Commentary

The ‘post’ as powerful specific vocabulary

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Abstract
On several occasions through her article, ‘Keeping You Post-ed: Space-Time Regimes, Metaphors, and Post-Apartheid’, Houssay-Holzschuch (2021) prompts us to consider suitable vocabulary for analysing ‘post’ situations. In this commentary, I pursue the notion that the ‘post’ discourse already has a specific vocabulary. Taking Houssay-Holzschuch’s lead and drawing from Massey’s conception of space-time regimes, I argue that ‘post’ is used powerfully to fasten the past to a place’s present, bounding certain geopolitical discourses to people and places and overshadowing experiential memories of place. This powerful lexicographic move is shrouded by cruelly optimistic rhetoric that otherwise links ‘post’ with newly opened spaces of possibility, positive change, and hope.

Keywords
Power, ‘post’, space-time, vocabulary, hope

Introduction
Houssay-Holzschuch’s (2021) opening contention, that ‘societies that have undergone systemic change are characterized as “post”’, and her question, ‘what is a “post” situation?’, provided me with entry points to begin thinking with and through the ‘post’ as a specific vocabulary. The current closeness of a ‘post’ situation1 – the (post)pandemic2 – is perhaps more tangible for many of us in Western Anglophone academia than it has ever been. On the cusp of the (post)pandemic, we dwell with/in an uncomfortable and challenging liminal zone waiting for a return to the everyday we know, all the while engaging in a type of collective optimism for a seemingly imminent vaccine. Yet, ‘here we have a powerful imaginative geography’ (Massey, 1999: 36), which legitimises, for us, the hope possible but not necessarily probable for a (post)pandemic world. Referencing post-apartheid space-time, Houssay-Holzschuch argues that the liminality of this ‘post’ space-time opened ‘up spaces of possibility rather than probability’; such imaginative possibilities signalled hope for change notwithstanding the probability that change would never be equally distributed or equitably accessible across post-apartheid South Africa.

Equally, the (post)pandemic world will not be uniform across space-time. As we have already seen, the pandemic rupture has affected different places and communities unevenly, and so too will...
the power-geometries of globalised biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, and their corresponding flows of global capital, render different (post)possibilities in different places. The collective optimism we have for the (post)pandemic, therefore, may be better imagined using Berlant’s (2011: 2) maxim of cruel optimism – that is, it can enable us ‘to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way’. I return to cruel optimism again later in this commentary in an attempt to tie that sense of aspirational hope for post-apartheid South Africa’s entrance into the global economy to what Lave et al. (2018: 133) refer to as Massey’s ‘clear-eyed, consistent recognition that there are no linkages without tensions’.

Thinking with ‘posts’

But why begin here – with the pandemic – when Houssay-Holzschuch’s theorisations on ‘post’ assemble in post-apartheid space-time? I begin here because placing a viscerally imminent ‘post’ gives us – who do not have an experiential (non-cognitive) knowledge of the possibilities proffered by/in a ‘post’ period – a glimpse at exploring the ‘potentials of thinking-with-body’ (Drozdzewski et al., 2021, forthcoming). In connecting with experience, I start from the standpoint that our positionality helps us make sense of what the ‘post situation’ means, spatially and temporally. Thinking-with the ‘post’ for me occasioned considering my position as a citizen of two ‘post’ countries, (post)colonial Australia and (post)socialist Poland. Despite these citizenships, I do not have lived experience of either place before the attachment of their ‘post’ prefix. Like Houssay-Holzschuch, my ‘long-term, if long-distance, relationship’ to both helps me place and position the ‘post’, and it aids in how I make sense of how both countries still grapple with how this lexicographic interweaving of their histories continues to shape their presents.

Houssay-Holzschuch’s reflexivity is eloquently articulated. She eases us into her situated knowledge of place, allowing us access points to understanding how she has thought with the interconnections of place, identity, and its oft-traumatic memory. A laudable strength of this manuscript lies in its capacity to open spaces for thought tending towards congruence, contrast, and comparison with the reader’s own research. For example, her use of the notion of pásaist regime to frame South African history resonated strongly across to my Polish memory work, where the politics of memory firmly attaches the remembrance of Poland’s past sufferings to its contemporary identity. Yet, following this pásaist thread further, and indeed with Houssay-Holzschuch’s help, I pondered how seemingly easy and effective it is to lock the present-day identity/ies of a nation to its past by appending ‘post’ to its previous geopolitical system. And with what affect?

Why the ‘post’?

