Landscapes, houses, bodies, things: A place and the archaeology of the Inuit imaginary

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Inuit spaces and places

The distinction between space, understood as an abstract, universal and quantifiable quality of location and extension, and place, as a historically emergent investment of particular locations with personal and collective significance, has proved to be an extremely fruitful move for archaeology. However, it bears a suspicious resemblance to the sex/gender dichotomy that was useful for a time, but eventually got in the way. It proved difficult to defend either a stable, pre-cultural field of anatomical difference, or a notion of social identities that somehow eluded the materiality of the body. Bodies are not so easily disentangled from history and culture. We should likewise avoid the temptation to divorce the rational, instrumental appropriation of space from the social and emotive creation of places. Rather than narrowing its usage, I would extend a general quality of placeness to embrace settlements, buildings, human and animal bodies, and things. The recycling of topological schemas between such superficially unconnected cultural domains points to the necessity of conceptualizing a field of circulation of representations that I refer to here as the imaginary. An understanding of places as topologically grounded imaginaries has interesting archaeological possibilities, which I begin to unfold through prehistoric Thule and historic Inuit examples.

Inuit toponymic studies disclose the vast amount of cultural information tied to the land at particular places (Müller-Wille 1987). The place-names assigned to topographic features or harvesting sites index myths, legends, proverbs, and tales of encounters with people, animals and other beings while traveling on the land. Topography is mapped into memory through its articulation with a store of cultural knowledge, and at
the same time the community comes into being through the enculturation of individuals to a local history embedded in places. Nuttal (1992) refers to the culturally idiosyncratic, historically sedimented, community-constituting landscape of Greenlandic Inuit as *memoryscape*, with much the same sense that Basso (1996) gives to the term *place-world*, or with which Ingold (1993), Bender (1998), Tilley (1994) and many others inflect *landscape* (see, e.g., review in Knapp and Ashmore 1999).

Despite the apparently great chasm between Victorian geography and Inuit memoryscape, early explorers remarked upon the ability of their guides to produce accurate renderings of convoluted coastlines with paper and pencil (Figure 1) (Boas 1964; Rasmussen 1931). The two-dimensional cartographic projection was not so alien that Inuit women and men could not execute one with consummate skill, and even improve upon it. By deliberately distorting distances to reflect travel time (Fossett 1996), the scale on these maps was often rendered in days rather than miles, and they were accompanied by a recitation of place-names that traced a path through a hybrid socionatural landscape (see Latour 1993, 1999, Escobar 1999 on hybrid socionatures), a simultaneously real and imaginary geography. The objectification of spatial relationships in the form of a map drawn in snow or carved in wood (Figure 2) was a traditional mode of the Inuit relationship to place (Fossett 1996). The cognized landscape was not less precise or rational for the immense cultural burden it bore. Space and place are merely analytically circumscribed moments of a complex, hybrid human spatiality.
Expanding place

Nevertheless, the notion of place enriches archaeology by forcing us to attend as much to the social, discursive and phenomenological qualities of locations as the behavioral economies and ecologies that have dominated spatial interpretation. For example, Nuttall notes that places are not confined to land; sea- and icescapes are also comprehended within an Inuit ethnogeography. A seasonal icescape unavoidably confronts us with the imaginative and mnemonic dimensions of place. In the Central Arctic in the not too distant past, entire Inuit societies camped for much of the winter in a sequence of communal snow house villages on seasonal sea ice, returning year after year to make places that survived only in memories, stories, and songs.

During the prehistoric Thule period land-based winter settlement was associated with more durable, deeply sedimented places (Whitridge 2001). Besides the settlements and other meaningful places strung out along paths of seasonal travel, individual villages were themselves dissected by paths and punctuated by regions or points of heightened significance. The site of Qariaraqyuk (Figure 3) was made up not only of dozens of long-occupied winter houses sunk into great mounds of refuse, but also of festival houses, or karigis, summer tent neighborhoods, paths, a great commons free of features onto which all the houses faced, and a corresponding common space for the dead, to their backs (Figure 4) (Whitridge 1999). Each of these locations represented a site of practical activity amplified in the community’s imagination over a history of use, and in historic villages were sometimes recognized by the conferral of unique toponyms on particular karigis and house clusters (Burch 1981).

Just as village space can be decomposed into its constituent places and paths, so
too can individual features, especially ones as complex as the house. Houses represent great condensations of meaning, memory, and history and demand their own spatial phenomenology, or topoanalysis as Bachelard (1994:8) called it. The Thule winter house consisted of a network of intimate sites of everyday practice, as well as the thresholds between these delimited spaces that were themselves sometimes named locations ethnographically (Figure 5). The practical and meaningful investments of these places can be teased out through spatial analyses of floor assemblages. A correspondence analysis (CA) of artifact distributions at Qariaraqyuk reveals spatial associations of artifact types interpretable in terms of a gendered segregation of refuse-generating activities, and a separation of domestic maintenance tasks from community gaming and ritual (Figure 6) (Whitridge 1999, 2000). The spatial structure elucidated by artifact associations can be put to work as an analytical template, by reinserting architectural context as a supplementary variable in the CA (Figure 7). The results reveal the pattern of articulation of the network of settings that constituted the built environment with the major dimensions of practical activity (Figure 8). This can be treated as a kind of conceptual map of the spatiotemporal rhythms of Thule community life, what Ingold (1993) calls the taskscape. The degree of association of men=s and women=s tools and refuse with particular places reflects the degree of redundancy of paths of movement and sites of activity, a time-geography (Giddens 1985), that can be superimposed on house and community plan maps as the first step in a phenomenological reconstruction of women=s, men=s and children=s routinized practice (Figure 9).

