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Title	Patterns of place and space in the work of Rulfo
Author(s)	Richardson, Bill
Publication Date	2016-05-01
Publication Information	Bill Richardson (2016) 'Patterns of Place and Space in the Work of Rulfo' In: Dylan Brennan and Nuala Finnegan(Eds.). Rethinking Juan Rulfo's Creative World: Prose, Photography, Film. Oxford : Legenda.
Publisher	Legenda
Link to publisher's version	http://www.legendabooks.com/titles/isbn/9781909662599.html
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5710

Downloaded 2024-03-13T10:09:37Z

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Rethinking Juan Rulfo's Creative WorldProse, Photography, Film

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legenda

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Rethinking Juan Rulfo's Creative World

Prose, Photography, Film



Edited by Dylan Brennan and Nuala Finnegan
Studies in Hispanic and Lusophone Culture 14 Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney
Publishing 2015

Published by the

Modern Humanities Research Association Salisbury House, Station Road, Cambridge CB1 2LA and *Maney Publishing*

Suite 1c, Joseph's Well, Hanover Walk, Leeds LS3 1AB

Maney Publishing is the trading name of W. S. Maney & Son Ltd

LEGENDA is an imprint of the

Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing

ISBN 978-1-909662-59-9

First published 2015

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Printed in Great Britain

Cover: 875 Design

Copy-Editor: Dr Anna J. Davies

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Chapter 4

Patterns of Place and Space in the Work of Juan Rulfo

Bill Richardson

Juan Rulfo's work offers an intriguing example of the role played by place and space in artistic expression generally, and in literature in particular. Given the apparently abstract nature of the topic of spatiality, undertaking an exploration of how such notions play out in Rulfo's creative world may appear at first to be a project lacking the human touch and potentially one with limited value. It is worth noting, however, that critics have often zoned in on precisely the issues of place and space as key themes in the Mexican author's work. Gustavo Fares, for example, states the case for examining Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* in this light in the following terms, where his focus is primarily on the principal character, Pedro Páramo himself:

En Pedro Páramo y en su espacio faltan los límites en el sentido que allí todo movimiento se hace posible, y que los personajes se encuentran con enormes dificultades para poner una frontera precisa entre ellos mismos y el mundo, entre el cuerpo y el espacio, entre el adentro y el afuera.¹

[In Pedro Páramo and in his space there are no limits in the sense that there everything becomes possible, and the characters encounter enormous difficulties in establishing a precise frontier between themselves and the world, between body and space, between the inside and the outside].²

These remarks neatly capture something ineffable and yet essential about the way in which the novel seems to create imaginary spatial networks and webs of significance that highlight the connections between individual, recognisably human, characters and a wider and potentially infinite universe.

A similar claim could well be made in relation to several of the stories in *El Llano en llamas* [*The Burning Plain*], as attested to by the fact that commentators have also highlighted the centrality of place and space as a theme in that collection. Aspects that have been seen as relating closely to spatiality have included dimensions such as the atmosphere Rulfo conjures up, or the oblique ways in which we encounter people and places — not to mention *things* — whose existence is often seen as marginal. Also commented on is the frequency with which we get the sense that there exists an 'otherworld' that interacts with the everyday world in Rulfo's work, or the fact that a narrative may invoke aspects of spatiality to convey character in conjunction with the use of spare dialogue or a lack of descriptive detail.³

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Julio Ortega, commenting on the spatial qualities of *Pedro Páramo*, states that:

[L]a descripción del espacio no por económica deja de ser constante y precisa: el creciente calor, la lluvia incesante, la desolación árida, suscitan el curioso agobio ensañado de ese espacio; aquella oscura rebeldía de la vida vista desde la muerte se relaciona, de algún modo, con el terror victorioso de un espacio negro. Un espacio infernal que posee desde la muerte el tiempo de la vida.⁴

[The description of space may be economical but it is also constant and precise: the increasing heat, the incessant rain and the arid desolation bring out the mercilessly oppressive nature of the place; that dark rebelliousness of life as seen from death is related in some way to the victorious terror of a black space. A hellish space that, from death, takes possession of the time of life.]

All of this suggests that spatiality is indeed central to the Mexican author's work, and the argument presented here is that the crucial role played by spatial concepts deserves fuller study. Thus, we share the kinds of concerns that underpin the work of the commentators who have previously examined aspects of space and place in Rulfo, but the aim of this chapter is to offer a broad overview of the theoretical dimension of the issue, noting the multiplicity of connections between spatiality and Rulfo's work, but also sketching, albeit briefly, a framework within which such connections can be examined, one that allows us to appreciate the links, parallels and contrasts that exist between a variety of aspects of space and place as they are manifested in literary production such as that of Juan Rulfo.

