystery of the marginal, the mystery of becoming’, whereas colonialism fixes ‘that continual possibility which represents loss or unformed being’ (54). In the same vein, Suzie O’Brien opposes imperialist discourse to the ‘wilderness of dialogical possibilities which is the space for postcolonial enunciation’ (O’Brien 1990: 91; quoted in Randall 2006: 19, my emphasis). For Gareth Griffiths, too, the sense of linguistic dislocation in the novel makes it a postcolonial text (62). He, for one, opposes a reading that would understand this thematic as universal (61). Just as Cândani, however, Malouf presents a sobering view of the boundless potential of this specific mysterious, dialogical space, as they both associate it with death.

As if responding to the postcolonial readings, Don Randall differentiates between two interpretations of the Child (2006). If we read the narrative as an account of identification and the gradual loss of identity, the Child can indeed be seen as representing the imaginary (2006: 25). There are, however, other reading and writing positions that might be better equipped to emphasize the productive irreducibility of otherness celebrated by so many postcolonial scholars. Instead of the postcolonialists’ poststructuralist reading, Randall proposes a phenomenological approach, especially Levinas’ ethics of the Other [18]. To emphasize his point, Randall states that Ovid ‘is equally clear in his recognition that the Child is indisputably other than anything the poet’s self contains and is also more than anything he could imagine’ (2006: 26).

As in that earlier dream I am face to face with something that is not myself or of my own imagining, something that belongs to another order of being, and which I come out of the depths of myself to meet as at the surface of a glass (52,
In spite of the fact that Ovid also recognized the boy as the wild boy he played with as a child, and in spite of the references to the 'face to face'-position and the glass surface where they meet (which suggest the realm of the imaginary order), Randall argues that the Child 'surely manifests otherness, because he presents a reality that is not and can never be contained within the self' (2006: 27). Thus, the Child would not stand for the imaginary other, the mirror self, but for an ungraspable otherness that resists appropriation.

This alternative reading is supported by the novel's ending, in which the visual imagery as the means of overcoming alienation is both evoked and problematized. This happens when Ovid and the child leave the relative order of the village. It is only when he is very close to death, when the wild child guides him ever further into the wilderness, that Malouf’s Ovid experiences the richness of his natural environment to the full. This wild, intensely productive space, with which the feral child interacts happily, is a multiple agents in its own right, and as such it exceeds the notion of imagined space (and certainly that particular imagined space that is organized by the Imaginary, and that appears as the mirror other of alienated, civilized man). By its sheer materiality, it also exceeds the mythical, transforming space that was the subject of Ovid’s famous works. It appears as a phenomenologically lived space that is sensually experienced through sight, hearing, smell, and taste; and though it is not the social space meant by Lefebvre, the novel’s emphasis on its interactivity does evoke a sense of lived space that has certain affinities with Lefebvre’s. Just as in Cándani’s novel, then, the potential of imagined space as the privileged site for the healing of alienation is seriously questioned, together with the redeeming force of the visual.

In the following section, I will turn to a novel in which the critique of visuality is articulated even more radically.

Marie Kessels: Imagined Space Is Lived Space and Vice Versa

In her novella Ruw (‘Rough’), 2009, the Dutch writer Marie Kessels also expresses the desire to return to the real, but she weds this desire with a strong critique of the visual. The story is told by a woman, who, having lost her sight in an accident, tries to regain her sense of space in new ways – through the use of hearing, touch and smell. Kessels’ work, of which the subtle cultural critique lies in its meticulous, sensual, idiosyncratic examinations of everyday life, that refute all facile understanding, can well be read as a convincing critique of dominant patterns of perception. No dominant, routine approach to the world can yield any real knowledge. This novel is an exploration of the most productive ways to relate to space when dominant strategies have fallen away. Because of its emphasis on the materiality of space, this novel also offers some insights that are at the heart of ecocriticism.

