Questioning place as a concept and category of humanist geography

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Abstract

This article discusses place as a concept/category in Geography, particularly, in Humanist Geography, emphasizing its transformations through an ontologic/ phenomenologic approach. In this context, I explore place as an openness to the outside, as a processual/multiscale phenomenon, and as a spatial creation/production. Therefore, my reflections on the concept of the place were updated and deepened in this article as a return to my previous studies and research on this topic and its operationalization as a concept/category.

Keywords: Place. Geography. Humanist geography. Spatial creation/production.

Problematizando lugar como conceito e categoria da geografia humanista

Resumo

Este artigo procura problematizar o conceito/a categoria de lugar na Geografia e, em particular, na Geografia Humanista, enfatizando as transformações ocorridas com o conceito/a categoria a partir de uma abordagem ontológica/fenomenológica de lugar. Nesse contexto, discute-se o lugar como aberto ao exterior, como processual/ multiescalar e como criação/produção espacial, atualizando e aprofundando a reflexão nessas direções, de modo a retomar o uso do conceito/da categoria lugar operacionalizado em estudos e pesquisas anteriores do autor.

Palavras-chave: lugar. Geografia. Geografia humanista. Criação/produção espacial.

Problematizando lugar como concepto y categoría de la geografía humanista

Resumen

Con este artículo se busca problematizar el concepto y/o categoría de lugar en la Geografía y, en particular, en la Geografía Humanista, enfatizándose las transformaciones ocurridas con el concepto y/o categoría a partir de un abordaje ontológico/fenomenológico de lugar. En ese contexto, se discute al lugar como abierto al exterior, como procesual/multiescalar y como creación/producción espacial, actualizando y profundizando la reflexión en esas direcciones, de modo a retomar el uso del concepto y/o de la categoría lugar, operacionalizado en estudios e investigaciones anteriores por parte del autor del presente artículo.

Palabras-clave: Lugar. Geografía. Geografía humanista. Creación/producción espacial.

Introduction

With this article, I intend to return to an important reflection on my research, developed within the scope of the activities of the Free Space Research-Action Group of the Universidade Federal da Bahia, discussing the notion of place and how it has been employed as a concept and category to guide our studies.

As a result of research conducted during a post-doctorate at the Humboldt Universität in 2009, the book *Lugar e Mídia* (Serpa, 2011) presents some of these meanings attributed to the concept/category of place. From the assumptions and premises developed in this work, I seek to advance the discussion about place as a lived and representation space as well as point out existentialist and ontological/phenomenological perspectives to approach place in the contemporary world.

In the book mentioned, I underscore the relationship between place and media, by focusing on groups and initiatives, which were in Salvador and Berlin at the time of the field surveys, that employed media such as radio, the internet, and television, to produce and broadcast content closely related to its place of occurrence. The starting assumption was that the relationship between place and media creates/produces urban space in contemporary times based on tactics and discourses typical of agents and groups that encompassed the different initiatives analyzed in the book (Serpa, 2011).

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At this point in my reflections and research, it was important to emphasize that, by relating to each other, place and media reflected and conditioned spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 2000), producing "places" in the contemporary city and involving different scalar dimensions in this process. To problematize this relationship, my premise was that the action and discourse of these groups and initiatives produce/create "places" from the appropriation of the media in specific spatiotemporal contexts, through strategies that may or may not consolidate in spatialization strategies (Certeau, 1994).

In this context, the spaces of representation gained, in the analyzes developed in the book, the status of places of enunciation, of places that can emerge from the institutional superstructure, from the confrontation with the hegemonic ideas of culture, with the mass media strategies. This confrontation took place, in my view, basically through the production/creation of enunciated places, of places perceived and conceived through the contents produced generally by a few groups, but articulated in a network, like a web, which stitches together the enunciation strategies of/in different places, a "world" web, which also opens places to the outside (Serpa, 2011).

The idea of places open to the outside and integrating scales, from the local to the global, was the basis for reflection at this point in my research. When analyzing the tactics of socio-spatial appropriation of the media, conducted by groups and initiatives that made up the sociocultural fabric of the neighborhoods and districts surveyed in the two cities, I realized that these representations are built in everyday life from social, historical, economic, and cultural elements of their respective spaces of action. They are also influenced by the accessed media of these groups and initiatives, which is the first condition to produce content about the "place" (Serpa, 2011).

