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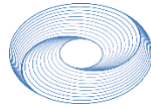
Janice Vis

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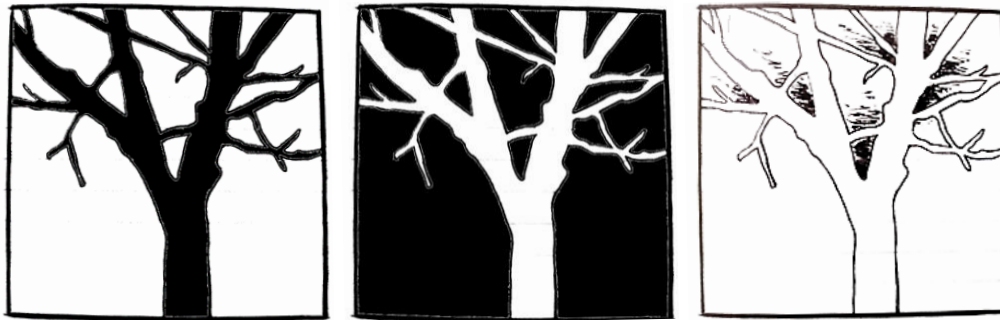
To See Space: Following Caterpillars and Confronting Anorexia

Janice Vis



It's springtime in the forest. I'm wandering a path near my apartment in Hamilton, Ontario, my eyes drifting skyward, staring between criss-crossing tree branches and suddenly I realize that I can see space. I see it buzz with potential, shift with material and immaterial dimensions. Space has grabbed me, entangling me in its webbing contingencies.

I had come to the forest looking for webbing—though, webbing of a different kind. In the Great Lakes Region, springtime carries the promise of Eastern Tent Caterpillars. These small, fuzzy creatures weave web-nests between forking tree branches, and I, hoping to examine some of these webs for my research, start going for daily walks while scanning tree branches for caterpillar silk. Except I'm not scanning tree branches themselves. I'm scanning the spaces *between* tree branches, the spaces where the webs might be (but usually aren't). I'm searching the shapes between the trunks and limbs, the odd polygons and jagged angles drawn by the edges of bark. And as my eyes move from space to space, I pay no mind to what lies in the distance. I am not looking *through* space; I am looking *at* space. It's like I'm seeing air as layered transparent sheets, tightly packed like pages in a book, and every page shimmers with the potential of a maybe-someday caterpillar web. Meanwhile, most plants and animals seem to fade; those beings normally considered subjects become the background, and what had been background-space becomes the subject that commands my attention.



But my experience is more complex than the subject-backdrop binary suggests, because I'm not looking at the totality of background space, but at particular regions *within space*. Caterpillars choose sturdy anchors for the webs, so my gaze is drawn to spaces near thick, strong tree branches—these spaces hold more potential for webs than the spaces near small twigs. So, there's space, and space itself holds different kinds of spaces, and these spaces don't have exact borders. All these spaces affect me to differing degrees, each according to their position relative to other tree branches—and to my body. Taking a step forward or backward reveals some spaces previously hidden while shielding others from view, changing what spaces can command my attention. I can only see some of these spaces and only because I'm in the same-ish space. American ecologist David Abram writes that spatial depth is not a “determinate relation between inert objects arrayed within a static space, but a dynamic tension... that can never be precisely mapped” because it constantly moves (Abram 98). Space is an enveloping mass slithering between my body and through treetops. As I move through space, it moves through and around me, and I experience—to borrow an intention misspelling from Abram—the “eairth” (101). This eairth is not only soil and trees, but also air, breathe, potential, transparencies, and maybe-someday-webs; the eairth is an entire relational network of spatial depths and affects.

How, then, can I see space? How can I speak of my body in space?

How can I confront of something so elusive, something material and ethereal, something one and many, but still inseparable from my body? What does it mean for me to be in space even as space lives all around me, trembling with possibility?

I think these are hard questions. And I think they're much older than I am.

This forest, in all its complexity and possibilities, has been living for a long time. Maybe even forever. The liveliness of the Great Lakes' region has always been recognized by the Indigenous Peoples of this place, many of whom describe their relationship to the land as spiritual, emotional, and physical. For example, Sandra Styres, a Kanien'kehá:ka scholar who works and teaches in the region, knows land “both as a fundamental sentient being and as a philosophical construct”; land has mass, intellect, and agency. More generally, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabeg Nations share rights to this land under the Dish with One Spoon wampum agreement, a contract and philosophy that foregrounds sharing the land's living abundance, responsibilities, and potential. As explained by legal scholar John Borrows, the land is a bowl with a “single wooden spoon” that feeds and is cared for by both Peoples; it is a place of living abundance. Borrows explains that this abundance is maintained because there are “no knives or sharp edges [present]... for this would lead to bloodshed.” His use of the future conditional—“would lead”—suggests that this agreement attends to present conditions that enable particular futures. In my reading, this means that the wampum recognizes many potential futures *already living in this space*, and outlines how the Peoples might relate to these potentials. So, as I understand it, Dish with One Spoon inhabitants have the responsibility to think about how their presence (and what their presence carries) is part of this space and its dynamic possibilities.

But not all people respect such principles. I am not Indigenous, and I was not raised with Dish with One Spoon. My Dutch grandparents sailed across the sea in the 1950s, partaking in a long history of European settlers coming to this region with their knives and sharp edges, their guns and

prisons and factories. The potential for life has been sabotaged; the lake-waters are filled with sewage, Indigenous Peoples have been incarcerated on mass, entire fish species have died off, and the effects of overlapping local, region, and global climate crises grow ever more terrifying. And alongside weapons and industries, settlers also brought their own ideas about how to relate to forests and trees and air. They brought their own ideas about *space*.