If we relate this novel to our discussion on the problematic concept of alienation, by reading the text – very much against the grain – as a comment on the relevance of the concept of alienation for a cultural critique, its response would be that the problem is not so much that an alien space should be made meaningful again, but that it should be made liveable again. Meaning, Kessel’s work suggests, is opposed to real understanding, as meaning is based on certain dominant discourses that blind as much as that they yield insight. What is more, visuality itself seems to be at odds with real understanding, as understanding can only come from painstaking sensual interactions. From such a critical perspective, the narrator has no option to gain the smug, triumphant mastery of one’s surroundings that one finds in some mainstream imagined spaces.

A remarkable aspect of the text is its explicit refusal of the logic of the imaginary order (with its emphasis on visuality) as
the most appropriate model to relate to the environment. This is, for example, made clear in relation to issues of friendship. The narrator may get very close to her friends, especially after a drink, but she will then remind herself sternly: she will allow herself the pleasure of this intimacy only ‘(u)ntil Narcissus was smack drowned in his mirror image’ (2009: 186). Mirroring as a means of identification is severely dismissed. This intuition of the futility of mirroring is also valid for her interaction with space. Refusing the illusion of similarity, together with the illusion of omnipotence that comes with that [11], she prefers to relate to the world’s new appearance through her touch. Her hand, now the mediating organ, ‘is not the mirror in which the world sees itself’ (2009: 137). The world that emerges is a rough space, unfit for visual fantasies (2009: 204). It is not the Lacanian Real, however. Resisting the force of the mirror, and the imaginary order, the narrator accepts that one can only come to terms with lived space through the painstaking mediation of signs and symbols. Though her sense of space is thus clearly related to the symbolic order, there are two reasons that problematize a poststructuralist reading that would see Kessel’s space as ‘text’. First, the narrator deciphers the signs without the benefit of any leading frame for this interpretation. Reading her surroundings is as maddeningly difficult as her effort to learn braille. Space does not present itself to her as coherence, network, textile, or text, but as an incoherent, unconnected diversity of impressions. Second, the signs are intensely sensual. Their materiality undoes their identity as merely semiotic traces.

Kessel’s narrative is therefore both a critique of any facile understanding of space as imagined, and an exploration of how the differences between imagined space, ‘real’ space, and lived space collapse, when the usual imaginary frames are no longer available. When space can no longer be imagined, one may try to map it anew; but this mapping is inevitably a full, physical and psychological confrontation with lived space, that is, an interactive, sensual space shaped by the practices and discourses of others. Mapping can only happen through living that lived space anew. Kessels defines space as simultaneously real, imagined, and lived, and she does so in a way that is exceptional – many literary texts will privilege one of these views of space, often imagined space.

My point is not so much that Kessels shows that space can be considered from all three perspectives, but that her novella embodies such a strong, convincing critique of the dominant desire to approach space as primarily imagined (through the visual). Thus, Kessels questions the gap between material reality and text: this alienating gap does only exist for the mainstream citizens whose experience of space has become an everyday routine.

Conclusion

In what way do postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism help us understand the critical potential of the concept of lived space? Senior’s work, which is inspired by a non-modern Creole understanding of life, shows that the metropolitan diagnosis of alienation as the main problem to address is hardly useful to those who are at the wrong, destructive end of globalisation. Marie Kessels, too, argues that alienation only comes with the uncritical adoption of mainstream discourses. Art and theory that evoke lived space, instead of, or alongside, imagined space, seem to steer free from the unproductive debate on alienation. The concept of lived space is concerned with action and connectedness, and not with identity and boundaries. Some of the promising senses of lived space, however (for example in phenomenology, or the ‘singular’ approaches discussed above), may be at odds with the much more political understanding of the term we can find in critical spatial theories such as that of Lefebvre. ‘Singular’ theories will not lead to any sharper insight into the specific agencies that are involved in the production of a certain space. I do not want to argue that art necessarily has to engage in such political practices – far from it. But if spatial theory partakes in a cultural critique, as its main practitioners argue, it is enlightening to ask in what ways it contributes to such a critique.
In addition, we might want to specify the exact nature of the contribution to a cultural critique of writers and artists who make the evocation of space their main concern. A focus on destruction instead of alienation often characterizes explicitly politically committed novels and/or non-metropolitan novels, but not necessarily so, as Cândani’s non-metropolitan novel on alienation shows; a focus on specificity may be part of a postcolonial cultural critique, but may miss the planetary, environmental agencies that shape places too, and that are acknowledged by ‘singular’ theories; finally, however, a novel’s reliance on lived space instead of imagined space may reinforce the demystifying strategies of a cultural critique, but not necessarily so, as Hallward’s critique of the ‘singular’ models of lived space shows. The fact that socially committed writers position themselves differently on the axis between lived space and imagined space, alienation and destruction, and specificity and singularity, is already a good indication that there is more than in critical position. I hope that my exploration of some of the different possible positions may be useful for any further analysis of the cultural critique accomplished by literary evocations of place and space.

