Scale and the other: Levinas and geography

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to Geography’s recent conversation of identity, landscape, scale and difference. It brings into dialogue previously divergent discussions about space, place and difference and proposes an approach that treats time, space, place and scale as co-equal conceptual and/or analytical elements of cultural landscapes. It argues that many philosophical debates about embodiment, emplacement and difference abstract a universalized notion of ‘place’, ‘body’ and ‘self’ which confounds and conflates scale issues and consequently confuses the dialectical interplay of ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘being’ and ‘culture’ across scales. The paper takes the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and the discursive communities around it as a philosophical entry point into these debates.

Keywords: Geographical scale; Difference; Cultural geography; Indigenous knowledge; Embodiment; Emplacement; Infinity; Other; Levinas; Scale politics of spatiality

1. Introduction

Attention to spatiality is acknowledged as one of the characteristic shifts of recent social theory. Within geography ‘cultural’ and ‘textual’ turns have reflected and reinforced social theory’s ‘spatial turn’. In dealing with the sociality and spatiality of lived experience, the interplay of material, perceptual and cultural dimensions of experience has proved fertile ground across the social sciences in general, as well as within geography in particular. Increasingly sophisticated engagement with space, place and culture, however, has not been matched in treatments of geographical scale. Jonas (1994) made this point some time ago in an editorial plea for a more careful and considered use of scale in geography. Despite considerable growth in explicit discussion of scale in geographical literature (e.g., Adams, 1996; Kelly, 1997; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; McGuirk, 1997; Cox, 1997; Howitt, 1998, in press; Jones, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Silvern, 1999; Marston, 2000; Brenner, 2001), Jonas’ concerns retain currency. Scale remains poorly understood, carelessly applied and surprisingly chaotic. Indeed, discussion often conflates the use of scale-as-abstraction and scale-as-metaphor (Jonas, 1994, p. 258) or blends the concept of scale unreflexively into other core geographical concepts (Brenner, 2001) in the ways that are unhelpful.

This paper seeks to bring two lines of thinking into a constructive dialogue, with a view to eliciting a shift in thinking about the scale politics of spatiality in cross-cultural settings. It draws together strands of phenomenological thought (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Irigaray) and cross-cultural work with indigenous Australians to propose a conceptualisation of geographical scale that envisions time, space, place and scale as co-equal conceptual and/or analytical elements of cultural landscapes, and, indeed, of complex geographical totalities generally. Rather than directly engaging the recent debates about scale in detail, my purpose here is to step outside that debate in order to consider the value of Levinas’ work to developing a better understanding of ‘scale as relation’ (Howitt, 1998). The paper argues that many of the philosophical debates about embodiment, emplacement and difference abstract a universalized notion of ‘place’, ‘body’ and ‘self’ which confounds and conflates scale issues and
consequently confuses the dialectical interplay of ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘being’ and ‘culture’.

2. Levinas and geography

The work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is rarely cited in cultural geography, although his writing and teaching anticipated many recently prominent themes of the discipline. His indirect influence through Derrida (1999), Irigaray (1996) and aspects of art criticism (e.g., Best, 1999) and anthropology (e.g., Rose, 1996) is wide, but there has been no serious consideration of his relevance to contemporary cultural geography to date. This paper seeks to address that gap, focusing particularly on issues of otherness and difference, and considering their particular relevance to the scale politics of spatiality. The paper first introduces some key elements of Levinas’ approach, then reconsiders the notion of scale. It concludes with a discussion of Levinas’ approach to em- bodiment, emplacement and otherness in terms of geographical scale and draws on experience with indigenous Australians to propose a new vantage point on the scale politics of spatiality and difference.

For Levinas, the relationship of difference, between the self and the other, is foundational in human existence. Levinas argues that it is this relationship – a relationship of fraternity, non-indifference and responsibility (Levinas, 1993 [1985], pp. 124–125) – which offers humanity a prospect for addressing the ethical dimensions of individual and social responsibility:

in social relations the real presence of the other is important… The presence of the Other (Autre) is a presence that teaches us something (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 148).

Levinas represents relations between the self and the other in terms of an ethical imperative in which the face-to-face encounter develops terms for understanding our place in society. “Intersubjective space” – that space in which one relates to the other(s) – “is not symmetrical” (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 48). He constitutes intersubjective space as a moral space. We occupy moral landscapes in which ethics (responsibility, reciprocity, proximity, collectivity and co-existence) frame and temper interpersonal, structural and political relationships. It is this, Levinas suggests, that distinguishes justice from charity (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 48). Cultural landscapes are simultaneously material and metaphorical – they simultaneously constitute and reflect both economy and culture. But importantly, space is not merely metaphorical. Proximity to the other involves a face-to-face engagement with difference which Levinas insists must involve ‘non-in-difference’ (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 124).

The economic relationship of possession, which underpins so many dimensions of human relationships, reduces the other, and in many circumstances the landscapes that are the other’s nourishing places, to the indifferent, interchangeable facelessness of a market commodity. Indeed, the notion of possession in Western terms, and its absence as dispossession renders the moral and cultural landscape of the indigenous other in Australia, outside the political realm by insisting that the politics of indigenous rights has focused on authorisation of certain sorts of land rights that are recognised and even created by the hegemonic dominant legal system rather than opening a relationship of equals between the authority of the Dreaming and the common law. So, rather than emphasising the mutual nourishment human societies enjoy from social (people–people) and environmental (people–place) relations, the act of possessing opens up the prospect of also being possessed. When linked to the prospects of a place we call home, our place in the sun that we possess and will defend, and juxtaposed with the interests of others who resist our acts of possession, contested cultural landscapes confront us with the threatening, alienating aspect of alterity and the potential for violence (Levinas, 1969, pp. 158–162).

Levinas, however, rarely talks about landscapes per se in his discussion of possession, ethics and economy. The scale of the individual body offers a more common metaphor for his consideration of social relations. The hand, the face, the caress and Eros recur as motifs in which the scale of the body is used metaphorically to engage with the ontological implications of the politics of difference. The hand, for example, is an equivocal organ, offering both the threat of violence, of grasping, taking, acquiring, and also the prospect of more gentle and communicative touch, communication, comfort and caress – “‘the hand takes and comprehends [prend et comprend]” (Levinas, 1969, p. 161). The experience of being-in-the-world, of feeling at home in the complex cultural landscapes of lived experience, is, for Levinas, inescapably concerned with intersubjective space as it is constructed at multiple scales from the intimate to the infinite metaphysical in time and space.