The umiak, or open skin boat, represents another topologically complex surface that
was historically differentiated not only by an elaborate terminology for its parts, but by the designation of places within it (Fortescue 1988) that had functional, symbolic, and sociopolitical significance related to the hierarchical organization of whaling. The boat's differentiated place-world is manifested in depictions of boats and their crews, often engaged in whaling, on decorated Thule artifacts (Figure 10) (e.g., Holtved 1944; Schledermann 1975; Maxwell 1983; McGhee 1984).

Even tools have their places. Harpoon heads undergo relatively little change in gross functional morphology over 1500 years of Neoeskimo prehistory, but particular locations on them are the sites of an almost obsessive stylistic and microfunctional intervention. The history of harpoon head forms reveals these zones of contact with seal or line or foreshaft as highly significant nodes within intricate cognitive maps that could be labeled, somewhat obviously, thingscapes (Figure 11). Considering also traces of use, breakage, and repair, it could be inferred that these places on harpoon heads were the endless butt of hunting stories, lessons to novice tool makers, and magical injunctions. The nature of the materials and decoration allows symbolic connections to be drawn from such sites to other cultural arenas (Whitridge 2002a).

The topology of an animal carcass was registered not only in an economic anatomy but in the social and political anatomies that inhered in the codes of game sharing (Figure 12). The partitioning of a whale carcass was a perilous political act with tons of food and oil at stake (Spencer 1959), forcing the butchers to attend carefully to conventional anatomical features and contours (Whitridge 2002b). The human body constitutes a topological field still more densely imbricated with personal history, cultural significations, and political disciplines, what Adrienne Rich (1984) called the geography
closest in the Thule record, their forms and materials and decorative tropes providing links to other discursive domains. Depictions of human figures in art point to a corpus of bodily techniques (Mauss 1979) or hexis (Bourdieu 1977), to which bioarchaeology also provides access (Figure 10).

The idea of place thus illuminates substantial new worlds of archaeological interpretation. Significantly, in the Inuit case, linguistic analyses reveal these worlds to be connected through semantic homologies between the various lexicons. The Inuit and Yuit terms for cardinal directions, the very concepts that enabled navigation on the landscape, are frequently derived from sets of terms for the walls of the winter house (Fortescue 1988). The same words or word stems were also employed for referring to regions of bodies and boats. There is a representational economy at work here, an efficiency of meaning achieved through the reduplication of topological schemas between semantic domains. This is manifested archaeologically in material and symbolic homologies between Thule settlements and dwellings (Figure 13), and in the meaningful juxtaposition of motifs in figurative art. An axis of semantic equivalency of houses and bodies and boats expressed in the Inuit word ilumiulerpaa, which can mean impregnating a woman, entering a house, or loading a boat (Nuttal 1992), neatly parallels the preference for images of people, animals, boats, and dwellings in Thule engravings (Figure 14).
The notion of the imaginary

Places are thus significant not merely in and of themselves, but as the sites of attachment of the real to a space of circulation of socially intelligible significations, in which entities that are incommensurate with respect to their materialities - landscapes, houses, bodies, things - freely exchange properties in the form of conceptual attributes and symbolic associations. This representational space is what I refer to here as >the imaginary<. In fields such as sociocultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literary studies, imaginaries are thought of as simulacra that tend towards their own materialization, for example a national imaginary that constitutes the unified state as an emergent political reality by setting the terms of a culturally-bounded historical understanding (Castoriadis 1987; Anderson 1991), or a bodily imaginary that renders certain modes of embodiment more intelligible and legitimate than others (which it suppresses or marginalizes) (Butler 1993; Gatens 1996). Imaginaries have the important property of defining the possibilities of future states of the real by underwriting particular logics of practice - what is thinkable and doable - in the present.

From the perspective of an archaeology of place, it is essential to recognize that imaginaries are nourished by their connections to the real (see, e.g., Escobar 2001 on place-based imaginaries). Without flags, anthems, monuments, and other national symbols, a national imaginary would never become fixed in practical consciousness, and neither would a particular bodily imaginary without the appropriate clothing, images, gestural repertoires, architectural settings and so forth. Imaginaries are everywhere affixed to the real, but are not limited by it; they constitute a heterogeneous field of communication and translation between diverse discursive arenas and material things,
a space of the production and ramification of hybrid cultural logics. Economic organization, social relations, environmental knowledge, ritual practice, or whatever can potentially achieve semantic connectivity within the realm of the imaginary. A place could be thought of as a *nexus of imaginary significations at the site of its intersection with the real*, at which point the imaginary achieves a practical, and not merely a semantic, cohesion and efficacy.

