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Local Cosmologies: Introduction to Thematic Issue, "Place"

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Abstract: This article introduces the concept of *local cosmologies*: bodies of beliefs, perceptions, and values regarding the order of things, always situated, embodied, emergent and contingent. For our purposes, cosmology is the exegesis of worldly (and otherworldly) experience. It is a framework within which the apparent arbitrariness of life takes form and meaning. Cosmology is born of the land and the imagination, and it comes into being in the various performances—from religious ceremonies to rituals of the state—out of which men and women create order of the past and through which they consider the future. It is there that our encounters as researchers begin—but not where they end. The local focuses our attention on the lived, the everyday, the vernacular, but also, and perhaps more significantly, on the immediate. It emphasizes the parts of the world that individuals can and do experience, shape, and narrate. Understanding local cosmologies means understanding not just individual ontological frameworks, but how those frameworks are connected by individuals and groups to and through experience.

Keywords: semiotics of place, local cosmologies

What value does “here” have in a world that is increasingly defined by its interconnectivity? What meanings can individuals find in daily experience, ostensibly shaped by local exigencies, when those experiences are simultaneously constrained and compelled by distant, often invisible people, groups, and forces? What actual strategies, affective as well as social and political, do people adopt to make sense of their place within their “society,” and how do these strategies make use of embodied, emplaced experience to ground individual lives in the context of abstract social existence?

In proposing a semiotic of place, what we are calling *local cosmology*—a term first coined by Tolbert (2016)—we hope to call (or recall) attention to the critical interrelatedness of local experience and beyond-the-local realities. In his classic description of multi-sited ethnography, George E. Marcus outlines precisely this interrelatedness, though in decidedly different terms: "Within a single site, the crucial issue concerns the detectable system-awareness in the everyday consciousness and actions of subjects' lives. This is not an abstract theoretical awareness such as a social scientist might seek, but a sensed, partially articulated awareness of specific other sites and agents to which particular subjects have (not always tangible) relationships" (1995:111). It is in part to this awareness of "other sites" and "agents," and their relation to *me*—or any other *me*—that local cosmology refers. The other part of local cosmologies lies in the active, intellectual work of human agents in constructing them. As a semiotic of place—as a strategy of/for representation and communication—local cosmologies form durable, flexible, and versatile tools which can be made to serve a variety of ends, from nationalistic myth-making to religious proselytizing to teaching one's child to play baseball. (Because—and here is the national mythic at work—that is what American children do.) In all cases, local cosmologies are things which people actively and consciously *do* (if not always with the critical depth, or pedantry, of scholarly analysis).

As an example: following the 2016 presidential election in the United States, many people in that country and elsewhere found themselves facing a situation in which taken-for-granted notions of identity and political affiliation were more dramatically challenged that at any point in their memories. This is a diplomatic way of saying that the shocking victory of an overt racist-sexist-xenophobe has severely undermined the American left's view of itself and of its political opponents, spurring hyperbolic discussions of identity politics from which a stark picture of the "reality" and pervasiveness of American conservatism has emerged. Understanding "what it means to be American" has always been politically and ideologically fraught—and without question oppression and the worst kinds of "-isms" have always shaped American history—but the rise of Trump has cast an especially harsh and unforgiving light on the ways in which geography, skin color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and, of course, political party impact people's experiences of life in "America." Empathy, ever in short supply, is at an all-time premium, and a broad and virulent semiotic of place now (again, always) serves as a shorthand for the ideology of the American right. In a strange and troubling twist on the kind of "metonymic misrepresentation" that James Fernandez decried as a peril of place-based constructions of cultural identity (1988:22), the idea of America has been repurposed and weaponized. An image of the United States that belongs in reality to only a select few—white, male, conservative, Protestant, rich—has come to embody the jeopardized moral grounds of a political elite. It is an image that, we are told, is being undermined by the nefarious deeds of people of color, people of other genders, anti-capitalists, and the evils

of “globalism,” and the America it represents must be made “great again” for its constituents—at the expense of those who have never lived in this mythical version of America (nor perhaps ever wanted to). (Note, too, the insistence on “America” here in place of “the United States.” It is ironic, and entirely unsurprising, that almost the entirety of the Americas are excluded from the “America” indexed by the hateful acronym, MAGA.)

This is by no means a phenomenon unique to the United States. The rise of a militant nationalism has shaken parts of Europe. In Poland, citizens have found themselves confronted with a machine that denies history in favor of promoting a unified vision of the past that ignores atrocities. France narrowly averted the catastrophic election of a right-wing nationalist bent on imposing a totalitarian regime that would have strongly limited religious and political expression and implemented policies that would have devastated minorities. The story is not much different in South Asia, where Modi’s BNP party has seized control and given rise to a new nationalist regime with a powerful drive towards establishing an ethno-religious state in India. President Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power in China is just as alarming, giving new cause for concern among China’s growingly vocal body of dissidents. Corruption in the Americas, especially in the Odebrecht case, has sent new waves of instability and outrage at all levels in government in Brazil following which the authoritarianism of the newly elected Jair Bolsonaro has marginalized the voices of indigenous peoples and threatened the security of diverse biospheres. Zimbabwe saw the fall of Mugabe, but the military government that followed and the administration it dovetailed into have suffered a complicated political legacy of their own.