Although he has received virtually no attention from geographers, Levinas’ language is strongly spatialized. Terms such as ‘distance’, ‘movement’, ‘transcendence’, ‘space’, ‘height’, ‘dwelling’ and ‘infinity’ appear often in his work. Unlike many philosophers, Levinas did not relegate space to a role of absence or negation. ² Rather, he applied a very contemporary understanding of space as simultaneously a concept of separation and relation,

² Irigaray, whose work is discussed later in this paper, also challenges the metaphorical equivalence of space with negation, absence and woman. See also Best (1995).
an “empirical image of a spatial interval which joins its extremities by the very space that separates them” (Levinas, 1969, p. 175). This expression also reveals something of Levinas’ interest in relations “whose terms do not form a totality” (Levinas, 1969, p. 39), such as the self–other relation, where there is no larger concept higher in some implied hierarchy that encompasses the two terms; and in totalities which implicate embodiment and emplacement. So, for Levinas, aggregation of the self and the other does not produce a new, larger singularity. The relationship, this alterity, is “produced in being” and is “irreducible to the distance establish(d) between the diverse terms”; it is to be grasped as a relationship of movement in time and space – “as the traversing of this distance” rather than as an exercise of thought, analysis or documentation (Levinas, 1969, pp. 39–40, emphasis in original). In these ideas of difference as a concrete engagement, as a face-to-face encounter, as conversation, Levinas offers a view of embodiment, emplacement and place-making that opens new avenues for discussion of scale and its application as a concept in contemporary cultural geography.

In exploring the experience of embodiment, of being-in-place as a basis for framing a phenomenology of difference, Levinas is not alone. There has been some considerable discussion of embodiment in feminist geometries, but I wish to return to both Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a starting point. As for Levinas, there is a strong linkage between the spatial and the visual in the work of Merleau-Ponty. For Levinas the face of the other confronts us visually with the here and now of existence. For Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1992) it is the primacy of vision that marks humanity’s way of being-in-the-world. In The transcendence of words, Levinas discusses his view of space:

I recently saw an exhibition of paintings [in which] Lapicque creates a space that is above all a realm of simultaneity… Space does not accommodate things; instead through their erasures, things delineate space. The space of each object in turn is divested of its volume, and from behind the rigid line there begins to emerge the line as ambiguity. Lines shed the function of providing a skeleton and become the infinite number of possible connections (Levinas, 1989 [1949], pp. 146–147).

He goes on to ask “isn’t the spatial dimension of this game of erasures related to the visual dimension?” Indeed, it is. The notion of the here-and-now is explicitly simultaneously temporal and spatial; it locates one in time and space. One’s way of seeing the world reflects both a visual ideology and a range of blind spots (see e.g., Rose, 1993, pp. 89–101) and it frames how one deals with spatio-ethical relations such as possession, dispossession, otherness and difference. And this spatial dimension is inescapably about being-in-the-world. At intimate scales it is about embodiment; more widely, it is about horizons, emplacement, coexistence and simultaneity; most widely it is about infinity, cosmology and transcendence:

To see is to be in a world that is entirely here and self-sufficient. Any vision beyond what is given remains within what is given. The infinity of space, like the infinity of the signified referred to by the sign, is equally absent from the here below. Vision is a relation with a being such that the being attained through it precisely appears as the world (Levinas, 1989 [1949], p. 147).

For Merleau-Ponty, the spatiality of vision and the body emerges from serious consideration of depth as both concept and experience. Depth is not reducible to just another dimension in the measurement of space, an alternative perspective on the other two dimensions of Euclidean space. It is depth that creates real-world spatiality. Casey suggests that Merleau-Ponty considers three things important in ‘primordial depth’:

First depth is not constructed but concretely given. Second, depth is less a dimension than a medium in which the perceiving subject and the perceived world are both immersed [And thirdly, depth] cannot be…measured – in paces, miles or any other unit of mensuration. Instead of being the kind of thing that yields to measurement, it is like an aura or atmosphere that resists precise specification (Casey, 1991, pp. 10–11).

For Casey, the concept of place provides a bridge between primordial depth as an abstraction and the experiential notion of being-in-the-world. He suggests depth and place are indissoluble. Constrained within an horizon, we envision “various things (materials, objects, events, people) existing in depth, that is to say, occupying various places in relation to the ultimate outer boundary region which we in term call the horizon (Casey, 1991, p. 16, emphasis in original). The notion of horizon is, of course, contextually contingent. It is not
an "ultimate outer boundary" at all. Rather it is a scaled spatial field. As a boundary of the field of vision, it implies emplaced and embodied seeing subjects. It changes with the subject’s movement, or with a shift to another seeing subject. By providing the contingently contextualized medium through which perceiving subjects and perceived objects interact, depth and place create an enlivened, embodied spatiality. But it is precisely the irreducibility of depth to its Cartesian simplification as a third dimension of spatial measurement that creates the need for a scale lexicon and a conceptualization of geographical scale. The co-location of mutually perceiving subjects in cultural landscapes, with their institutional, environmental, economic and social complexities, creates relationships that are always and complexly placed but are not place-bound. Intersubjective space, therefore, needs always to be contextualized as an ethical space, a moral and cultural landscape. And as the dreaming ontology of indigenous Australians reminds us, sentient and animated landscapes are themselves embodiments of gendered, powerful forces (see e.g., Stanner, 1979; Christie, 1992; Rose, 1996, 1999; Suchet, 1999). 5

In Merleau-Ponty’s representation, depth (and its place in perception) becomes crucial to ‘envelopment’. Casey critiques Merleau-Ponty’s discussion for (a) failing to specify the relationship between primordial and objective depth, and (b) failing to explain the relationship between depth and the other basic parameters of spatial experience (e.g., movement and level). Casey seeks to resolve these concerns by exploring the way in which “place grants depth” (Casey, 1991, p. 14). But Merleau-Ponty’s discussion does explicitly deal with space in terms that are consistent with more recent geographers’ discussions (see below). For Merleau-Ponty:

Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 243).