The greater the availability and access to the media in the neighborhoods and districts of the two analyzed cities, the more consolidated the spatial representations of groups and initiatives not aligned with the mainstream. Representations needed to be "communicated" so that places could be effectively enunciated, even though, in most cases, these representations were ignored by the mass media. This also shows that the discourse of the groups and initiatives analyzed in the book was never isolated from the respective contexts of enunciation, revealing that places are always procedural and articulate different conceptualized spaces (Serpa, 2011).

This connection of geographic segments/scales (from local to global) was broader and more complex depending on the articulation capacity of the groups involved, as well as their accessibility to the technical means in each specific place. This was also conditioned by the quality of the means of communication available and by their range of coverage. It was found that the places enunciated/communicated by these groups were always multiscale, but the spatial segments involved in the discourse and action by the groups and initiatives were more complex and more diverse according to the accessibility/availability of technical resources in their respective areas of action.

Thus, it is these qualities, place which is open to the outside, as a procedural/multiscale and as a spatial creation/production that I intend to dive into in the next sections of this article, updating the reflection in these directions (Serpa, 2011).

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Is place closed and reduced to a single scale or open and multiscale?

It is still common in Geography to associate the category/concept of place on a single scale: the local scale. This greatly limits the use of the concept/category of place in the discipline, since place cannot be reduced to a single scale of approach. However, this conception of "place" is not exactly new, because the idea of place as multiscalar had already been proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan, in her book Space and Place, which was translated into Portuguese as *Espaço e Lugar* by Lívia de Oliveira and published in Brazil in 1983 (Tuan, 1983).

However, this confusion between place and location fed and still feeds other limiting conceptions of the concept/category in the scope of Geography, for example, when, place is associated with spatial sections closed to the outside, as well as a fixed spatial identity, which is conservative and parochial. Although this may be true in some contexts and situations, these theoretical-methodological preconception and confusions can lead to criticisms of the phenomenological/ontological approach to place in humanist geography, by geographers related to political economy, such as, Doreen Massey (2000), p. 177):

> One of the results of is and increasing uncertainty about what we mean by "places" and how we relate to them. How, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of local place and its particularity?

In a localist and closed sense, places and the search for a sense of place would necessarily be considered "reactionary." Massey opposes this type of approach by proposing contemplation about other senses of place, of a more progressive nature, of places open to the world (Massey, 2000, p. 178). Although Massey's criticisms generally refer to humanist geography and the phenomenological approach to place, without taking into account new understandings of the concept/category in this subfield of Geography, her queries could be considered to emphasize how a phenomenological/ontological approach to place relates to the perspectives that she points to in its formulations. In other words, Massey's critique is dated and refers to a vision of place resolved by humanist geographers.

When approaching the issue of space-time compression in contemporary times and the way in which different groups and social classes will experience it, Massey returns to questioning how we think about places in a world of "socially varied time-space changes do we think about 'places'?" when the "'local communities' seem to be increasingly broken up." In such a context, how can one still think of place as "locality?" For her, "we need, therefore, to think through what might be an adequately progressive sense of place, one which would fit in with the current global-local times and the feelings and relations they give rise to (Massey, 2000, p. 181). Finally, Massey emphasizes with her criticisms and formulations that the "sense of place" is always politically disputed.

This is precisely the direction pointed out in the book *Lugar e Mídia*, cited in the introduction to this article. In the book, the groups and initiatives were analyzed as sociocultural activisms (Serpa, 2009), as subjects of renewed political action, in a more plural and less closed urban public sphere to popular and/or alternative groups in our cities. This reflection also put

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the discussion on the right to the city in a new perspective – urban places appearing in all their fullness as "works", through spatial practices that deviate from the "models" (Lefebvre, 2006). Theses "works" enunciated and communicated, in my opinion, as expressed in the conclusion of the aforementioned book, which could/should be considered as reflections on "e-governments" and political participation via the media, opening institutional spaces for the emergence of non-hegemonic spatial representations, to renew the planning and management strategies in/of the contemporary city. The examples analyzed in the book *Lugar e Mídia* showed that countercultural practices are entrenched in the cracks and crevasse of the contemporary city and are revealed in the practices of appropriation of the media by specific groups and initiatives in the respective places they occur.