In order to examine the interrelationship between spatiality and the work of Rulfo, then, we focus on four key dimensions of the space-literature relationship.⁵ The dimensions being referred to are categorized as follows:

(a) the *philosophical* dimension;(b) the *psychological* dimension;(c) the dimension of *plasticity*;(d) the dimension centred on the concept of *power*.

Each of these dimensions serves to highlight certain important aspects of the ways in which spatial concepts impinge on literary expression, and, consequently, in this instance, on Rulfo's work. What we are calling the *philosophical* dimension refers to the relatively abstract nature of our knowledge of the wider universe, with spatiality operating in tandem with time as the two critical parameters within which we as individual human beings have an awareness of our own existence. The *psychological* dimension is centrally concerned with how places inform human identity while the idea of *plasticity* is relevant in the sense that there are 'plastic' qualities to the written word that have to do with the texture and form of the writing, as well as in the sense that we are interested in the sensory qualities of the universe conjured up within the literary work. The final dimension, that relating to *power*, reflects the fact that observing how characters exercise control over places and examining the ways in which spatiality can reveal unequal relationships and situations of exploitation or social injustice are crucial aspects of our experience of many literary works.

These various dimensions of the relationship between spatiality and literature — the four p's of *philosophy*; *psychology*; *plasticity*, and *power* — will be elaborated

on below, while reference will be made, in the case of each respective dimension, to ways in which it can be exemplified in Rulfo's work, focusing on the two most renowned texts in Rulfo's *oeuvre*, the short story collection *El Llano en llamas* (*The Burning Plain*; 1953) and the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955).⁶

Spatiality and Philosophy

Looked at from the spatial perspective, the first of these dimensions, *philosophy*, is about the links between a literary work and the expression of an individual's own sense of their place in the world. The philosophical dimension of space and place centres on the notion of the connections between the individual human being and the cosmos that surrounds him or her, and highlights the idea that, as sentient beings, we can never entirely forget the fact of those links or be completely unaware of the enigma underlying the immensity of the universe itself and our own place in it. This is the quintessential web of relationships that ties us to place, as outlined by Michel Foucault:

[W]e do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored by diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.⁷

This aspect of human spatiality is of direct relevance to a work such as *Pedro Páramo*, since in that novel, we are constantly being reminded of the links and potential links between the individual who happens to find himself or herself in a particular location and the potentially infinite universe in which they carry on the business of living. The inhabitants of the town of Comala, to which Juan Preciado comes, apparently in search of his father, are depicted as being linked to this broad conception of the universe. The decayed town is seen as a focal point for a wider world, a node within an entire pattern of spatial and temporal dimensions that go to make up the labyrinthine universe, encompassing past, present and future, and implying links with the recognizable world of Comala itself and its hinterland as well as with the supernatural *demi-monde* of spectral characters whom Juan Preciado meets and whose status as living beings is intensely uncertain. As Jean Franco suggests, in Comala there is no clear division between the world of the living and the world of the dead: 'los límites ya se borran y los muertos invaden el territorio de los vivos para absorberlos'⁸ [Borders disappear and the dead invade the territory of the living to absorb them].

In Fragment 30 of the novel, for instance, we hear the character of the sister, who is living in an incestuous relationship with her brother, Donis, in a ramshackle house in this rundown village, offer this mysterious answer to Juan Preciado's query about how to get away from the place:

Hay multitud de caminos. Hay uno que va para Contla; otro que viene de allá. Otro más que enfila derecho a la sierra. Eso que se mira desde aquí, que no sé para dónde irá — y me señaló con sus dedos el hueco del tejado, allí donde el techo estaba roto —. Este otro de por acá, que pasa por la Media Luna. Y hay otro más, que atraviesa toda la tierra y es el que va más lejos. (p. 110)

[‘There is a multitude of paths. There is one that goes in the direction of Contla; another one that comes from there. Another one goes straight up the mountain. What you can see from here, I don’t know where that goes’ — and she pointed to a hole in the roof, where the roof was broken. ‘And this other one over here, that one goes through the Media Luna ranch. And there is another one, that runs through the whole land and that goes the furthest of all.’]