3. Landscape and otherness

A recently emerging discussion of landscape often posits an alternative way to link space and place as a culturally mediated relationship between foreground and background, between the ‘here and now’ of place and the horizon of space (Hirsch, 1995, p. 4). Like Levinas’ core concepts, such as self, other, face, ethics and infinity, landscape offers metaphors for contextualizing cultural relationships and processes in space, time and place. Landscape emerges as “a complex material and ideological entity” (Mitchell, 2001, p. 271) which is contested in both domains and at multiple scales. Hirsch’s useful discussion considers Carter’s (1987) account of the colonial encounter in Botany Bay when James Cook’s expedition for imperial England encountered/intruded into the cultural landscapes of the Eora people in the landscape that would become Sydney. The different cultural logics engaged in that encounter (and subsequent reconfiguring of Australian landscapes) used contrasting narrative forms to contextualize people and landscape. For the European imperial narrative, exploration, discovery and settlement are the central tropes. The other might be unknown, but the human other was constructed as inherently inferior (capable of being known and dismissed) and the non-human other, however exotic and bizarre, capable of discovery, exploitation and subsumation to the European meta-narrative of conquest and accumulation (see also Blaut, 1993; Rose, 1997). Although the task of encompassing the ontological implications of this distant encounter for contemporary Eora people 6 is difficult, perhaps impossible, what is interesting for the current argument is that the Eora narrative for that landscape was the Dreaming. Although indigenous peoples’ sense of place is often glossed as exemplifying a localized world view, the Dreaming (which the anthropologist Stanner (1979) represented as ‘everywhen’) offers a scale metaphor which encompasses the infinite within the immediate. This ‘local sense of place’ gloss for non-European or non-academic ontologies, however, just will not do. It reserves to the imperial, acquisitive European gaze the only cultural logic of multiple scales, reducing the question of scale in cultural relations to an underlying economic and political logic that is Euro-centric. The Dreaming, as a scale metaphor, therefore, opens a window on the plurality that Levinas alludes to – the infinite within the immediate. It mediates relationships across space and time at vast scales, while retaining an embodiment and emplacement that is concrete, local and specific. In the Dreaming, there is an

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5 It is beyond the scope of the present paper to attempt any detailed consideration or discussion of the Dreaming as an ontology. The references cited offer an introduction to this idea. It is worth noting here that the issue of ontological pluralism has been central in shaping practical responses to the recognition of native title in Australia. The author’s work in negotiation of native title in South Australia, for example, has required explicit consideration of both scale and the Dreaming (see e.g., Agius et al, 2001).

6 The term ‘distant’ here reminds us that scale is simultaneously spatial and temporal. For most readers, the location at Botany Bay on Australia’s east coast will be spatially more remote than it is for me. In fact this passage was written on the banks of the Eora estate in Port Jackson, within a half-day’s walk of the site of the 1770 encounter at Botany Bay. That encounter continues to shape the everyday lives of Eora descendants in palpable ways, but is remote in terms of temporal scale.
ethical narrative that establishes a very different relationship between the here and now of place and the wider narrative of distant horizons of space–time and social and environmental order. The apparently abstract notion of landscape becomes contextualized when it is embodied and emplaced, when it is culturally and experientially constructed and scaled by peoples’ ethical relations and experience.

For Rose (1996), the Dreaming nurtures the landscape as a ‘nourishing terrain’; country. 7 This term ‘country’ in Aboriginal English encompasses people (countrymen) and place (homeland); here and now and horizon; Dreaming and lived experience. Using Levinas’ metaphor of ‘nourishment’, Rose writes an account of embodiment and emplacement that foregrounds the way in which place, identity and ontology are mutually constitutive. In discussing the Yolngu-matha language from northeast Arnhem Land, Christie (1992) (also Christie and Perrett, 1996) offers a detailed insight into the way in which language shapes our experience and understanding of inter-cultural experience. Taken-for-granted categories such as ‘plant/animal’ or ‘land/sea’ are revealed in the encounter with Yolngu-matha speakers not as self-evident realities, but as culturally specific constructions reflecting ontological assumptions. 8

This leads us more or less directly back to Levinas and his consideration of otherness, lived experience and ethics. Although it is notoriously difficult to encapsulate Levinas’ body of work in a summary statement (Davis, 1996), it is clear that for him relations between humanity, time and space were intimate. Through embodiment and emplacement, social and environmental relations involve concrete engagement – a matter that has implications for all subsequent abstraction. Theoretical knowledge and philosophical speculation had to be comprehended into social experience:

The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude... [My book Time and the Other] tries to understand the role of time in this relationship: time is not a simple experience of duration, but a dynamism which leads us elsewhere than towards the things we possess. It is as if in time there were a movement beyond what is equal to us (Levinas, 1985, pp. 60–61).

Levinas’ writing disrupts common binaries underpinning many approaches to scale. His texts are often represented as paradoxical (e.g., Cohen, 1986, p. 9; Davis, 1996). Even the self–other binary, apparently central to his approach, is disrupted to establish relationships between the self, the other-that-is-like-me and the entirely-other. Levinas grapples to establish terms for engaging with relationships between things whose coexistence is not reducible to a unity. He tries to discuss core philosophical issues in ways that are not subsumed by the philosophy that has gone before. To put this more concretely and more politically, he seeks to engage with the construction of and relationships with the ‘other’ in terms that do not provide a platform for ‘deep colonisation’ by being framed in terms provided by the discourse of colonisation (see also Rose, 1999). In Time and the Other, he asserts that “existence is pluralist”. A plurality, he writes, “insinuates itself into the very existing of the existent” (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 43). This pluralism opens material, discursive and conceptual spaces that are not captive to the dominant pole of the self, and which are not to be defined, discussed or engaged with as a binary in terms of the absence of that pole.

In grappling with self–other relations that are always contextualized “because we are always immersed in the empirical world” (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 43), Levinas targets that which is, by convention, unscaleable, immeasurable and incomprehensible – the infinite. But his starting point for this journey is instructive. Without seeking to accrete one scale upon another; without asserting a hierarchical structure, Levinas writes of infinity “I think the erotic relationship furnishes us with a prototype of it” (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 43). Here again we see the paradoxical characteristic of scale being emphasized, with the characteristics of the largest scales becoming accessible through the smallest. 9

Some of Levinas’ key concepts (e.g., self, other, difference, face, ethics and infinity) imply both spatial and scaled relations. A more relational concept of scale might allow a better understanding of ‘the unthought, the unheard, the unseen’ in socio-spatial experience. Such a conceptualisation would enable us to capture some of that paradoxical relatedness-but-separateness that Levinas refers to in discussing economic relations (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 175): to name them and to analyze them.

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7 Levinas’ idea of nourishment is discussed at length in Totality and Infinity (1969) and also in Ethics and Infinity (e.g., 1985, pp. 59–60).
8 Indeed, such distinctions represent the ‘big stories’ of western philosophies. In Aboriginal English, a ‘big Dreaming’ is one that has considerable geographical reach, ceremonial importance, and social significance. It is interesting that the distinction between land and sea and between animals and plants are both put forward in Genesis (1:6–7; 1:11; 1:20–25). These are indeed the ‘big Dreamings’ of western ontologies. For further discussion of indigenous ontologies and their implications for cultural geography see Howitt and Suchet (in press).
9 This parallels William Blake’s poetic of ‘a world in a grain of sand’ (see Howitt, 1993).
Recent discussion of spatiality has highlighted the important implications of scale, particularly emphasizing the social and political construction of scale (e.g., Marston, 2000; Brenner, 2001). A more sophisticated concept of scale is widely acknowledged as crucial for addressing the nature and implications of the spatiality of otherness and difference. But just what sort of thing is referred to in these debates about scale?