At the same time, the entire globe is coming to terms with an increasingly destabilizing, wholly unavoidable, and frightening transformation in the earth itself. A rapidly and alarmingly changing climate has begun to take its toll, the consequence of centuries of industrial pollution manifesting in rising temperatures, powerful storms, and increasing fears of impending ecological collapse. Even in the places where rainforests once seemed eternal, people are beginning to note with terror the abrupt changes in their surroundings and the beginnings of the loss of the great biodiversity that has for all memory characterized their homes. The world itself is becoming something alienating, and so too are our understandings of the world and its histories (and futures), and our relationship to it transformed.

As a species, we have been witness to great upheavals, but it is difficult to imagine a time of greater uncertainty than the present moment. And it is in response to this sensation of extreme vulnerability that we turn again to the questions of how we make meaning in an unstable world, and to a consideration of the narratives about our world that result from our efforts. As researchers in the humanities and social sciences, we often find ourselves anxious about the impact of our efforts to understand these processes. Is it naïve to think

they might generate empathy? Is it cynical to deny the possibility? Working to understand the thinking and living of others is of paramount importance in any efforts to cope with societal upheaval. Part of this endeavor necessitates encounters with the nebulous construct that we have elected to label local cosmologies—bodies of beliefs, perceptions, and values regarding the order of things, always situated, embodied, emergent and contingent. For our purposes, *cosmology* is the exegesis of worldly (and otherworldly) experience. It is a framework within which the apparent arbitrariness of life takes form and meaning. Cosmology is born of the land and the imagination, and it comes into being in the various performances—from religious ceremonies to rituals of the state—out of which men and women create order of the past and through which they consider and attempt to shape the future.[1] It is there that our encounters as researchers begin—but not where they end. The *local* focuses our attention on the lived, the everyday, the vernacular, but also, and perhaps more significantly, on the *immediate*. It emphasizes the parts of the world that individuals can and do experience, shape, and narrate. A focus on the immediate in this sense encourages us to view social experience through the lens of locally-oriented structures of knowledge, emic perspectives on knowing and knowledge-making that emerge through daily interactions with places and people and the ordinary business of being in the physical/social/spiritual world. For us as scholars, these encounters refigure our own preconceived notions of how the world (or worlds) work. They grant moments of inspiration that force us to reconcile the ways we have been trained to apprehend and order the universe with new logics. We will develop the seeming dichotomy of the local and the cosmological more fully below.

In exploring local cosmologies we propose to begin at the level of the phenomenological: not with "bare" experience, but rather the experience of a world that comes pre-loaded with meaning and significance. Our approach parallels that of Edward S. Casey, who calls for a phenomenological understanding of place which "rejoins not only the anthropologist in the field but the native on the land: both have no choice but to begin with experience" (1996:16),[2] what folklorist David Hufford calls a "pedestrian" phenomenology (1982:xv). How "the world" is constructed, perceived, interacted with, and represented to other humans differs widely from group to group, individual to individual, place to place, and time to time; regardless, humans of all backgrounds must interact, to some extent, with the physical world, and this in turn gives rise to a need to conceptualize that world in a way that makes such interactions comprehensible (Relph 1997:208; cf. Code 1993:21). Simultaneously, regardless of differential constructions of the experiential world held by different groups (and individuals), inter-group interaction must take place *within* that experiential world, with all the differences in understanding, meaning, authority, and significance ascribed to that world by the groups involved.

The notion of scale is instructive here. As Arturo Escobar has argued, “the politics of place has to be found at the intersection of the scaling effects of networks, on the one hand, and emergent identities, such as the black and indigenous identities of the Colombian Pacific, on the other” (2001:166). Local cosmological thinking also occurs at this intersection. It parallels what E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert, in their introduction to an edited volume on the topic of scale, term “scalar projects”: “Social actors not only construct and feel their worlds in scalar terms but also conduct themselves—and try to affect others—accordingly. They have scalar projects, which they engage with varying degrees of reflection” (2016:11). Scaling, in their usage, is a complex and always political undertaking. “As an inherently relational and comparative endeavor, scaling may thus connect and even conflate what is geographically, geopolitically, temporally, or morally ‘near’ while simultaneously distinguishing that nearness from that which is ‘far’” (ibid.:3). Our approach parallels these considerations in its exploration of the processes by which various agents establish and deploy discourse (among other strategies) to position their local experience within, alongside, and against other scales, notably (but by no means exclusively) the national and the global.