Her answer serves to evoke those links between individual human beings, the locales in which they find themselves, and the immensity with which they are surrounded. The vision she offers is one of a multiplicity of routes and paths, trajectories that extend in all directions and that seem to hold out the promise of establishing meaningful links with other locations, both natural and supernatural (or physical and imagined), but that, in the context in which they are evoked, serve only to act as criss-crossing axes that pin the characters in place and emphasize the stasis they find themselves in.⁹ Her sense of guilt pervades everything she says, and she articulates a willingness to assume that guilt without question, a guilt from which there is apparently no escape. Her physical confinement is similarly absolute, and the talk of multiple pathways serves not to suggest a potential for movement away from this place, but the very impossibility of being elsewhere:

Nunca salgo. Aquí donde me ve, aquí he estado sempiternamente... Bueno, ni tan siempre. Sólo desde que él me hizo su mujer. Desde entonces me la paso encerrada, porque tengo miedo de que me vean. (pp. 110–11)

[I never go out. Here where you see me now, this is where I’ve been for all eternity... Well, not quite forever. Only since he made me his wife. Since then I’ve spent all my time shut up in here. I’m afraid people might see me.]

And so, the trajectory that Juan Preciado has followed in coming to this ‘other’ world is depositing him now in a place that undermines his own relationship with reality, and which also, on the one hand, suggests stasis and, on the other, hints at the degree to which that relationship may extend in all directions. When seen in the light of subsequent references to the place of burial in which he now finds himself, this suggests the dissolution of everyday realities and an undermining of ontological certainties that are a central part of how the novel operates. At this juncture, both time and space are perceived to be malleable, and directionality fluctuates from one moment to the next and from one scene to the next, so that references to time moving backwards are juxtaposed with cosmic references that suggest that spatial entities can come into existence or be unmade in line with the shifting status of the living and the dead:

Como si hubiera retrocedido el tiempo. Volví a ver la estrella junto a la luna. Las nubes deshaciéndose. Las parvadas de los tordos. Y en seguida la tarde todavía llena de luz. (p. 114)

[As if time had gone backwards. Again I saw the star beside the moon. Clouds melting away. Flocks of thrushes. And straight away the evening still full of light.]

The philosophical aspect of human spatiality asks us to get to grips with the awesome reality of our ‘place in the world’, understood in the broadest and most

abstract sense of that term. Indeed the word ‘place’ in that phrase encompasses both spatiality and temporality; from this philosophical perspective, we are cognisant of the indissoluble link between space and time. We apprehend the essential unity of these two concepts; thus in the realm of the Bakhtinian chronotope,¹⁰ we grapple with the ways in which literary texts hinge on certain evocations of location, understood in the sense of characters and actions being ‘placed’ within particular spatial and temporal parameters. In this way, texts are viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, while simultaneously being appreciated in terms of the particular temporal and spatial contexts in which they are found. This serves to unite the general with the particular in the most abstract way possible, but always with due recognition of the fact that the abstraction which is operating within the work reflects a genuine level of abstraction existing within each and every human being.

Spatiality and Psychology

The second ‘p’ in the list of four dimensions mentioned above is *psychology*. This refers to our awareness of the concrete connections that link us to the outside world and to other people, in other words, to our knowledge of the fact that, despite the aloneness referred to above, we are beings whose identities are contingent on those around us. If the philosophical dimension of spatiality prioritizes the generic concept of ‘space’ as a universal parameter, along with time, within which we move about and have our being, the psychological dimension may best be identified with the idea of ‘place’, where the distinction hinges on the contingency and concreteness of the latter, as opposed to the abstraction of the former. Doreen Massey is one author¹¹ who differentiates between the timelessness and absoluteness of the former and the time-bound nature of the latter. Following her argument, ‘place’ is then viewed as a type of situated practice inherently linked to the functioning of social relations, and spatial location is seen as being especially meaningful in terms of the interactions between an individual and other living beings that contribute aspects of meaning to that location, leading to the creation of identities that are particular to the location in question. Thus, attachment to place may function at a large scale related to nation, region or town, or at a smaller scale in which we are identified with neighbourhoods, workplaces or homes — or with a dry and dusty plain, or even, in Pedro Páramo’s case, with a ranch and its hinterland. This aspect of spatiality is posited on the notion that we operate within social collectives that contribute meaning to our lives and to our actions in the world. In literary terms, it highlights how a text can have the capacity to articulate that dimension of our existence, in terms of the power it has to incorporate itself into its characters’ sense of belonging. Literary texts frequently do this by means of spatial concepts, and Rulfo is a good example of how this can work.