Thus, the next section of this article discusses how more recent reflections in the field of humanist geography, especially those of Edward Relph, have been moving precisely in the direction of what Massey pointed out two decades ago, of "re-imagining" the place, that is, "re-imagining" geographic specificity and place differences, repositioning the concept/category in the discipline, so that "place" is understood as: "(i) not delimited, (ii) not defined in terms of exclusivity, (iii) not defined in terms of opposition between an inside and an outside; and (iv) not dependent on false notions of an internally generated authenticity" (Massey, 2004, p. 20).

Place without limits: a repositioning of place as a "confluence"

In a chapter written especially for the book *Qual o Espaço do Lugar?*, organized by Marandola Jr., Holzer and Oliveira (2012), Relph discusses new approaches to the concept/category of place, affirming place as a focus and confluence of experiences lived daily; a place of an "I without limits", the basis for these everyday experiences of the world.

The author states that, contrary to what one many think, modern technologies do not diminish but rather increase our experience of place. The provides his own example, at the time he was writing the chapter for the aforementioned book: "I am in a local café on a street in Seattle, far away from my home in Toronto, drinking fair trade coffee from El Salvador made in a machine from Italy, writing a paper for a publication in Brazil and occasionally reading e-mail from friends in far-away cities." (Relph, 2012, p. 31).

In this context, Relph also observes that place and sense of place are not constant, addressing the differences in his sense of place than that of his grandparents, who lived most of their life in a village, rarely traveling more than twenty kilometers away. Thus, his grandparents' experience of place was strongly influenced by the economic and technological conditions in which they lived, and their sense of place was narrowly limited and deeply rooted. On the other hand, "mine, which is affected by my mobility and is by no means uncommon in the early twenty first century, is diverse and cosmopolitan." (Relph, 2012, p. 28).

In a phenomenological/ontological approach, being and place are always intrinsically linked. Supported by the reflections of Jeff Malpas, Relph reflects on place as how we uniquely and connectively experience the world. Place is the nearness of being, because "being is the existence of all things," but nearness here has nothing to do with Cartesian metric, but "means an awareness of the openness, totality and connectedness of the world." (Relph, 2012, p. 28).

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By relating "home" and "place" and still supported by Malpas' reflections, Relph (2012, p. 29) emphasizes that "home, and indeed every place, is bounded not by precisely defined boundaries but in the sense that it is a focus of intense experiences, and is simultaneously boundless."

In the reflections of both Relph and Malpas on home and place, the influence is evident of Martin Heidegger's thinking and his notion of "inhabiting", which is "updated" by the first two in the directions as previously mentioned. For Heidegger (2008, p. 137), "man's reference to places and through places [...] rests on inhabiting. The relationship between man and space is nothing more than a dwelling thought of in an essential way." However, Relph is critical about the romantic aspect of part of Heidegger's thought, disagreeing with the Heideggerian view that modern technology would distance us from inhabiting and being: "In this I think he was only partially correct." (Relph, 2012, p. 30). This point of view, of strictly delimited places rooted in geographical experience, would lead, according to Relph, to attitudes of exclusion and "a poisoned sense of place" (to which Heidegger himself succumbed when he became associated with Nazism)"(Relph, 2012, p. 30).

Relph's position that technology would not distance dwelling from being is supported by our own research carried out in Brazil and Germany in the first decade of the 2000s, the results of which are in the aforementioned *Lugar e Mídia*. There, we defended the assumption that the investigation of the relationship between media and place, between technology and place, should also start from an evaluation of space as an operational medium and as a perceived/conceived medium, according to the ideas of Milton Santos (1996). From the results of such an investigation one could infer the role and importance of places for the appropriation of technique and its transformation, through use and appropriation of technology, which would also lend a processual meaning to the concept/category "place". This "new technical medium" (composed of communication and information technology, of languages, and equipment) goes beyond the function of supporting human action, since it is itself, according to Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro, "intrinsically action": "For this reason, its nature is strategic and, virtually, instituting" (Ribeiro, 2008, p. 191, emphasis in the original).