Embedded within Houssay-Holzschuch’s thinking with post-apartheid South Africa space-time is, I sense, a scepticism and disappointment at the ‘post’ reality, but also a lack of surprise that the situation is so. We witness this lack of impress in her discussion of the persistent longevity of economic disparity across South Africa’s population and the visceral vestiges of apartheid’s spatial borders and planned zones. Indeed, places such as the former Venda border continue to embody the deeply entangled ghosts of place (cf. Bell, 1997) through their materiality. Yet, even in the absence of such material markers of a place’s past, memory remains in other mediums. It remains etched into atmospheres of place, carried in folklore and stories of place, and with people whose bodies attach to and sense a place’s past (Drozdzewski, 2016; Till and Jonker, 2009). As Koselleck (1985: 273) has argued, ‘there is no experience that might be chronologically calibrated – though data- able by occasion, of course [as the apartheid itself can be] . . . all experience laps over time; experience does not create continuity in the sense of an additive preparation to the past’. There is no distinct temporal demarcation of apartheid and post-apartheid space-time but rather a continuity of lived experiences across spaces. The ‘post’ cannot be a temporally contiguous representation across space(s).
To poke at this tension between time and space, Houssay-Holzschuch uses Massey’s concept of space-time regime, exploring how the use of post-apartheid terminology configures the entanglements of the ‘post’ situation. Massey’s space-time regime is a productive heuristic through which to better understand the complexity of a ‘post’ situation in South Africa; Houssay-Holzschuch demonstrates its efficacy in her discussions of liminal transitions and lingering nostalgia. However, I contend – contrary to Houssay-Holzschuch’s contention – that we may already have a relevant vocabulary for considering how post-apartheid experience never separates space and time. The ‘post’ itself is that relevant vocabulary. Pursing this red thread – by asking why the post? – reveals opportunity to consider the utility of this existing vocabulary to describe place, while also stimulating further questions: who chooses when post can be used, and why? And, with what intended outcomes, purposes, and promises?

Massey (2013: 9) argues that ‘the language we use has effects in moulding identities and characterising social relationships. It is crucial to the formation of the ideological scaffolding of the hegemonic common sense. Discourse matters’. The discourse of ‘post’ positions the spatial location in question in an after state; it bounds this discourse to certain types of political entities ‘conceptualizing them as having a specific relation to place’ (Massey, 1999: 29). The word post-apartheid, then, characterises and moulds notions of racial segregation of people and place, which also, by ascription of the prefix ‘post’, indicates a past situation, after these histories. Not only does this discourse moderate discussion of whether such histories of segregation are indeed histories, but ‘such naming produces a form of “linguistic settlement” that produces [and bounds] places through the simple enunciation of intentions to do so’ (Berg and Kearns, 1996: 99). The naming of something as ‘post’ produces a norm. It creates an expectation of something past. It produces that quick reference point, simply enunciated. But the ease of utterance overlooks and/or simplifies the complex social, cultural, and political entanglements and relationships that characterise histories, identities, and memories of place. It does so because in the space-time regime of ‘post’, ‘spatialisation has taken the life out of space’ (Massey, 2003: 113).

The power and politics of ‘post’

In this final section, I attempt to address who chooses when ‘post’ can be used, and why, by returning to Berlant’s cruel optimism. In pursuing this discussion, I note my lack of engagement with Houssay-Holzschuch’s narrative on metaphor. In her first paragraph examining metaphor, Houssay-Holzschuch’s discussion of a post-apartheid space-time shaped by possibility rather than probability hooked me in a different direction. At that point, my immediate thoughts were of how this space of possibility was (potentially) cruelly optimistic (Berlant, 2011). To pursue this different direction, however, relies on the association of possibility as proffering positive change, and that the space of possibility present in a post-apartheid space-time ‘does not exclude other temporalities’ (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). It also requires us to attend to the vocabulary that we already have as geographers; one that pursues the role and operation of power and politics, and, in this specific case, the purposeful operations of power to ascribe space for ‘post’ nations.

In the naming of post-apartheid, a space of possibility opens. It is a space of potential hope that could encompass change away from the past; this hopeful space is future-oriented. This hope is also a form of optimism that will engender positive change. Such change holds the possibility to move forward from past traumas and differences, perhaps not accepting or ignoring them but moving away from them. This movement forward is positioned as offering something better (whether this be better economic, rights-based, or social situations). Berlant (2011: 16) argues that the determining parameters for these cruelly optimistic assumptions of a better life rely on a type of in-here all together aesthetic of collective hope, so that hope as an ‘activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palatable’.