From Juan Preciado’s opening statement in *Pedro Páramo* to the effect that his purpose in coming to Comala was to re-connect with his own roots in the guise of his father and the place his mother came from, to the repeated emphases on the identification between Pedro Páramo and the village and surroundings of Comala, in particular towards the end of the novel, we gather that one important theme that

runs throughout the work is that search for identity. This aspect of Rulfo's novel is frequently read as implying a quest that functions at the level of *national* identity, as propounded, for instance, by Hedy Habra:

A partir de este acercamiento fragmentado a sus orígenes y al autoconocimiento, se puede extrapolar que el texto constituye un comentario existencial sobre la búsqueda continua de la identidad del mexicano.¹²

[On the basis of this fragmented approach to his origins and to self-knowledge, we can conclude that the text constitutes an existential commentary on the continuous search for Mexican identity].

Rulfo's approach to this is deliberately reductive, and, far from operating within a *costumbrista* paradigm, his novel constitutes an attempt to home in on what is universal and essential in that relationship between person and place that adds an identitarian dimension to locations. In *Pedro Páramo*, as in several stories in *El Llano en llamas*,¹³ we get sufficient local detail to ensure that we know that the places being referred to are identifiable places located within a specific geographical context: the flora and fauna, the landscape and the references to climate serve to situate us in a particular region of Mexico, even when the name of a town such as Comala is an invention. But these features are not of interest for what they convey of local colour; rather they are seen — through the impact of soil and climate, through movement between locations, or through qualities of atmosphere and landscape — as commenting on how people anywhere may relate to the circumstances in which they find themselves. The element of *whereness* matters to Rulfo's characters, even if, as in *Pedro Páramo*, the world they inhabit is apparently a kind of mythical nether-world or other-world in which the living can rub shoulders with the dead. Needless to say, that fantasy element, the casual acceptance of intercourse between those who are — perhaps — alive and those who have previously passed away, is an exaggeration of the casual affirmation of such mingling that is associated with Mexican culture generally, the most emblematic representation of which is probably the *Día de Muertos*.¹⁴ But these people we encounter are, to a large extent, constituted in their very essence by the locations in which they find themselves. Not only are they very much *of* this particular place, they simply are *where* they are, and their increasing decrepitude as human beings goes hand in hand with the dissolution and decay of Comala itself, as people and place crumble before our eyes, losing all semblance of substantiality or of meaning. Here we have an instance of the phenomenon that Ricardo Gullón refers to when, in the context of a theoretical discussion of the relations between novels and space, he suggests that 'el estar, pudiéramos decir con un punto de exageración, determina el ser'¹⁵ [being located, we could say with just a slight exaggeration, determines our being]. Thus, the motivations for the way characters behave are frequently related to place itself, whether in terms of Preciado's desire to re-discover the place that he sees as the source of his identity, his mother's recollected declaration to the effect that 'Allá hallarás mi querencia. El lugar que yo quise' (p. 117) [That's where you'll find what I'm attached to, the place that I loved], or Pedro Páramo's ambitions in relation to the lands that surround the *Media Luna* ranch.

Furthermore, the identification between person and place in the novel and in the

stories is frequently figured in bodily terms. We might think of the image of Pedro Páramo dissolving into a pile of stones at the end of the novel, or of a character such as Juvencio Nava in the short story '¡Diles que no me maten!' ['Tell Them not to Kill Me!'] who is depicted as being able to perceive the earth beneath his feet even in pitch darkness because

Allí en la tierra estaba toda su vida. Sesenta años de vivir sobre de ella, de encerrarla entre sus manos, de haberla probado como se prueba el sabor de la carne. (p. 115)

[His whole life was there, in the land. Sixty years of living on it, of holding it in his hands, of tasting it the way you would taste meat itself.]

Our world, from this perspective, is composed of a network of relationships with groups of people, whether that refers to family, region, or a whole range of aspects of what we consider to be our identity — be that national, ethnic, sexual or other forms. The literary work, in terms of this dimension, reflects those aspects of our human situation, and the narratives we examine may allude directly or indirectly to searches for identity, to assumptions about identity, to loss of identity or to the yearning for ways of articulating or transforming characters' identities.