Thus, the idea that place is uniqueness, but also connectivity, fits well with the premise that the appropriation of technique and its transformation into technology can increase and strengthen our experiences of place, as highlighted by Relph. This becomes even more true if we agree with Relph (2012, p. 31) that a place is a "a microcosm. It is where each of us relates with the world and where the world relates with us." In the next section, we briefly discuss the relationship between world and place from a phenomenological perspective, also paying attention to the problem of the spatiality of being-in-the-world and its manifestations as lived space.

World and place and the spatiality of being-in-the-world

In this section, we start from the discussion established by Werther Holzer in a chapter of the book already mentioned here, *Qual o espaço do lugar?*, published in 2012. In this text, Holzer (2012, p. 290) states that "'world' for a phenomenological science is in essence the meaning of all things, referring to the being who addresses things and questions their meaning", He defends

the premise that "world" should also have this essential meaning for geographical science. At the same time, one wonders why, in Geography, "world" has been recurrently replaced by "space".

The author finds the answer in the affirmation of the positivist paradigm in the discipline, with the aim of "giving a status of science […] to a knowledge that many geographers, from the beginning of its constitution as an academic discipline, knew to be 'beyond science'" (Holzer, 2012, p. 290). He explains: "beyond science, because, by necessarily referring to the lived world of man, it promoted a synthesis of many types of knowledge." Clearly, we are speaking here of a "world of life", in the same way as Edmund Husserl thought, as "a world prior to the scientific world"; however, this also means "that we do not have the world as just a phenomenon constituted by consciousness (by the subject), but also constituted in consciousness" (Goto, 2008, p. 97-98).

According to Holzer, to understand the (adjectivized) concept of geographic space, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of the relationship between world and place. At the same time, he recognizes that "world" would need to be better studied by Geography, "overcoming the colloquial meaning as the 'terrestrial globe', a meaning recently appropriated by Geography from the theme of 'globalization' or 'worldization'" (Holzer, 2012, p. 293). From this perspective, Holzer emphasizes that "the object of Geography calls for analysis from a phenomenological contribution that addresses the 'everyday experience of the world', that is, that explores it as a 'geographical experience'" (Holzer, 2012, p. 299).

Thinking along similar lines, Relph deepens the relationship between world and place, by emphasizing that the whole world is involved in each place, giving this assertion a profoundly existential and ontological meaning, but simultaneously, recognizing the economic and social aspects involved in this relationship, since "everywhere is now caught up to a greater or lesser degree in the neo-liberal forces of globalization." (Relph, 2012, p. 31). This is precisely the case of electronic communications, as we have been emphasizing so far, which do not recognize borders, which, in our view, emphasizes the character of openness to the world and multiscalarity of "place" in contemporary times.

Therefore, when examining phenomenology/ontology for the meaning of the relationship between world and place, both Relph and Holzer arrive at similar considerations, the former asserting the pragmatic value of phenomenological interpretations of place and being, "finding ways to address the enormous global/local issues that have emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century." (Relph, 2012, p. 31-32); and the second calling on "geographers of all creeds and nations", if they want to, "to adapt Geography to the demands of a world of people immersed in 'globalization'", to "talk about the 'world' and leave 'space' for the astronomers, physicists, and mathematicians" (Holzer, 2012, p. 302).

Although many would probably disagree with him, Holzer's appeal may indicate a shift in theoretical-conceptual, methodological, and ontological focus in geographical studies and reflections, from the concept/category of space to the concept/category of the world; to underscore and reveal the spatiality of being-in-the-world that is manifested through different geographic modes of existence, such as landscape, place, region, and/or territory: geographic modes of existence that also translate into concepts and categories of geographic science (Serpa, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Marandola Jr., 2012).

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By attributing "spatiality" to being-in-the-world, to presence, Heidegger (2012) seeks to conceive "being-in-space" as a way of being, which discovers "at each step a 'world'" (Heidegger, 2012, p. 164). In *Being and Time,* Heidegger (2012, p. 166) emphasizes the original character of the "world" in relation to "space", because "space is not in the subject, nor is the world in space," because the subject, "if well understood ontologically, is spatial. And [...] space shows itself as *a priori*. Space, by "showing itself essentially in a world", does not condition its mode of being, because it depends on the world as *a priori* presence.