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Notes

1. Some of my discussions of literary texts are based on longer versions in other publications. I have discussed Olive Senior’s work in my forthcoming book. Cándani’s novel is discussed in a chapter in The Cross-Dressed Caribbean, Ledent et al., forthcoming. Malouf’s novel was discussed in an unpublished paper, ASCA, 2006, and Kessels’s novel was analyzed in an unpublished paper presented in Bloomington, 2011.

2. See Mary Louise Pratt’s famous Imperial Eyes. Inge Boer’s work is an especially productive example of the postcolonial re-thinking of space.

3. Olive Senior was born in 1941 in Jamaica, and has been living in Toronto, Canada, since 1993. The Caribbean is nevertheless still central to her work (which includes fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and children’s literature, and which has won numerous awards).

4. Whereas some phenomenological strands within ecocriticism do hold that reconnection with the world is nevertheless possible, psychoanalysis questions this assumption for the reason that human subjectivity can only come into being by an irrevocable separation from the real (Grosz 1994: 116).

5. Though Hallward is primarily concerned with unveiling the contradiction between what postcolonial scholars say they do, and what they are actually doing, he is also highly critical of what he calls the ‘singular’ approach, which, in his eyes, lacks explanatory force. He develops this argument throughout his book, but a summary is presented in the Introduction.

6. One could also argue that imagined space can have a strong critical effect by evoking a cultural anxiety that invites a critical self-reflection: Conrad’s novella may be a good case in point. I would argue, however, that metropolitan literatures will often offer melancholy, nostalgic, or romantic imaginations of alienation and loss that will not necessarily invite a critical self-reflection, whereas non-metropolitan literatures will more often counter such imaginations to identify the actions, practices and conflicts that have made the world into what it is. For a discussion of this assumption in the field of ecocriticism, and a critique of romantic (environmental) aesthetics, see Morton (2007).

7. Not all scholars subscribe to this theoretical approach, however. Phenomenology, for example, does assume continuity between us and the world, even if this relation is not necessarily simple and straightforward. In addition, in the context of Deleuzian theory, the notion of such an irreparable gap does not make sense. There is not enough space here to elaborate on the differences between these approaches, but they would lead to different understandings of the concepts of lived space and perceived/imagined space.

8. By virtue of her closeness to the lush landscape, one could read the narrator’s bosom-friend as the embodiment of Surinam, which opens the possibility of an allegorical reading.

9. The focus on potentiality and becoming we find in many postcolonial interpretations could also be understood within another, non-phenomenological, Deleuzian approach.
10. Indeed, it is through Ovid’s writings that most of us became acquainted with the myths of Narcissus and Echo. This does not mean that Malouf’s story uses these myths (which evoke the Imaginary) to frame Ovid’s last years. On the contrary; Malouf’s story suggests that, to a certain extent, Ovid is finally moving outside the logic of the Imaginary (and the Symbolic).

11. In the period in an infant’s life that Jacques Lacan describes as the mirror stage, the young child begins to identify itself with an external image (for example in the mirror), which then offers the fragmented self the pleasurable illusion of coherence and omnipotence.