Local cosmology names the experience-near end of scaling, the particular affective, embodied, as well as intellectual dimensions of finding oneself in a church or a bus or a stadium or an army, of doing the mental labor of fitting the pieces together in some way that conforms to one’s understanding of reason, of embodying in oneself through the act of living those layers of “reality”—the tiers in a social scalar order—that make up the world around us. What Carr and Lempert call “*interscalar* assemblages” (Carr and Lempert 2016:14, original emphasis)—the ways in which individual actors relate different scales to one another—inform local cosmological strategies. Yet the notion of scale does not exhaust the possibilities of local cosmological thinking. Scales, after all, relate to size, extent, scope; they express things in terms of other things, and make it possible to posit equivalencies between nonequivalent things. Local cosmologies incorporate scalar logics alongside any and all other logics, cultural frameworks, technical skills, knowledges, and personal histories by use of which human actors understand their place in their world. They emerge as personal, experientially-oriented and experientially-constructed maps (or models) of reality with me (or us) at the center. Cosmologies articulate the cognitive links between the scalar ontologies provided us by society (and the various knowledges it asks us to accept as “real,” such as “religion,” “tradition,” etc.), and those formed, challenged, and verified by individual being-in-the-world. If “scalar projects” are external social strategies by which aspects of the phenomenal world are compared and related to one another, local cosmologies are the internal understandings of those comparisons and relationships and, most crucially, how they impact individual humans and how those humans must navigate them.

These processes are not wholly idiosyncratic. (They would have little semiotic potential if they were.) While there is a necessarily vernacular, as well as an individual, tinge to local cosmologies, they articulate with official discourses of place and scale in complex ways. Linkages form between those external models and scales and the experiences of multiple individuals within, around, and against them. Far from ideologically neutral, local cosmologies may incorporate as well as test, reconfigure, and reject the assumptions, norms, prejudices, and other messy social bits of the cultural logics with which they interact. Indeed, as Susan Gal shows, individuals may locate themselves differentially in the potentially contrastive organizing logics that comprise these ways of thinking, depending on the context (2016:101–3).

Cultural geography has given us the notion of place as distinct from space (Tuan 1977), the distinction resting, for the most part, on the notion of *meaning*. Spaces are endowed with meanings in various ways. For Yi-Fu Tuan, a pioneer of place studies, the process is largely experiential: "In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977:6). For others, notably Kent Ryden (1993) and Keith Basso (1996), places are made through narration, through the framing and shaping of experience in language which is in turn able to be deployed to shape and direct subsequent interactions with the world. The key issue here, for our purposes, is the sense that the *experience* of local space enables the *construction* of localized place.

But Edward S. Casey rejects the primacy of space, arguing instead that, phenomenologically speaking, the world does indeed come with characteristics, qualities, and meanings attached (1996:15–16). Key to Casey's approach is embodiment: "It is by bodies that places become cultural in character" (ibid.:34). Casey's argument is essentially that abstract space, as a pure abstraction, does not precede meaning-rich, experienced place, which has depth and breadth, horizons, contents, and relationality. Every encounter with a location renders it a place, as the bodies that inhabit it invest it with meanings, both physical and cultural. "Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse" (ibid.:24). For our part, we find in common with Casey's approach an appreciation for the primacy of place, and in particular the embodied nature of its experience.

As Casey suggests, "To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in" (1996:18). Similarly, Christopher Preston—responding to a discussion on subjectivity in epistemology by Lorraine Code (1993)—emphasizes that individual actors necessarily occupy different places, noting, "It would be surprising if these dramatic differences of places, literal differences in epistemic location, did not also contribute

something to the constructions of knowledge [Code's] agents produce" (Preston 1999:212). It may be enough, for present purposes, to acknowledge that place relates to where people (actors, agents) find themselves, how they conceive not only of their spatial/physical locations, but what they *think about*—in all the complexities this vague formulation allows—this self-finding. Attending to the experience of place reminds us—and the scholars mentioned above would all agree—that place is highly relative. Place shapes our experiences in the most fundamental ways, and the relationship between place and experience is reciprocal. Through experience, we become aware of the concepts others have connected to the places through which we move; by learning about such preexisting concepts, the flavor of our experiences is altered. "To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought" (Tuan 1977:9). Place impacts our experiences both by means of its physical characteristics and through culturally-constructed notions of significance, value, history, et cetera

Place, identity, and the relationships between self and others are inextricably linked, informing and co-determining one another in complex matrices. Any sense of the 'local' finds meaning, at least in part, from the experience and positioning of various forms of the 'nonlocal.' Humans understand our own concepts of the local to be in tension with other senses (or scales) of place such as the national or the global. This positioning is both contrastive and constitutive, presenting in any discourse of the local a set of productive contradictions. The local is *a part of* the national and the global; the local is *apart from* the national and the global. At the same time, place can take on its own meanings without need of a contrasting other – a "here" does not necessarily require a "there" (Tuan 1977:136). The degree to which these various scales diverge or intersect with one another is predicated on a host of social, cultural, and political contingencies.