To be more specific: according to American philosopher Edward Casey, much of Western philosophy theorizes space in terms of “generality” (14), of universality—space is seen as a singular “neutral, pre-given medium... onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed” (Casey 14). Space, in this line of thought, is empty, void, nothing more than a blank canvas, without context or agency. Culture and history can transform passive space into particular places, but space comes first—it is assumed primary, ahistorical and without distinction.

I’d rather not rely on Western philosophies, but many are engrained in my thoughts and habits, so I carry them into my forest-walks and research excursions; they shape how I see the world and how my mind makes sense of sensations and phenomena. Perhaps I initially gravitated toward the word ‘space’ to describe the areas between tree branches because I assumed that they uniformly lacked activity and meaning.

But if I assume that I move through generalized empty space, how can I think about specific spatial relationships? The empty space narrative doesn’t help me ponder the effects of my presence. The empty space narrative doesn’t help me notice how my actions shape what is possible in this space.

Web-seeking has challenged me to think about space differently—to see it not as empty, but as full—and to see my presence as a participant in that fullness. Space is complex and provoking, present now and yet futural; my position and openness shift how space can act on me and what

futures I consider. So even though I can't precisely see anything 'in' these tree-branch spaces, I still find myself in varying relations to them.

And here, perhaps is the crux—*finding myself* in space... *finding* my body in spatial relations. I come to the forest looking to find caterpillars, and instead I find my relationship to the possibility of caterpillar webs and the inescapable reality of be co-constitutive with this forest-space. I am reminded of a conversation between Australian artist Anya Kanngieser and Métis scholar Zoe Todd on kin studies; they repeatedly emphasize that the act of being present “is *doing something*” (390). As a spatial being, the act of *being* means that I am negotiating with space, with its history and potential. I must account for myself in that negotiation. As Stacey Alamio writes: “a recognition... that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world” means that a “the pursuit of self-knowledge, which has been a personal, philosophical, psychological, or discursive matter, now extends into a[n] investigation into the constitution of our coextensive environments” (Alamio 20). A pursuit of self-knowledge includes how I know myself and how I know how to relate to my surroundings. Who do I expect to see in the forest? What role do I play here? How has the space been formed to invite or rebuff bodies that look and move like mine, and how do my movements reinforce or challenge these knowledge formations? How am I responding to the space's potentials? If I am in the forest as a researcher then my research is not simply *about* this space, but about the relationship between my embodied research methods and this space's possibilities, between my body-mind and spatial liveliness. Being a body isn't just about formalized biology—it's about ways of living and thinking, about changing the potentials that live in this land.

At the same time—my body is also a living site of potential, and space is doing something to me just as I am doing something to it. I try to remain open; Todd and Kanngieser encourage me to “remain attentive to place” and its capacity to teach—these spaces are teaching me, shaping my knowledge about what it means to *be here* (391).

In truth, I need to be taught. I'm terrible at being a body in space. I'm about ten years recovered from anorexia nervosa, and there are still days when I can't recognize my own body in the mirror, or when I'm terrified to do so. I am a spatial being, but my ability to see myself in space is severely compromised. Intellectually, I know I'm not better or worse for being a bigger or smaller person; I can tell myself that weigh and waist measurements don't matter. But I often feel as if my body does not know what I know. My body *knows itself* as being too large, as taking up too much space.

But as I'm looking for webs, I realize that don't experience my body with the same antagonism. I can't say I feel good, but I no longer experience my body as some bulging, expanding thing. This seems curious to me; at the very moment when I am faced with the material reality that the space around me is alive, that my body cannot *just be* without intruding into already living worlds—*this* is the moment that I no longer experience my fleshiness as inherently intrusive?

Perhaps I no longer experience myself as a detached object that *can be* simply measured. That is, if I no longer see space as a uniform, neutral, and blank expanse, then I cannot see my body as taking up a supposedly objective measurement of some medium called "space." My body is used to thinking of itself as always taking up *too much space* in general, but this knowledge begins to crack when I come to know space as non-generalizable. My body must learn to know itself differently, to see itself in relation to possibilities and potentials beyond too much, too big. I am spatially made and re-made by countless lively dimensions; am I not invited to see my own body as lively as I relate to the life of this forest? Am I not responsible for considering how my body might be party to mutual flourishing? Does not this responsibility require that I attend to a wider range of relations and possibilities? Questions of how much space I take up—where less is always good, more is always bad—change to questions of how I am making space.

Of course, my habits of space-making include my past ways of knowing; some self-knowledge is a sharp edge, carrying the potential for harm. Imperial measurements, reductive binaries—these are embodied knowledges that shape how I relate to space—*but they do not offer an objective assessment of my spatial relations*. The objectivity they claim is directly challenged by my experience of spatial possibilities. And by attending to the relationships between spaces, by noticing how other creatures shape spatial possibilities, and experiencing myself as part of these possibilities—my body begins to learn other ways of knowing itself.

For me, experiencing the body in different space, accepting the body as useful to make relationships alongside trees, webs, and caterpillars, and understanding my body is an active part of how I can be and think in the world is anti-anorexic work. I wonder if it is more, too. My path is my own, but I think attending the body in space provokes questions about learning through the body, about how assumptions about seemingly basic concepts affect how the world can be known. What practises of learning can better acknowledge the body as spatially located, participating in possibilities that entangled with the corporeal self? What would happen to our knowledge of ourselves if we better attended to our relations in and of living space?

I don't have answers. I am learning these questions in my body in ways I did not expect. Perhaps that's the point. I am challenged, caught by space, caught in space, re-learning how to see, with more to learn still.

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