In other words, "space can only be conceived by in relation to the world", since "one does not have access to space in an exclusive or primordial way"; because space is a constituent of the world, "according to the essential spatiality of presence", with regard to "its fundamental constitution of being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2012, p. 168). In this context, "the being-in-the-world must be made visible in terms of the structural moment 'world'" (Heidegger, 2012, p. 110), "world" which is "the context 'in which' a factual presence 'lives' as presence", "world" that has "a preontologically existential meaning" and that "sometimes indicates the 'public' world of the we, sometimes the immediate (domestic) and 'self' surrounding world" (Heidegger, 2012, p. 112).

This shift in focus of geographical reflection, from "space" to "world", a world that precedes space and reveals the spatiality of presence, seems fundamental to understand that the lived space is lived while it is created and produced, as the spatiality of being (i.e., as a "quality"), deconstructing the idea of space as an externality or as a "measurable" materiality.

The great potential in reflecting on the spatiality of being-in-the-world is because this spatiality reveals itself as geographic modes of existence, with their qualities and in their specific contexts/conjunctures. Furthermore, this spatiality sometimes reveals itself as territoriality, sometimes as regionality, and sometimes as placeness, which will be focused on the latter.

A spatiality that translates into locality

If we start from the point of view that space is created and produced as a lived space and as a spatiality of being-in-the-world, we must admit that this spatiality can be translated into placeness, creating and producing particular places open to the world: placeness as quality of places and a specific form of manifestation of the spatial presence. The placeness is expressed by a gradation, which is stronger or weaker depending on the different contexts and spatiotemporal situations.

Based on Relph, it is possible to enunciate some of the aspects that can manifest in some kind of placeness in terms of the spatiality of being-in-the-world: gathering – because the place demonstrates its specificity and its openness by virtue of its quality of "gathering together"; placescape – the most evident aspect of the place, its morphology; roots and rootedness – "we can have roots simultaneously in several different locations, all of which are connected." (Relph, 2012, p. 24); nodes – because places are nodes that articulate socio-spatial networks at different scales; construction/creation – the different ways in which different subjects create and produce space as a "place"; sense of the place – the ability of each subject, individual or collective, to evaluate and appreciate places.

Of all the aspects raised by Relph, the "sense of place" seems to be the most important, as it refers to the subject (the factual/empirical being-in-the-world), individual or collective, "the ability to appreciate places and grasp their qualities," and this ability can present itself as innate or be learned and improved. From this perspective, "since people have senses and places do not" (Relph, 2012, p. 24). Relph even notes that "Geography as a discipline seems to attract those who have a strong sense of place and also enhances this sense."

The performance of the groups and initiatives analyzed in our research in Berlin can be interpreted in the terms proposed by Relph, because their action is often linked to specific discourses (and senses) about (of) "place." Although it appears frequently in the discourses of these subjects, the spatial focus of the "district" (Bezirk) is often replaced by the focus of the "neighborhood" (Viertel) or even the "block" (Kiez). The focus of "city" reveals a contradiction in the discourse of these groups and initiatives about Berlin. On the one hand, the German capital is portrayed as a set of towns and "villages," on the other hand, the city is viewed as a place of multiculturalism and the "meeting of cultures" (Serpa, 2011).

The regional focus (Berlin-Brandenburg) is also present in the discourse on "place" of the different groups and initiatives. One reason for this is that to obtain a frequency for a non-commercial radio station in the city, it is necessary to negotiate with parliaments of Berlin and Brandenburg a change of legislation in both German states. The objective is to envision a non-commercial radio station with its own frequency that broadcasts its programming to both Berlin and Brandenburg. In Germany, each state often has its own communication laws and radio stations with very different characteristics (Serpa, 2011).

The groups active in Berlin have in common with similar initiatives in other German cities – the spoken and written language – giving rise to the national focus in their discourse on "place". A network/association of independent German-speaking radio stations makes it possible, for example, to exchange programs and content over the internet, even going beyond national borders to reach groups and initiatives in countries with the same language, such as Switzerland and Austria. The National Association of Free Radios brings together broadcasters of the genre from all over Germany, on account of their common guiding principles, such as their not-for-profit statis, their strong connection with the place, with openness and access to all those who want, in theory, to participate in its programming (Serpa, 2011).