A durable theoretical model with clear relevance to the present discussion is provided by anthropologist Murphy Halliburton, who coined the term *local phenomenologies* to describe ways of knowing "constituted by both local analytic theories of experience and lived experience itself … [which] influence one another to some degree" (Halliburton 2002:1126). Halliburton's focus on the *local* parallels our own, with important implications for the experiential approach we advocate: if even experience itself is always understood differently—that is to say, if those understandings are always differentially constituted by different cultures and individual actors—then the more complex and abstract formulations of relations between components of the world of lived experience must likewise be highly changeable, contingent, and differentially articulated. These changing and changeable ontological structures, highly localized and individualized but always connected to external social norms and processes, are what we are calling local cosmologies. Akin as

well to de Certeau's "local authorities" (1984:106)—those discourses that invest places with special meanings arising from experience and therefore in opposition to the imposed, mediated discourses of society—local cosmologies are fundamental, indeed formative, components of our mental maps, the ontological tools by which we make sense of what we endure every day. By advancing this model, we hope to elicit deeper reflections and push the limits of both the collective knowledge of the human sciences and our scholarly approaches to "knowable" potentialities.

It has not gone unnoticed by scholars and activists alike the role which place—and the connections between *specific places*, bodies, and memories—plays in both local and global politics. Anthony P. Cohen, in outlining what he terms "the ethnography of locality" (Cohen 1982:2), calls attention to the powerful structuring influence of local places on individual identities. Cohen highlights the hierarchical quality which local experience necessarily imparts to social existence: "Thus I might choose to identify myself as British, Scots, Shetlander, Whalsayman, or as belonging to some particular kinship-neighbourhood nexus in Whalsay. The significant point is that with each 'ascending' level I increasingly simplify (and thereby misrepresent) the message about myself. At each descending level I present myself through increasingly informed and complex pictures" (Cohen 1982:10). Cohen's hierarchical conception of cultural identity is central to our concept of local cosmologies—with the caveat that identifying with "ascending" levels of social organization does not *necessarily* misrepresent individuals, particularly if the higher (i.e., more complex) levels form an important part of an individual's identity. In the shadow of Brexit, is "British" less precise an identifier than "Scots"? A Scottish citizen may position themselves toward this emerging UK in a number of ways, each aligning with or against other scales of identification. To be Scots may be a nationalist position, or an anti-imperialist, a globalist, a regionalist, or a separatist one, each positioning drawing from a host of other political contexts and considerations.

Other scholars have focused on the conflicts that may arise over local places. While we find local cosmology useful for linking together the various ways in which place, memory, and (social/political) meanings overlap, Reid and Taylor (2010) have found purchase in *body~place~commons* as a means of highlighting the confluence of interests embedded in contested landscapes. Others still have found a number of insightful ways to reflect on the complex articulations between people and their physical and imagined environments. Situated within nested layers of political articulation, ranging from local considerations to the global and back again, places provide anchoring points for political discourse and performance, especially clearly in the case of contested spaces (see Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:18–25), as well as spaces set aside for commemoration (also often contested, and perhaps necessarily so). Inasmuch as places contain embedded within themselves differentially shared meanings that hinge upon the capacity of an audience to

recognize and affiliate with them, the semiotic and affective value of place relies on the performance of certain messages. When places are threatened, be it by outside occupation, environmental destruction, etc., the response is necessarily political.

The process of relating places across scales is inherently political. Richard Bauman, discussing the presidential campaigns of William Jennings Bryan, notes Bryan's efforts, both via in-person speech-making and through the strategic use of phonograph recordings, "to bring the immediacy of his oratorical performances to the voters of the nation-state" (2016:48). An essential problem for Bryan during these campaigns, Bauman argues, was how to extend the scale of his political public to increasingly broad levels of social interaction, from the local (here indicating the sites of Bryan's in-person speeches) to the national (a level of interaction here constructed from the sense of connectedness created among Bryan's in-person speech sites as well as the mediated interactions with his phonograph recordings). And Susan Gal notes, "When invoked in real-time interaction, models for scaling contextualize experience, imaginatively placing the phenomena of experience in wider (and narrower) relational fields" (2016:92). These "models for scaling" are important components in the formation of local cosmologies, and they may be inherited, contested, differentially constructed, deployed and re-deployed in individual experience.

The particularities of our research, and the demands of novel considerations inspired by fieldwork and other research imperatives, drive us to extend this reasoning beyond physical localities. Understandings of place, with their focus on the experienced world, can be applied to virtual places, social networks and frameworks for experience not constituted along physical-geographic lines, and conceptions of selfhood, statehood, and nationhood that employ the language and concepts of place—that invoke the *immediacy* of place—without necessarily connecting in explicit ways to space/place at all. Online communities such as discussion forums; trade unions or hobby groups; fan clubs; religions—all of these types of groups use terms or employ performances which suggest (or themselves comprise) a shared *immediacy of experience* (Adams and Warf 1997:139; see also Pink et al. 2016:19–39, 123–45). As Pink et al. indicate in their discussion of the implications of the local for digital ethnography (2016:124–25), Appadurai's (1996:178) framing of *locality* is key here, with its emphasis on phenomenological immediacy and the contexts in which social interactions occur.