4. What sort of a thing is scale? 10

I do not take place to be something simply physical. A place is not a mere patch of ground, a bare stretch of earth, a sedentary set of stones. What kind of thing is it then? . . . [This question] suggests that there is some single sort of thing that place is, some archetype of Place. But whatever place is, it is not the kind of thing that can be subsumed under already given universal notions—for example of space and time, substance or causality. A given place may not permit, indeed it often defies, subsumption under given categories. Instead, a place is something for which we continually have to discover or invent new forms of understanding, new concepts in a literal sense of ways of ‘grasping-together’. A place is more an event than a thing to be assimilated into known categories (Casey, 1996, p. 26, emphasis in original).

In debates about the spatial turn in social theory, the cultural turn in geography and the spatial turn in cultural studies, there has been intense consideration of the relationships between space and place, time and space, and place and identity. Despite the heat and light created in these debates, there has been relatively little clarification of the nature and role of geographical scale. For example, Casey (1998) provides a detailed philosophical history of ideas of place, but the term ‘scale’ is not listed in his index. In some formulations, space is contrasted with time as static and a-political rather than dynamic and the context of politics and change. In others, it is space that is dynamic, while place is static, nostalgic and conservative (see e.g., Massey, 1992b, 1993b, 1994a, 1995 for discussion of these debates). The spatial politics of cultural identity are deeply implicated in these debates, with much attention given to the way in which social and cultural identity is simultaneously and dialectically reflected in, inscribed upon and created by geography, history and culture.

This suggests that place is better understood as an event rather than a thing. It is also, perhaps, better to similarly conceptualise geographical scale as an event, a process, a relationship of movement and interaction rather than a discrete ‘thing’. Despite its importance in the construction of influential things such as power, gender, being, identity and wealth (inter alia), it is unhelpful to think of scale as the sort of thing that has causal power in its own right. Swyngedouw (1997) offers a wide variety of terms intended to expand the vocabulary of scale, 11 but ultimately remains unclear about just what sort of thing he thinks scale might be. In contrast, Agnew suggests that scale is simply a matter of “the spatial level, local, national or global, at which [a] presumed effect of location is operative” (1993: 251, emphasis in original), apparently considering this makes it clear just what sort of thing scale is. But this definition leaves unresolved what is meant by ‘spatial level’ and what the content of the adjectives ‘local’, ‘national’, and ‘global’ is—and why those particular scale labels (or spatial levels) should be privileged in the definition of scale. In Taylor’s materialist framework, scale provides “a way of organizing the subject matter of political geography” (Taylor, 1982, p. 21). Taylor considers that there was little questioning or critical justification of this approach, and there was an implicit acceptance:

that the three scales—global, national and urban—are as ‘natural’ as social science’s division of activities into economic, social and political. This spatial organization is simply given (Taylor, 1982, p. 21).

Although Taylor goes on to question the uncritical application of these scales as an organizing principle, his suggestion that “the scale of reality is the global scale” (Taylor, 1982, p. 25), while the national scale is “the scale of ideology” and the local is “the scale of experience” leaves unexamined this question about just what sort of thing scale is. His more recent work (e.g., Taylor, 1993) modifies this schema to “world-economy, nation-state and locality” (e.g., Taylor, 1993, p. 47), but leaves the nature of scale constructed within such terms unexamined. To get beyond the use of metaphorical scale labels as if they were ontological givens (see also Howitt, 1993), the links between spatial organization and spatial experience in vision, movement, relationship, distance and action need to be explored.

By itself scale is not a producer of adjectival spaces (or places)—it does not produce local communities or global cities. It is not a uni-dimensional or single faceted

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10 I note that one of GeoForum’s referees expressed frustration that I do not explicitly answer this question. In opening a specific debate on this question, and in drawing attention to the lack of an answer in the recent debates, I do not seek to suggest it is easily answered. Indeed, part of my intention is specifically to invite its further exploration.

11 Swyngedouw’s paper offers at least 23 terms as part of a new scale vocabulary.
element. No simple schema proposing an orderly ladder of scales from local to global is adequate to capture this complexity of the concept. While it is far easier to say what scale is not than to clarify what it is, it is also useful to consider at least three interacting facets as constituting scale – size, level and relation (Howitt, 1998). Competing notions of scale, for example, govern how spaces are understood to be bounded in terms of, for example, production, identity and consumption. On the one hand, the construction of virtually autonomous local spaces nested neatly within larger scale spaces constitutes and sets boundaries around ‘the local’ as if its extra-local linkages are genuinely external relations. On the other hand, more relational approaches set boundaries around ‘the local’ for analytical purposes, and always acknowledging that extra-local linkages are actually ‘internal’ relations that co-constitute ‘the local’.

For geographers, scale as size has been a matter of central importance – consideration of appropriate map scales for particular forms of analysis and presentation (e.g., Haggett, 1965), and how to transfer conclusions drawn from analysis at one geographical scale to other scales or within a different spatial frame at the same scale (e.g., McCracken, 1983). For Bird, establishing an appropriate scale for analysis involved taking account of “the amount of space under consideration” and “the numbers of people” Bird (1956, p. 25). More recently Hudson (1992) has focused on map scales in a discussion of “scale in space and time” that acknowledges “scale as level” and the mutual embeddedness that Swyngedouw (1992, 1995, 1997; Kelly, 1997; Marston, 2000). Starting from an acknowledgment of the fundamentally metaphorical nature of scale labels, this literature considers that scale boundaries are better represented as interfaces, and that it is not only larger scale entities (global or national) that contain smaller scale entities, but that the larger scale entities are at the same time contained within smaller scale entities. If one constitutes scale as size, this observation would be at best paradoxical, even nonsensical. Yet it is clear that there is an inescapable dialectical link between, for example, national culture and individual values. Each clearly contains, responds to, encapsulates, and is constructed from the other. Similarly, if one constitutes scale simply in terms of levels which act as mediators in the realization of place”.