On the other hand, the media appropriation strategies in Salvador and the scales involved were much more restricted in our research and clearly demonstrated that the "neighborhoods" made up the repertory of everyday life in the popular areas of the Bahian capital, "repertory" mentioned here in the sense of Michel de Certeau (1994) in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In the discourse of the hosts on the community radio stations surveyed, in the poorer neighborhoods of Salvador, the "neighborhood" was always valued as a spatial area: sometimes referring to the penetration of broadcasters in these areas, reflected in the local content broadcast in their programming, sometimes emphasizing the "public interest" character of these stations for the population to raise the self-esteem of residents or even to provide them with public service utilities (Serpa, 2011).

The game of scales that operates in the creation/production of places in contemporary times – our research found that this was much more extensive for the groups and initiatives present in Berlin than in Salvador – also relativizes the idea of "inside" and "outside", of "insiders" and "outsiders", present in a closed conception of "place", which in our view, is an understanding surpassed by humanist geography. The game of scales clearly shows that being-in-the-world is a limitless being that reveals itself as spatiality/place by creating/producing "place" in everyday life, "place" as the simultaneous "here" and "there" that is discovered in the occupation and that translates into "multiplicity" for presence, as stated by Heidegger (2012, p. 156-157).

In this context, the opposition between inside and outside can no longer be "measured" by its geometric evidence, since it is necessary to "put space in parentheses", make it retreat, "so that we can have free thought", in a radically dialectical attitude (Bachelard, 1998, p. 233). In other words, all places, in an existentialist/ontological conception, are at the same time vast and intimate because the dialectical relationship between inside and outside diversifies and multiplies in countless nuances and shades. Both, inside and outside, are "intimate" and are always ready to "become inverted" (Bachelard, 1998, p. 221).

By creating/producing space as a place and manifesting spatiality as place, being-in-the-world also reveals its corporeality. For Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 205), being a body "is to be tied to a certain world… our body is not primarily in space: it is of it". And if the body only "is" of space, if "being a body" is always "being a body-in-the-world", we must also admit that place, world, and space are human constructions and not objective and strictly "material" externalities. Place, world, and space are dialectically constituted as product and process, as embodied human experience.

Place, world, and space are experiences/concepts that only occur in processes related to being-in-the-world, such as, in the specific case of the creation/production of places, of processes of "placement", according to what we discuss in this article; therefore, the processes of "placement" produce/create simultaneously world and space, the latter as a spatiality intrinsic to being-in-the-world, as "location." The relationship between space and world, in turn, finds its fulfillment precisely in the processes of "placement": by "place", appropriating and creating space, being-in-the-world also creates its own existential "worlds" embodied in space and time. This also means relating to the place in a sensitive way through existence. It means talking and interacting with others and meeting non-human things, underlining the responsibility of caring for the being that is related to living in places, such as emphasized by Relph based on Heidegger (Relph, 2012, p. 30).

Furthermore, if inhabiting has to do with building, as Heidegger (2008, p. 126/127) reminds us, and if building "is already in itself to inhabit" and "saying to build", then, "in the sense of inhabiting, that is, in the sense of being and being on earth, building remains, for man's daily experience, what has always been, as the language so beautifully says, 'habitual'" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 127). Thus, inhabiting and building the being-in-the-world creates place, on many diverse scales, "place" the earth, through action and discourse, which was shown by my research with the groups and initiatives that create place in Berlin and Salvador to appropriate the available means of communication action an operational means (Santos, 1996).

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These groups and initiatives also demonstrate that action and discourse are "language" and, following the trail of Heidegger (2008, p. 126), "access to the essence of a thing comes from language", but for this to happen, we must pay attention to the vigor of language, which, "among all the appeals that speak to us and that humans can, from ourselves, contribute to letting ourselves be said [...] is the highest and always the first".

So, let the language speak of the essence and appearance of this contemporary place, which is at complex, multiscalar, and multifaceted, of this place of a limitless being and open to the world through action and discourse.

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