Notably, Appadurai explicitly problematizes terms such as *cosmological* when applied to the processes by which localities are made. These terms, "by distracting us from their active, intentional, and productive character create the dubious impression of mechanical reproduction" (1996:180).[3] By contrast, our conception of local cosmologies *emphasizes* their active, volitional characters. While local cosmological acts can and often do have the

effect of reproducing received notions of locality, such reproduction need not be viewed as mindless or "mechanical," but rather as a key strategy by which individuals relate themselves and their groups to their "places," broadly conceived. Experience reminds us of the role of individuals in shaping their own worlds; by emphasizing it we can avoid representing this process of shaping as "mechanical." Conservatism, seen in this light, is as active and volitional as its opposite: holding onto established values is not passive or "mechanical," but represents the end point of a process of thought that judges a particular version of the world (usually one located in or at least identified with the past) superior to another (usually one perceived to be encroaching on the former). This language of "worlds" is apt: the world as a place, or a concatenation of places, and all the people (or peoples) within it, necessarily informs thinking about how the world should be, about how we should experience (the world), about how we can create a world that will enable the experiences we want to have. Both as literal indicators of scalar dimensions and as metaphors for layers of individual and social experience, the local and the global each resound with the longings of/for the other. In recognizing, organizing, and acting on these longings, people are asserting their personhood, emerging as key actors in the creation of their own realities.

Local cosmological examples abound. Catholic churchgoers in local parishes are reminded each Sunday when they recite the Nicene Creed that they not only belong to, but *believe in*, the "one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church." United States citizens pledge allegiance not only to the flag in front of them, but *to the Republic for which it stands*. As Robert A. Orsi, discussing the presence of a shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Washington, DC, has noted, "Mary's presence in the nation's capital city represented the unity of *American* Catholics, sanctioning their patriotism and loyalty to the nation. This is Mary as an American citizen" (Orsi 2005:64–65). Such professions of fidelity as the Creed and the Pledge—one to a religion, the other to a nation, both of which are often, as in Orsi's example, imbricated within the other—gesture powerfully to imagined communities (Anderson 2006[1983]) , to masses of individuals linked not through face-to-face interaction but by participation in the very institutions whose credos they are. As Tuan notes, "Experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, marked by symbols. We know our home intimately; we can only know *about* our country if it is very large" (1977:6). Similarly, anthropologists Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop write, "As beings, we are always oriented or positioned toward aspects of an ever-broader potential world of experience. It is not possible for us to experience the world in its entirety. We must always focus on particular aspects of it" (2011:90).

Such intimate but intangible connections to increasingly complex and expanding formulations of space/place, what Tuan calls "construed space" (1977:17), are fundamental to social existence and underlie the dynamics and power structures which

shape contemporary societies (see also Tolbert 2016:153–54). Eric Wolf, addressing the linkages between power and ideas, describes power as not only dependent on production and society, but also on its relationship with "imaginary elements and beings projected beyond tangible experience into metaphysical worlds" (1999:281). These "imaginary elements," embedded in the imaginary landscapes that help to define and, to greater or lesser extents, direct contemporary social groups, and the "metaphysical worlds" onto which they may be projected, make up local cosmologies. In large part, our focus here is on the contrast Wolf, Tuan, and Anderson all identify, between what we might call the *immediate experience* (I am saying the Pledge of Allegiance at a baseball game) versus the *imagined experience* of community (I am a citizen of the United States).

The imagined experience of community is in turn identical to Cohen's special formulation of *belonging*, "the almost inexpressibly complex experience of culture" (1982:16). This experience calls our attention to the close links between these apparently contrastive orders of social experience. For instance: *we, right here, in this chapel in the American Midwest, are members of the holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, which we know is based in Rome, in whose history we share, whose pontiff we recognize as our spiritual leader, who directs us in following the example of Jesus Christ, the son of God, the creator of our reality; we acknowledge all of this here and now through this Creed*. Performances like these are the moments in which the abstractions of local and national, of parish and Church, of immediate and imagined come together: they are the experience of belonging, an experience with necessarily local *feeling* even as it points to broader levels of social/political/spiritual life. (We might add many other qualifiers before "life" as well.) Orsi's example of imported Madonnas is again pertinent here:

> Annual feast day celebrations in honor of these Madonnas were occasions for making the worlds their respective devout had come from present again in the American environment: in the gaze of the Madonna, the familiar sense world of the old countries—smells, the taste of remembered food and drink on the tongue, the music of childhood, and so on—were re-created, or created anew according to the exigencies of immigrant memories. (Orsi 2005:66)

Later Orsi notes how Catholic children's spiritual practice served to powerfully embody Catholic cosmological notions within the children's own corporeal lives, linking "cosmic grandiosity" with "the materiality of moral recompense" (Orsi 2005:101). The connections thus forged between cosmos and body are one further dimension of local cosmological thinking.