**Archaeological imaginaries**

An archaeology of the imaginary attends to the hybrid conjunction of networks of representations and the materialities of practice, as place does with respect to landscape. Places are topologically grounded imaginaries: heterogeneous, emergent networks of matter and meaning, not completed, hypercoherent symbolic lattices in the fashion of structuralist anthropology or economic geography. Attending to the placeness of Thule settlements, houses, bodies, and things, brings their imaginary dimensions to light. The CA of artifact distributions generated one version of an interpretive grid for exploring a field of practical and semantic associations related to gendered labor and a household/community opposition, but a differently constructed data matrix would have produced a different grid, and brought different associations to light. Another approach would be to start from a particular location and follow its tendrils of associations outwards. For example, kitchens were linked to women and girls by the CA. Ethnographic hints to the kitchen=s place in imaginaries of gender, the family, the house, etc. can be played off against the architectural details and contextual associations of real archaeological examples.
Thule kitchens are exterior to, in front of, below, and smaller than the main living area, hence distinctively emplaced with respect to the topological schemas noted previously. They are associated with fire, smoke, heat, blood, and the transformation of animals and clay into cultural products. Any or all of these could be taken up as discursive threads to be followed into other places and semantic universes. At Qariaraqyuk most kitchens incorporate a whale skull in the wall (Figure 15), presencing a large body of symbolism related to whales and women, such as the notions that the soul of the whale resides in the skull, and that women attract the whale to the hunter (Lantis 1938; Rainey 1947; Bodenhorn 1988). The wife of the whaling captain gave the dead animal a ceremonial drink of fresh water, and menstrual blood was used in esoteric whaling rituals (Spencer 1959; Lowenstein 1993). In a myth that is sufficiently widely distributed that it likely derives from a common Thule cultural base (Sheppard 1998), a young woman is abducted by a whale who makes a house for her out of his own bones at the bottom of the sea. Women enter into relationships of affinity with whales (and other animals, as in the Sedna myth widespread in the Eastern Arctic), allowing them to act as intermediaries between hunter and prey. Archaeologically, whale skulls are most common as construction elements in the karigis that served as clubhouses for male whaling crews and sites of community ceremonial, establishing an equivalency between the kitchen as a symbolically charged, domestic, female space, and the karigi as a ritually prominent, communal, male space. Skulls also occur on flensing beaches, where they sometimes exhibit a perforation that may be related to releasing the soul (Savelle and McCartney 1990), and a whale tail motif appears in the design of women=s combs and needle case toggles.
There is thus a complex field of semantic articulation of women and whales that is materialized at a major locus of domestic activity by the incorporation of whale skulls in kitchen walls. Through the translations made possible by this gyno-cetacean imaginary the whale skull attaches the kitchen, the people who occupy it, the activities that occur there, the temporal cycles of its use, and the things that are found there, to other times, places, activities, and things, including the karigi, the summer whaling camp, the flensing beach, communal ritual, care of the body, sewing, the bottom of the ocean, the society of whales, the reincarnation of animal souls, and the mythic past. Places such as the Thule kitchen are the inextricable sites of attachment and interpenetration of the real and the imaginary.
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Figure 1: Netsilingmiut map of western Boothia Isthmus (Rasmussen 1931:92)  
Figure 2: Ammassalimiut wooden maps of East Greenland coast (Peterson 1984:624)

Figure 3: Qariaraqyuk survey area
Figure 4: Qariaqyuk site structure

Figure 5: "Typical" North Alaskan winter house (after Murdoch 1988:72)

Figure 6: Correspondence analysis reflecting spatial associations of 44 functional artifact categories
Figure 7: Clusters of spatially associated artifact categories, with context types plotted as supplementary variables.

Figure 8: Summary of correspondence analysis results. Context types are superimposed on the major axes of artifact variability.

Figure 9: Places and paths in Thule winter village.
Figure 10: Details from Arctic Bay drill bow (after Maxwell 1983)

Figure 11: Sites of repeated intervention on Thule 2 sealing harpoon heads

Figure 12: Traditional bowhead carcass divisions at Tigara (after Foote 1992:31)
Figure 13: Practical and symbolic homologies between village and dwelling space.

SETTLEMENT
- SACRED
  - BURIAL CAIRNS
  - HOUSES
  - CACHES
- PROFANE

HOUSE
- BODIES AT REST
- SLEEPING PLATFORM
- HUMAN ACTIVITY
- HOUSE FLOOR
- STORED ANIMALS
- TUNNEL

HIGH STATUS
LOW STATUS

Figure 14: Thule drill bow from Arctic Bay (after Maxwell 1983)

Figure 15: Plan of House 38 at Qariaraqyuk

extramural detail not shown