The idea of scale as level is often conflated with scale as size, with a common implication of nested hierarchical ordering of space. The idea of scale as level, however, simply alludes to wider scales encompassing greater amounts of complexity (divisions of labour, administrative reach, cultural diversity, etc). In some discussions, this idea of levels has been presented as layers, with each succeeding scale layer subsuming those below it (e.g., Storper, 1988, p. 168). McGuirk (1997, p. 481) suggests emphasis on scale as level often reflects acceptance of an “indisputable hierarchy of scales – global, national, regional, and local – in which processes, outcomes and responses can be categorised as originating at distinct and discrete levels”. McGuirk rejects the necessity for this hierarchical foundation for the notion of scale, and advocates a framework in which scales mutually constitute each other and in which the production of scale and inter-scale relations becomes a matter for empirical investigation rather than theoretical assumption. Nevertheless, in many social science settings, careless use of notions of scale as level, often leaves the spatial extent of an issue invisible. It becomes “the unthought, the unseen and the unheard” (Benhabib, 1992 [1987], p. 287) in such constructions, although it exercises influence. Despite the insight of accounts such as McGuirk’s, hierarchical representations of scale as level remain common in social science, often leading to simplistic representations of globalization as imposing a developmental trajectory on people and places, and to a separation of fields of study as various scales (identity studies as local, industry studies as global etc). A third dimension of scale, scale as relation, has emerged in recent discussion (e.g., Howitt, 1993, 1998; Jonas, 1994; Swyngedouw, 1997; McGuirk, 1997; Fagan, 1995, 1997; Kelly, 1997; Marston, 2000). Starting from an acknowledgment of the fundamentally metaphorical nature of scale labels, this literature considers that scale boundaries are better represented as interfaces, and that it is not only larger scale entities (global or national) that contain smaller scale entities, but that the larger scale entities are at the same time contained within smaller scale entities. If one constitutes scale as size, this observation would be at best paradoxical, even nonsensical. Yet it is clear that there is an inescapable dialectical link between, for example, national culture and individual values. Each clearly contains, responds to, encapsulates, and is constructed from the other. Similarly, if one constitutes scale simply in terms of level, the mutual embeddedness that Swyngedouw (1992, 1997) characterizes as ‘glocalization’ is all but incoherent. Any locality (local scale space) is constituted not only by things that are directly manifested within the locality, but also by cross-scale relations (e.g., Massey, 1991, 1992a, 1993a, 1993b, 1994b). These relations operate not hierarchically or unidirectionally, but simultaneously; not just sequentially but also in

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12 I remain enormously indebted to my continuing discussions of scale with Ron Horvath for this formulation.

13 Holly (1978, Fig. 4, p. 13) uses the following labels – life cycle, seasonal, weekly, daily, hourly in temporal terms and nation, city, suburb, community and house in spatial terms.

14 Benhabib uses this phrase to describe the failure of much western thought to come to terms with concrete otherness.

15 Bondi (1993) offers a powerful overview of identity issues in recent cultural studies.
different orders. It is clear that dialectical, relational concepts of scale are critically important in emergent debates in social science. It is also clear that a shift in scale is simultaneously a change of both quantity and quality. A shift in scale produces consideration not just of more (or less) but also different. A shift in scale, in other words, implies precisely the plurality, proximity and engagement that Levinas draws our attention to.

So, how are we to answer the question of just what sort of thing scale is? It is an abstraction, and as Ollman (1993) observes, like any abstraction it will demonstrate elements of ‘extension’, ‘level of generality’ and ‘vantage point’. It reflects facets of space, time, culture and environment. It has dimensions of size, level and relation, and is paradoxically simultaneously hierarchical and non-hierarchical. If social relations are always spatial (e.g., Massey, 1984), if we are always both ‘in place’ and ‘in culture’ (Entarkin, 1991, p. 1), then social and environmental relations are also always scaled. Scale, in other words, is simultaneously metaphor, experience, event, moment, relation and process. It is implicated in, and simultaneously implicates other core concepts in geography such as space, place and time. It is also deeply implicated in core cultural concepts such as identity, subject and difference.

In social science generally, the scale shift that occurs between analyses of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many has always been troubling. 16 Once this shift is spatialized, it requires explicit consideration of scales and scale shifting, but this is all too rare. The link between psychoanalysis, psychology and sociology is not reducible to a measurement or a formula or a simple statement of scale differences. While individuals, social formations and cultural groupings may be mutually influential, there is no pre-determined causal link between them. One simply cannot predict individual behaviour from the knowledge of social behaviour or cultural values, nor vice versa. Neither can one read off from large structures the details of small events and processes, whether past, present or future (cf. Storper, 1988). This conundrum leads to many studies that deal with different scales as autonomous spheres of social action. There are, for example, studies of the body as a site of production of identity, as a scale of analysis; just as there are studies that examine the neighbourhood, or the city, or the nation as a scale of production or analysis. In statistical analysis, the transfer of explanations from one spatial frame to another has long been acknowledged as fraught (e.g., McCracken, 1983). Yet we do shift between geographical scales and sociological levels. Feminist scholarship and queer theory have facilitated a reconsideration of the body as a scale of analysis. Geographers have engaged enthusiastically with the challenges that arise from serious consideration of this spatial scale, but have generally avoided a shift to the metaphysical scale (the infinite), generally limiting their scope to global (cultural, economic) and planetary (physical, environmental) scale. But Levinas’ traverse of this terrain, from erotic to metaphysical is enticing, and offers some valuable insights relevant to more concrete and conventional cultural and social analysis.

For Levinas, movement and its implied spatiality are central to the creation of meaning in human experience. Movement, the journey, the distance travelled, is always through cultural landscapes – nourishing terrains in which the self confronts the other; 17 spaces in which one is constantly confronted with glimpses (or more) of that which cannot be subsumed, that which is unfamiliar; places and peoples with pasts and futures; landscapes in which the subject feels simultaneously at home and vulnerable. Indeed, in the opening lines of Totality and Infinity, Levinas highlights this movement as fundamental to metaphysics, and also to the “unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence” (Levinas, 1969, p. 52):

[Metaphysics] appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an ‘at home’ which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself, toward a wonder.

The term of this movement, the elsewhere or the other, is called other in an eminent sense. No journey, no change of climate or of scenery could satisfy the desire bent toward it. The other metaphysically desired is not ‘other’ like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape which I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this ‘I’, that ‘other’. I can ‘feed’ on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had been simply lacking them. The alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other (Levinas, 1969, p. 33, emphasis in original).