Importantly, the relationship between the local and the larger cosmos (social, metaphysical, or whatever) to which it is conjoined is not always harmonious. Dorothy

Noyes (2016) calls our attention, for example, to the refusal of Berguedan *integristes* to acknowledge links between their local culture and anything beyond their town. "Authenticity, as they use the word, is what emerges from the local: the alienation they know and fear is that of their situation being defined for them from above" (Noyes 2016:38). In experiencing the local festival called the *patum*, which creates a powerfully visceral feeling of community, the *integristes* have allowed the local to supersede other levels of experience: "Their cultivation of the local is an attempt to enlarge and make permanent this reality" (ibid.:48).

In discussing the complex relations of local, immediate cultural "parts" to larger, extrapolated "wholes"—neighborhood and nation, for example—Cohen asks how scholars seeking to form meaningful associations between these levels of experience can do so "without treating them as the determined products of their wider setting?" (1982:14). Though he hesitates to offer a concrete solution to the problem, he suggests an ethnographic approach which calls attention "to *their* meanings—to their experience of culture" (1982:16). Similarly, Clifford Geertz has argued that symbolic anthropological analyses are characterized by

> a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view ... Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another. (1983:69).

Geertz is speaking of scholarly interpretations, but we suggest (and we suspect he would agree) that this same kind of thinking characterizes individuals' approaches to their own worlds. The "tacking between the most local" and "the most global" is not only a critical part of maintaining an awareness of membership in imagined communities: it is also a necessary component of the processes by which understandings of daily interactions and the forces that motivate them are constructed. The recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Nicene Creed have meaning in both their immediate, local contexts and in their shared capacity to connect the local and immediate to the "global structure" of which the participating individuals may feel themselves a part. (*Feeling* is key here.) That the situation may be complicated by the presence of "outsiders"—non-Catholics attending a Catholic mass; French citizens attending their first American baseball game—does not refute this point; rather it subtly but potently underscores the power of one end of the experiential/imagined spectrum to explicate the other, to mangle Geertz's construction. The non-Catholic may not feel a connection to the community of Catholics outside the immediate church context; the French citizens may not feel a stirring of American

patriotism (or interest in baseball). But each will at the very least be aware that they have entered a site wherein such affective dynamics, conditioned by history and various types of social instruction, exist, wherein something beyond the immediate experience of the people in this church or this stadium *but articulated through and lending meanings to that experience* is being consciously invoked and understood by a majority of participants. The awareness of that dynamic is in fact very likely to increase their sense of "outsiderness" (see Cohen 1982, 3), and for this reason alone scholars should attend to these types of social processes. But, if we imagine ourselves in the shoes of the non-Catholic churchgoer or the French baseball initiates, it is the very feeling of outsiderness that cues our attention to the presence of a local cosmological framework, to the work of its participants toward its creation and maintenance, to the contrastive and conflictive potentialities of different local cosmologies in encounter with one another, and perhaps especially to the assumptions, both social and personal, undergirding our own experience in this place at this moment among these people.

As we have argued, local cosmologies call our attention, first of all, to the importance to individuals and groups of forming linkages between the immediate, the sensed, the present, and the knowable, on the one hand, and on the other, the conceptual, the understood, the ongoing, and the (potentially) unknowable. Archaeologist Conor Newman aptly describes this perceived hierarchy of experienced and conceptualized realities:

> Like opening a Russian doll, we perceive and encounter the world at various scales, moving seamlessly between them along the strands of an existential and cultural web of our own making. While each of us has a sense of the whole world and our place in it, individually we occupy or inhabit only small parts of it. That with which we are most familiar, which bears most of our fingerprints, is the local, and it is the local, therefore, that reflects most faithfully who we are as individuals because this is where we call 'home'. (Newman 2009:10)

The nested quality of social experience that Newman highlights echoes Tuan's concept of construed space and encapsulates the intellectual and experiential basis of local cosmological thinking (but cf. Carr and Lempert 2016:13). The emphasis here is on the everyday, the quotidian, the palpable—because this is the level of experience—and on the affective nature of such experience. Local cosmologies can easily be conceived of as the systems of knowledge and belief (and their attendant modes of behavior and practice) that link the primarily experiential with the largely abstract, as in the case of the local community's relationship with the nation or the "community of nations." The hierarchies that often inform local cosmological thinking may be artificial constructs, but they are important perceptual and conceptual distinctions that influence the lives and actions of individuals.

The specifics of our chosen terminology reflect the contrasting layers of experience through which local cosmologies are formed. As we use it here, the idea of the *local* helps to orient our thinking toward what is immediate and perceivable, the things and ideas and behaviors which are a part of everyday experience. Despite its articulation of a semiotic of place, local cosmology need not be anchored to physical spaces: in fact, as we have seen, the concept of space as such may not enter into the equation at all. The point here is, again, that these systems of knowing link the immediate perceptual realm of the individual/group to broader social, ecological, or metaphysical systems and realities (to name only a few possibilities).