Berlant’s (2011) contention is that we are patterned into a mode of thinking that we need to remain hopeful of/for future positive change. We hold on even when this helpfulness rubs against the still present traumas and differences of our present
circumstances, and which will likely linger as embodied memories, wounds in the landscape, and narratives of place too (Till and Jonker, 2009). Despite the wounds and the logical improbability of change, the optimism that comes with this space of possibility is positioned as seemingly preferrable because it allows the bounding of the place into a particular stage of globalised progress. With this bounding, the appendage of the ‘post’ prefix reveals itself as cruel.

The cruelness relates to sociolinguistic context, or in German the Begriffsgeschichte (cf. Koselleck, 1985) that accompanies the discourse of ‘post’, which, Berlant (2011) reasons, signals a shift towards positive change, and out of something apparently less favourable. Yet, this shift to a ‘post’ state does not necessarily symbolise or affect change, neither resolutely or evenly, and especially for those living through the shift into the post space-time or its immediate aftermath – we may indeed feel this soon too. Change is not enacted through the addition of a prefix. Rather, I think that ‘post’ is used by the powerful to signal that the nation/state has progressed along some continuum of social/cultural/political/economic progress, which itself signifies a progress line towards (an ill-defined) better future. While markers of economic growth and renewed social policy may be put forth as evidence of change and progress, the ‘post’ does not erase difference(s) and it certainly does not see difference as a value of and in itself. It does not change how people experience their local worlds, nor how they continue to live with their pasts in place.

What it does do is keep these nations/states ‘post-ed’, to borrow Houssay-Holzschuch’s phrase, by continually shackling the present of those places to their past. They are (post)socialist, (post)colonial, (post)apartheid, but with no real tangible markers of when the post will be released from its prefix. As Libby Porter (2010: 16) states: ‘To be “post” colonial is to be always and forever implicated, though in constantly shifting ways, in colonialism’s enduring philosophies’. Here, we see cruel geometries of power operationalised to keep a ‘geographical “place” in the world . . . [and] . . . realigned in relation to the (new) global realities’ (Massey, 1992: 163). These ‘very clear and consistent directions in the geography of power’ focus on bounding people and place to ‘the specificity of positioning within the globalized space of flows’, at the expense of difference and of richer stories of place that remain fastened to ‘post’ discourses (Massey, 1992: 163).

We already have a rich scholarship focused on the deeply productive ‘messiness and entanglements of social dynamics’ in ‘post-ed’ places (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). For example, Stenning’s (2005: 124–125) research on Nowa Huta, in Poland, demonstrates the ‘the challenge of identifying, interrogating, and theorizing post-socialism as a conceptual rather than a descriptive category after the “end of transition”’. In research on (post)colonial planning in Australia, Porter (2010: 18) explicates specificities of difference and the spatial practices enabling them across colonised nations; she argues that we need to avoid generalisations of the ‘state’ of these (post)colonies, and that we can do this work by showing how ‘a politics of difference is made manifest within . . . social practices and relations’. In a final example, Till and Jonker’s (2009: 86) research in Cape Town explores the tensions of overlaying the (re)imagined hopeful new (post)apartheid Cape Town: ‘through marketing and planning discursive practices, experts attempt to empty out places and create in their stead sites, bound objects that can be mapped and consumed in Cartesian space’.

In each example, we have scholarship that engages with what Massey saw as the bounding of places to their assigned ‘post’ space-time regimes. Further, we can also see how powerful the maintenance of a ‘post’ space-time is in the sustenance of this space-time as a space of hope and possibility – hope for the unemployed steel workers in Nowa Huta, hope for the acknowledgement of colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands in Australia, hope that a new Cape Town can divert attention from its violent legacies. But that space of possibility that opens with the ‘post’ is not just a temporary transition zone, its temporality is a much longer holding zone because we are accustomed to – by those governing the ‘post(s)’ – remain optimistic. While I have (and was) admittedly diverted away from Houssay-Holzschuch’s discussion on metaphors to describe ‘post’ space-time, part of my inclination to take that diversion was that I pondered her questions.
of needing (more) vocabulary, further frames of references, more examples. I think we have the vocabulary for this type of work, but if Massey directs us to consider one point most intently, it would be to ask who uses that vocabulary most powerfully and to what effect?

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Notes
1. I use Berlant’s (2008: 5) definition of a situation in the following sense: a ‘situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life’.
2. Throughout this commentary, I have opted to bracket (post) as a prefix, so that the (post)pandemic, for example, can be read as neither finite before or after the pandemic event, but rather as open to multiple and fluid readings of that space-time. When directly referring to Houssay-Holzschuch (2021), I continue to use her articulation of post-apartheid.
3. Porter also points out that this continuing legacy of the linking ‘post’ with present is motivation for her use of (post)colonialism, with ‘post’ in parentheses.

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