Thus, the other and the elsewhere are implicated in each other, and their transcendence does not, in Levinas’ view, involve a negation of the distance, of alterity, but its confirmation and maintenance. The relationship between the self and the other is not reducible to a single term, a common set of characteristics:

16 Levinas (1993) offers a perspective on this issue.

17 I am also indebted to Deborah Rose, whose compelling use of the term ‘nourishing terrains’ in her brilliant and beautiful essay (Rose, 1997) was an important impetus for my engagement with Levinas.
The absolutely other is the Other. He and I [sic] do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I”... We are the same and the other. The conjunction and here designates neither addition nor the power of one term over the other. We shall try to show that the relation between the same and the other... is language (Levinas, 1969, p. 39, emphasis in original).

Language is a relationship with alterity. It permits conversation with the other across ostensible boundaries of difference, but does not subsume the other to the self; does not possess the other:

The relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed. The relationship with the Other, transcendence consists in speaking the world to the Other (Levinas, 1969, p. 173).

This theme has been widely engaged with in social science, in part because of the serendipitous English form – wor(l)d. In fiction, for example, Le Guin refers to the task of ‘writing worlds’ Le Guin (1989) (see also Le Guin, 1976). In cultural geography, too, this theme has engendered discussion and debate about the relationships between text and territory, word and world, representation and represented. For Derrida (1999) (also Derrida, 1997, 1998) it is words such as welcome, respond, hospitality and friendship that offer the path to engagement with the other (and to democracy). It was in such terms that he framed his own farewell to Levinas (Derrida, 1999). For Levinas, it is conversation and the face-to-face that are crucial, and which leads him to distinguish the act of speaking from its more enduring artefacts in writing (e.g., Levinas, 1969, Section III – Exteriority and The Face; Levinas, 1985, pp. 87–88). While Derrida’s work is often characterized as an extended critique of the privileging of speech over text, it is also itself a reflection and product of deeply engaged discourse and conversation that recognizes the power of both literacy and oracy (see especially, but not only, Derrida, 1998). 19

Levinas points out that social science’s reliance on the written word has “acquainted us to underestimating the direct social link between persons who speak, and to prefer silence or the complex relations, such as customs or law or culture, laid down by civilization” (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 148). Here we find ourselves drawn back toward more recognizable representations of scale politics and issues of place, identity and power. We might now, however, make this return to engagement with people–people and people–place relations with a very different view of otherness and difference. For Harvey, for example, “‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ is produced in space through the simple logic of uneven capital investment and a proliferating geographical division of labour” (Harvey, 1993, p. 6, emphasis in original). For Levinas, in contrast, the difference (and the opportunities it creates for transcendence) 20 is certainly reflected in and in its turn reflects economic relations. However, it is also simultaneously metaphysical and corporealized in space. Difference is a relationship that implies both a discursive space and complexly scaled relations in material space–time, in which the western notion of a bounded, individualized and constrained self needs to be challenged by a radically contextualized notion of self and other.

5. Embodiment and emplacement

Both Benhabib and Rose tackle the issue of the bounded self in helpful ways for our effort to better comprehend the nature and implications of geographical scale. 21 For Benhabib (1992 [1987]), it is the distinction between a concrete and a generalized other that offers a critical vantage point on modernist thinking about the relationship between the self and the other. From the modern tradition, she argues, we have inherited a “dichotomous characterization” (Benhabib, 1992 [1987], p. 280) of this relationship. From the standpoint of the generalized other, each and every subject is reduced to a generalized and interchangeable other which is equivalent to the self – “entitled to the same rights and duties as we would ascribe to ourselves” (Benhabib, 1992 [1987], p. 280). In contrast to this:

The standpoint of the concrete other... requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and

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18 See e.g., Philo (1991), Crang (1992), Cosgrove and Domosh (1993) and McDowell (1994). Luke goes as far as to proclaim that “Words are realities. Realities are words... New words generate new realities... Plainly, this New World Order deserves a new word order” (Luke, 1994, p. 626).
19 Derrida’s remarkable conversational text (1998) offers a powerful exemplar of his propositions and their implications in multicultural and pluralist societies.
20 Or in Massey’s terms, for rethinking radical democracy spatially (Massey, 1995, see also Derrida, 1997, Chapter 4).
21 Feminist discussion of subjectivity is, of course, more generally relevant to this issue. My selection of Benhabib and Deborah Rose is deliberate, however. The former offers a basic critique of simplistic modernist ideas of a self–other binary. The latter draws eloquently on two important sources of inspiration that have helped shape my own thinking Levinas and the Dreaming of Aboriginal Australia. For useful starting points to further explore feminist critique in this area see, inter alia, in Geography Rose (1993, 1995). Blunt and Rose (1994), Pile and Thrift (1995) and Blunt and Wills (2000, Chapter 3); more widely see e.g., Bartky (1990) and Fraser and Bartky (1992).
affective-emotional constitution . . . [and to] confirm not only your humanity but your human individu-
ality (Benhabib, 1992 [1987], p. 281).

In both standpoints, however, the other is defined only in relation to the self. In seeking universally rele-
vant insights, this approach offers a “‘monological’ model of moral reasoning” (Benhabib, 1992 [1987], p. 286). It is poorly equipped to deal with collective iden-
tities, pluralities and difference. Following Habermas, Benhabib advocates a communicative, or radically
contextualized, basis for moral theory – a relational-
interactive theory of identity in which moral agents
communicate with one another in actual dialogue (Ben-

Rose (1999) offers another step away from the bounded self as the basis for moral judgment and un-
derstanding of the self–other relationship. She takes her
readers into the loving relationships, the mutual en-
twining that exists between people and country in many
Australian Aboriginal ontologies. In her view, one’s identity and relationships in these cultural settings
is not bound by the body but constructed in the inter-
penetration of bodies (human and non-human; past,
present and future; here and not here) and places. The
Aboriginal English term ‘country’ that captures this ‘matrix of relationships’ is an explicitly scaled concept.
It is a matrix that is:

Small enough to accommodate face-to-face groups
of people, large enough to sustain their lives, polit-
ically autonomous in respect of other, structurally
equivalent countries, and at the same time inter-
dependent with other countries (Rose, 1999, p. 177).

As with Levinas’ view of the self–other binary, the
complex people-place relations of ‘country’ are not bi-
naries that are reducible to simplified unities. They are
complexly scaled, simultaneous, emplaced, embodied
and infinite. Rose considers the complex ways in which
the dominant western view of the self as coterminous
with the body is completely inadequate for under-
standing Aboriginal views of the self:

... it would be a mistake to regard the boundaries of
the person as coterminous with the body, and it
would equally be a mistake to believe that if other
people share a person’s body, that person is thereby
violated. On the contrary, the persons achieve their
maturity and integrity [their ‘self-realization’ in
some senses] through relationships with people, an-
imals, country, and Dreamings.