The concept of *cosmology* underscores the central point that these systems of knowledge are primarily concerned with ordering the world as such—that is, they are explicitly engaged in fitting everyday experience into the larger context of the region, the nation, the world, the cosmos (or whatever). While cosmology can certainly connote mythological narrative, the actions of divinities and the creation of the universe, or the relationship between the human and spiritual realms—and these genres or concepts in fact resonate in critical ways with the themes we hope contributors will explore in this issue—it also speaks more generally to the structure of reality. A cosmology, in our usage, is the set of assumptions about how things relate to other things, how they work, why they work as they do, and how humans can navigate the world of things (and people and places and everything else) with all its demands and intricate hierarchies. Cosmology is also useful for its derivative forms, *microcosm* and *macrocosm*, terms which emphasize the hierarchical relationships into which individual experience is often slotted.[4]

Local cosmology, then, emphasizes the combination of daily experience with understandings of broader levels of reality: social, spiritual, etc. Simultaneously, it underscores the fact that the systems considered here are (experientially, affectively, and conceptually, if not geographically) *local* and, therefore, not necessarily representative of every member of a particular group, however that group may be conceived. The local community (however defined) may see itself as existing within the nation, for example; but the community's understanding of its own role, of the values and ideals of the nation, of the history of and reasons for the current political system, etc., may not match (or even be acceptable to) the larger social unit (as in Noyes' example cited above). Even the supposed scalar relationships of these social levels, to adapt Carr and Lempert's language, and the levels themselves—"community," "nation"—are of course essentially arbitrary, and they may not be shared among constituent parties. Nothing is monolithic, especially systems rooted in experience. Community, at any rate, "is an effect of network strategies" (Noyes 2016:39). We are not suggesting that units of social organization are absolute (or exist at all), nor that all the individuals within a particular level of social organization (emically understood) conceptualize their relationships in the same way.

Rather, by highlighting these issues, we hope to privilege people's own understandings of the relationships among the various kinds and settings of social experience and the broader, more abstract systems ("nation," "culture," "God") to which they meaningfully connect.

For humanists and humanistic social scientists, engaged primarily in projects that are grounded in the felt experiences of our subjects, be they ethnographic, textual, or archival, inroads into local cosmologies are necessarily varied. For some, cosmology emerges out of articulations between place and memory. Others find cosmology as a grounding force for the processes of inspection and interrogation inherent in knowledge foundation or for establishing an ethos. If there is a common ground shared by scholars grappling with local cosmologies, it is first and foremost an acknowledgement of the role of cosmology in situating, navigating, and communicating the complexities of life itself as a (more or less) intelligible metanarrative. It is here that ethos and pathos meet and intertwine with logos, mythos and place, both "real" and imagined.

Local cosmologies are not coterminous with local knowledge, although the latter is unquestionably relevant to (and often expressed within) the former. Paul Sillitoe's (1998) definition of local knowledge is helpful here, and while he specifically situates it in the context of debates over development, it clearly has applications beyond that specific set of issues:

> Local knowledge in development contexts may relate to any knowledge held collectively by a population, informing interpretation of the world. It may encompass any domain in development, particularly that pertaining to natural resource management in particular [sic]. It is conditioned by socio-cultural tradition, being culturally relative understanding inculcated into individuals from birth, structuring how they interface with their environments. (1998:204)

The useful parts of this definition, for our purposes, are its emphases on locality, interpretation, and the implicit constructedness that characterizes local knowledge. However, Sillitoe's definition is also greatly limited by its fixedness: local knowledge, in his usage, is anchored to a specific population (implicitly, to a physically localized group); further, it is dictated to individuals by that group. The picture that emerges is one of a fixed body of wisdom that molds individuals into its own likeness—in Appadurai's words, one which produces "reliably local subjects" (1996:181).

A more holistic approach to these issues is that formulated by Fredrik Barth (1995). Problematizing the use of the term *culture*, which results in exoticization (Barth 1995:65), Barth suggests instead that scholars substitute the word *knowledge*: "Using knowledge

(referring to what people employ to interpret and act on the world: feelings as well as thoughts, embodied skills as well as taxonomies and other verbal models) as our prototype for culture allows us to construct rather different models of culture and invites an imagery less vulnerable to the constructions on which disempowering discourses build" (ibid.:66). For Barth, this approach enables a greater awareness, and a more sensitive treatment, of the ways people interpret their daily experiences. While knowledges held by different individuals will necessary differ, there remains the possibility of overlap. "Thereby, other modes of representation and other and more dynamic questions come to the fore when we model culture in such modalities: variation, positioning, practice, exchange, reproduction, change, creativity" (ibid.).