Implicit in this construction of the person is the idea
that places, trees, waterholes, Dreaming sites, and other
animals are also subjects. Their being and becoming
in the world exists in relation to other subjects, some
of whom are human beings (Rose, 1999, pp. 179–180).

In other words, in the Aboriginal account reported by
Rose, subjectivity, one’s sense of self (and implicitly
one’s understanding of the Other), is not embodied
within a particular body. Rather:

Subjects . . . are constructed both within and without;
subjectivity is located within the site [and scale] of
the body, within the bodies of other people and
other species, and within the world in trees, rock-
holes, on rock walls, and so on (Rose, 1999, p. 180).

Langton (2002) offers an account of Aboriginal phi-
losophy which offers a further extension on Rose’s
consideration of the ethical and political implications
of this conceptualization of subjectivity. For the Bama
people of eastern Cape York Peninsula, the world is
understood as “a biogeography of human and non-
human presences, some living and mortal, and some
spiritual and ever present” (Langton, 2002, p. 265).
Langton offers an account of how Bama ontology grasps
the simultaneity of past, present and future in a sentient
landscape, in which Bama “separate the human from the
non-human in one domain only – the mundane; all these
essences and potentials are pre-existing in the primordial
landscape behind the landscape – the sacred” (Langton,
2002, p. 265). Drawing on astronomers’ idea of “stars in
the night sky as representation of the past, the present
and the future”, Langton suggests Bama encounter the
‘Old People’ in the landscape “just as stars are en-
countered in gazing at the night sky” (Langton, 2002, p.
265–266). By intertwining space and time in their sen-
tient landscapes, Bama:

perceive the spiritual presence of Elders in the land-
scape as what has emanated through time since the
demise of the ancestor and can now be understood,
guided by the Elders, as one perceives the place in
the landscape where their being is represented by
the spiritual enlightenment which the invocations

Being, sociality, temporality and spatiality are co-
dependent, intertwined. Embodiment and emplacement
counteract each other in the encounter with the other
that the self must have in order to exist. Being is being-
in-place. It is also, inescapably being-in-time, and being-
in-society. As Langton observes of Bama ontology:

Space and temporality are intertwined as contingent
dimensions of life in Bama philosophy. Bama
conceptions of the past and the future imply both
temporality and space through the mediation of
Old People, the deceased who infer connection or
affiliation with, attachment to, inheritance and own-
ership of land. It is in this metaphysical construction that place is marked, inscribed with Story, given meaning; guiding human movement in the process (Langton, 2002, p. 266, emphasis in original).

For Levinas, “death is alterity” – a relationship with difference that makes life meaningful and vulnerable. For the Bama death is a continuing and affirming presence of others whose existence in the landscape “is a source of power in place, which enlivens the subject” (Langton, 2002, p. 267). “This mysterious contradiction”, Langton notes, “is the ontological foundation of [Bama] subjectivity and the subject’s place in the physical world as both a cultural and natural phenomenon” (Langton, 2002, p. 267).

6. Eros: body, porosity and alterity

Heaven knows no frontiers And I’ve seen heaven in your eyes. 22

As already indicated, engagement with the other, for Levinas, is not an abstract notion. It is made real in the process of experience, of being-in-the-world, being-in-place. For many readers, it is precisely this difficult juxtaposition of concrete experience as an abstract notion that makes reading Levinas difficult. However, it is the experience, the need to both recognize and traverse the distance between the self and the other, the need to recognize that this is a separation that cannot be ignored, and that it is a separation that must be transcended, a separation that binds without subsuming, that matters for Levinas. This is particularly clear in his writing of that simultaneously most intimate and most transcendent relationship with the other, Eros.

In characterizing the erotic relationship as embracing alterity, Levinas characterizes gender difference as “a formal structure”, which is neither “a contradiction”, nor “the duality of two complementary terms” which presuppose a pre-existing whole. 23 Eros differs from “possession and power” and is “neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge”. It is a relationship characterized by equivocation between voluptuousness and fecundity (see e.g., Ainley, 1988), and holds “an exceptional place among relationships”. This so for Levinas because:

It is a relationship with alterity, with mystery, with what (in a world where there is everything) what is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there – not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity (Levinas, 1989 [1947], p. 50).

While Levinas unequivocally writes as a male subject in his discussion of Eros, he affirms the subjectivity of the other, and the reciprocity implicit in the relationship – indeed, the ethical imperatives derived from his vision of the self–other relation, particularly from his discussion of the caress and fecundity, underpin his thinking. He seeks to change the terms of debate in a way that overcomes the deep colonising impact of patriarchy and its hegemonic language of gender, but risks being read as representing a limited and traditional view of the feminine (e.g., Chanter, 1988, pp. 35–36). His account of the feminine remains, perhaps intentionally, ambiguous, but in refraining from resolving the equivocal, he opens a “silence which opens a space for others, those who have always been Other, and who are beginning to be radically other – women – to speak, to write their otherness” (Chanter, 1988, p. 52). In responding to Levinas, Irigaray uses that space to write equally unequivocally as a woman, and in the process offers a startlingly beautiful and provocative glimpse of the embodied self. She asserts the inerasibility of the feminine and its irreducibility to the disembodied other of a masculinist gaze or fantasy. The sensory experience of touch, she argues, precedes the expression of abstract concepts:

Before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace, or the work, of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress to reshape, from within and from without, flesh that is given back to itself in the gestures of love. The most subtly necessary guardian of my life being the other’s flesh. Approaching and speaking to me with his hands. Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other’s hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me back to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather to, to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life holds itself in reserve. Searching for what has not yet come into being, for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become (Irigaray, 1986, pp. 232–233).

The mystery of relations between lovers is more terrible, but infinitely less deadly, than the destruction

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22 “No Frontiers” (J McCarthy), from the singing of Mary Black, on the albums No Frontiers (DARA 032) and The Collection (DARA 046).

23 The passage referred to was criticised by Simone de Beauvoir as dismissing woman as subject, reducing the feminine to an objectified other (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949], p. 16). For valuable commentary on it, see e.g., Ainley (1988, 1996); Chanter (1988); O’Connor (1988).
of submission to sameness... Sameness, quantitatively polemical when it comes to its place, occupies my flesh, demarcates and subdivides my space, lays siege to and sets up camp on my horizon – making it uninhabitable for me and inaccessible for the lover (Irigaray, 1986, p. 235).

So at this most intimate of scales, the hand to flesh, flesh to flesh intimacy of lovemaking, Irigaray provides a seductive glimpse of the relationship between space, place, movement and being that offers an unsettling illumination of issues of scale. Her consideration of porosity, mucous membranes, fecundity and penetration remind us that the most sacrosanct of imagined boundaries – the boundary imagined by essentializing ontologies as bounding the individual, the self away from both human and non-human others – is ultimately meaningful only in relation to these others; and most meaningful in that moment of self-realization that derives from the face-to-face encounter with the unbridgeable gulf between the self and the other in lovemaking where the simultaneity of the body, society and infinity is palpable.

In the intimate scale of corporeality and carnal love – “the most intimate mucous threshold in the dwelling place” (p. 243) – Irigaray offers a vision of coexistence, which, at wider geographical scales, challenges humanity to overcome the terror of the unknowable other. In crossing that most intimate threshold, which she suggests we consider not as “a profanation of the temple” but “an entrance into another, more secret place”, she sees a more revealing metaphor. In the mutual inebriation of lovemaking, she reveals the difference between fear and transcendence 24.

where the beloved receives and offers the possibility of nuptials. An inebriation unlike that of the conqueror, who captures and dominates his prey [or one might add, the dwelling place of the prey, displacing them from their nourishing terrain, their place in the sun; opening the process of dispossess-ion, alienation and conquest and the fear and loathing that accompanies it]. Inebriation of the return to the garden of innocence, where love does not yet know or no longer knows, or has forgotten, the profanity of nakedness. The gaze still innocent of the limits of reason, the division of day and night, the alteration of the seasons, animal cruelty, the necessity of protecting oneself from the other or from God. Face to face encounter of two naked lovers in a nudity that is older than, and unlike, a sacrilege. Not perceivable as profanation. The threshold of the garden, a welcoming cosmic home, that remains open. No guard other than that of love itself. Innocent of the knowledge of displays and the fall (Irigaray, 1986, p. 243–244).

This coexistence is “neither an explosion nor an implosion but an indwelling. Dwelling with the self, and with the other – while letting him/her/it go... Never finished. Unfolding itself during and between the terms of encounters” (Irigaray, 1986, p. 252). And in following Levinas’ distinction of pleasure from power, she emphasizes intimacy rather than animality as the key feature of the caress. The nature of scale implied in Irigaray’s account is in the connection between the intimate and the infinite, between the physical and the metaphysical, the transcendence of space and place by the movement of lovemaking:

Caressing her to reach the infinity of her center, the lover undoes her, divests her of her tactility – a porosity that opens up to the universe – and consigns her to the regression of her womanly becoming, always in the future. Forgetful of the fecundity, in the here and now, of lovemaking: the gift to each of the lovers of sexual birth and rebirth (Irigaray, 1986, pp. 244).

Thus, as we glimpsed in the opening references to Levinas’ idea that the route to the infinite is through the intimate transcendence of the self, we can glimpse here the paradox of scale relationships in geographical thought. The most private and intimate of moments offers a window on the wider social and political issues of coexistence that underpin geopolitics and power. But this window is not the window of a microcosm into a larger reality. Indeed, that is not the nature of scaled relationships (Howitt, 1993). Rather it is the window of emplacement and embodiment as experience – the simultaneity of personal and societal experience.

The challenge this window presents, however, has many dimensions. On the one hand, it is the challenge of language. How might we escape the deep colonising of what is thinkable by the hegemony of ‘Western’ thought, to allow space (or silence) for others whose thought, aspirations and experience are not only not encompassed by ‘Western’ philosophy, but are actively silenced and annihilated by it? On another hand, it is the challenge of governance. How are we to organise society and space to accommodate human (and non-human) diversity equitably, sustainably and ethically? And on another hand, it is the challenge of relation-

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24 It is worth noting that this tension between fear and love, caress and violence, is one that is woven into the Bible, where the more conventionally religious relationship with the infinite vacillates between fear of God and love of God.
ships. How does one be oneself, accept one’s intimate others, and nurture the future? 25

7. Nourishing terrains: coexistence, otherness and scale

In considering in some detail the nature of geographical scale and its place in the web of relations between space, place, time, culture and nature that provide the philosophical foundations of geographical thought, this paper has sought to explore the relevance of some elements of phenomenological thought, particularly the work of Levinas, to contemporary Human Geography. Levinas’ project of moving beyond the constraints of philosophy (i.e., beyond the hegemonic western discourses that construct the other as absent, inferior and conquerable), to construct a language (and a silence) of ethical engagement and situated availability (Rose, 1999), parallels many of the practical challenges geographers face in understanding complex, multi-cultural geographical totalities. Despite the depoliticization of many aspects of academic geography, there has been some discussion of geography’s many intellectual project in terms of its politics, inclusiveness and scope (e.g., Christopherson, 1989; Chouinard and Grant, 1995). Themes such as postcolonial studies and counter-colonial resistance and reconstruction; homelessness and displacement; gender studies; queer theory; labour market restructuring; suburbanization; minority rights; environmental ethics and politics; and national restructuring all encounter not simply the complex relationships between space and place, which are often mistaken for the compass of geography, but also implications of scale in the constitution of basic questions, relationships and processes.

Levinas’ work offers a window on the paradoxical simultaneity that characterizes issues of scale. Levinas’ metaphors of the face, infinity, the hand, the caress and the other, like Merleau-Ponty’s metaphors of visibility, Foucault’s concern with power and Derrida’s engagements with deconstruction, offer geographers and others concerned with the interplay of social, spatial and ‘natural’ domains much food for thought. In taking us to a new vantage point on the nature of the other, Levinas also brings us to the brink of a new understanding of the self. In considering ideas of embodiment and emplacement across cultural differences, his work also offers a useful vantage point on the paradoxes of geographical scale. The interpenetration of scales and the co-construction of places and identities at several scales parallel the shift between individual, collective and universal notions of self. In analytical terms this involves the interpenetration and co-constitution of social, economic, environmental or political relations at the local and/or national and/or global scale. From this new vantage point, scale appears to be less of a distinct thing-in-itself than a co-equal element in the construction of cultural landscapes and geographical totalities. The social processes implicated in the construction of these places have been revealed not just as spatialized, a matter increasingly acknowledged across the social sciences, but also as scaled. From the intimate scale of Eros to the incomprehensible scale of the Infinite, it is in the scaled processes of embodiment and emplacement that relations of difference, otherness and identity construct meaning, relationship and human possibility.

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25 To some extent these questions are taken up by both Levinas and Irigaray in recently published work, e.g., Levinas (1998); Irigaray (2000). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to elaborate on these works further.