A middle ground between the above approaches, and the formulation of local knowledge closest to our use of local cosmologies, is offered by Casey: "Local knowledge, then, comes down to an intimate understanding of what is generally true in the locally obvious; it concerns what is true about place in general as manifested *in this place*. Standing in this place thanks to the absolute here of my body, I understand what is true of other places over *there* precisely because of what I comprehend to be the case for this place under and around me" (1996:45).[5] Casey's reformulation of local knowledge bridges the geographic fixity of Sillitoe's model with the epistemic refiguring of "culture" by Barth. By grounding local knowledge in phenomenology, it becomes possible to interrogate the experience of place as it relates to processes of knowledge production. A person's contact with and movement through places, over the course of a lifetime, forms the geospatial context out of which all experience (as memory, as know-how, as pathos, as nostalgia) emerges and operates, either as part of an individual process or one that is shared amongst some collective body. People may move from a place, but the impact of that place remains embedded in memory, and, potentially, in identity. Thus the question "where are you from?" contains within it some dimension of the question, "who are you?"—even as this particular dimension overlaps with other competing and complicating dimensions of self. And all of the categories implicated here are problematic: as Ien Ang notes, "it is the very question 'where are you from'—a question so easily thrown up as the bottom line of cultural identity (thereby equating cultural identity with national identity)—which lacks transparency here" (1999:551). We can speak then of a habitus of place that leaves on individuals the residual markers out of which identities take form and within which knowledge is generated through experience. The connection of local and extra-local aspects of identity and existence come, through local cosmological frameworks, to the fore, highlighting points of contact between the local and global (Robertson 2012[1994], 2005; Appadurai 1996) and to still higher and/or more abstract layers of social reality(-ies).

Local cosmologies can speak to seeming impossibilities of geographic conflation, like the persistent flying of Confederate flags in rural towns in central Pennsylvania or New Hampshire. They can call our attention to tactics, in de Certeau's sense, that long to become strategies, and vice versa. For de Certeau, "Strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power" (1984:48, original emphasis). Local cosmologies collapse these impulses into one, writing individual hopes and fears and desires and prejudices—Catholics united in abstract belief despite never interacting directly; a contemporary Confederate sensibility located above the Mason-Dixon Line—onto physical space both despite, and with the support of, contemporary geopolitical realities. Most importantly, local cosmologies call our attention to what people do in the spaces and places they inhabit, and how they connect those spaces and places to others which they will never inhabit but which necessarily exert tremendous influence over their personal ontologies.

Ethnography, at first blush, may be the methodology best suited to exploring local cosmologies, with its focus on experience and affect and individual personalities in group contexts. As Marcus writes, "The distinction between lifeworlds of subjects and the system does not hold, and the point of ethnography within the purview of its always local, close-up perspective is to discover new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices can continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas" (1995:98). But by no means does ethnography have sole claim to understanding meaning-making. We hope that scholars in all fields will co-opt local cosmologies in ways useful and appropriate to their own ends. People relate their lives to the lives of unseen others in a startling array of media, utterances, performances, and cultural productions. But these relations are not limited to their fixed expressions in stories or song or film: they are born out, in differential and contrastive ways, in human experience.

Endnotes

1 In this it parallels the closely related, and perennially problematic, concept of tradition, as classically formulated by folklorist Henry Glassie (2003).↩

2 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for calling our attention to Casey's approach to place and its divergence from Tuan's, as well as to the importance of scale and the recent work by Carr and Lempert. We consider these writers below.↩

3 Appadurai is undoubtedly right to insist that local knowledge is primarily "about producing reliably local subjects as well as about producing reliably local neighborhoods within which such subjects can be recognized and organized" (1996:181). This process might be viewed as the inward-facing trajectory of local cosmological thinking, which is always simultaneously coupled with an outward-facing view concerned with linking "local subjects" with non- or extra-local conceptual zones. Appadurai acknowledges as much when he writes, "The way in which neighborhoods are produced and reproduced requires the continuous construction, both practical and discursive, of an ethnoscape (necessarily nonlocal) against which local practices and projects are imagined to take place" (ibid.:184). The reciprocal nature of neighborhood-context that Appadurai emphasizes underscores the generative framework of local cosmologies, which become structures and processes of knowing shaped by the local (locality, in Appadurai's sense) and extended outward, encountering other cosmologies (themselves local to their actors) but still, always, making sense of them in and through the local.↩

4 Carr and Lempert note that micro- and macro-level scales are ontological constructions which are arbitrarily valued, and argue that scholars should therefore resist adopting them as analytic categories. They write, "We ontologize scalar perspectives, rather than ask how they were forged and so focused. Indeed, it is all too easy to proceed with our analyses as if the oft-critiqued but still-convenient tiers of macro, meso, and micro were the ready-made platforms for social practice, as if social life simply unfolded in more or less intimate, proximate, local, grounded, or contained situations" (2016:8). Understanding how such perspectives were "forged and so focused" is part of the task we hope the concept of local cosmologies can help accomplish. In privileging people's own perspectives on their worlds, we hope to bypass the problematic adoption of scalar ontologies Carr and Lempert critique—but the (emic) language of scale necessarily persists.↩

5 Though Casey is here careful to point out that this embodied knowledge does not necessarily hold for all places: instead, this type of local knowledge can suggest commonalities between "other places of the same region" (1996:45).↩

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