One recurring aspect of identity in Rulfo is the relationship between father and son, and this is frequently related to questions about place and space. Arrival in particular places can offer the characters the epiphanies and insights they desire or, more often, the ones they dread. At the end of the story 'El Llano en llamas' ['The Burning Plain'], for example, the outlaw Pichón emerges from jail to find a girl waiting to reveal to him that he has fathered a son, and she shows him the boy who, he says, was 'igualito a mí y con algo de maldad en la mirada' (p. 110) [exactly like me, and with a hint of evil in his eyes]. This moment occurs after Pichón's trajectory around the plain has come to an end, and he has been captured and held in prison for a number of years. It seals the story, relating the journeys of banditry and sabotage that had been undertaken by Pichón to the moral dimension of the tale, the challenge of an individual's becoming reconciled to his violent past. It provides a coda to those accounts of the deeds and misdeeds of Pichón and his comrades, that have been figured in the story as the recounting of a set of journeys in which they criss-cross the territory committing their acts of violence. Increasingly, in the course of that account, the outlaws are depicted as being confined to specific areas and locations, and the repressed emotional response is conveyed, as is so characteristic of Rulfo's writing, in terse comments on the relationship between these places and these individuals. We are told, for instance:

Algunos ganamos para el Cerro Grande y arrastrándonos como víboras pasábamos el tiempo mirando hacia el Llano, hacia aquella tierra de allá abajo donde habíamos nacido y vivido y donde ahora nos estaban aguardando para matarnos. (p. 108)

[Some of us headed up the Cerro Grande, and crawling along like snakes we spent our time looking down on the Plain, on that land below us where we had been born and had lived and where now they were waiting for us, to kill us.]

Their eventual defeat is a consequence of that spatial confinement, and that defeat

is described as a dispersal, a statement to the effect that they have run out of space in which to carry out their exploits, so that Pichón can finally conclude that:

De este modo se nos fue acabando la tierra. Casi no nos quedaba ya ni el pedazo que pudiéramos necesitar para que nos enterraran. Por eso decidimos separarnos los últimos, cada quien arrendando por distinto rumbo. (pp. 108–09)

[In this way we were running out of ground. Now there was hardly enough of it left for them to be able to bury us. That is why those of us who were left decided to separate, each one heading off in a different direction.]

Spatiality and Plasticity

The third term of the four on the list presented above is *plasticity*, used here to refer both to the malleability and ‘plastic’ qualities of the universe of the narrative, that is, to the sensory, or even sensual, dimensions of the world dreamed up within a literary text, as well as to the sensory qualities of the writing itself, that is, the texture of the language. The text achieves a shared illusion of plasticity, meaning the sense the reader has, based on the words the author shares with him or her, that they are moving about within the universe of the story, with the result that that fantasy world becomes a kind of reality. This idea chimes with Pablo Picasso’s famous dictum to the effect that ‘Everything you can imagine is real’, and it suggests that the images of spatial realities conjured up in Rulfo’s literary work are no less real than — and even share a kind of plasticity with — some of Rulfo’s own photographs.¹⁶ The universe evoked in those photographs is instantly recognizable as the one depicted in *Pedro Páramo* or *El Llano en llamas*. Both the world of the photographs and the world conjured up in the texts, therefore, bear a perceptible resemblance to the socio-historical reality that is the Mexican state of Jalisco. This also means, of course, that the language in which the texts are written itself forms part of that plasticity, so that the spare, unadorned sentences of the works and the qualities of the colloquial language used by the characters contribute to the evocation of a world that is partly a reflection of an observable reality and partly a figment of our imaginings, stimulated by those texts.

Despite the element of plasticity that the texts share with the photographs, however, it is also the case that the two are obviously different modes of artistic experience, an idea explored by other contributors to this volume, most notably Jorge Zepeda. As suggested earlier, these texts eschew descriptions of local detail aimed at conveying the peculiar or the picturesque. It is not that Rulfo attempts to depict a naturalistic landscape or offers detailed descriptions of the territory within which his characters move about; rather, his literary texts seem to grow out of an imaginative attempt to grasp the essence of that real world that is the source of his inspiration, a real world that obviously fired in his imagination the invention of a special imaginary one. As Octavio Paz put it,

[Rulfo] nos ha dado una imagen — no una descripción — de nuestro paisaje... Su visión de este mundo es, en realidad, visión de otro mundo.¹⁷

[Rulfo has given us a picture — not a description — of our landscape... His vision of this world is really a vision of another world].

Rulfo's own comments bear this out, and he appears to invert the process by which we might normally expect that imaginative flow to proceed. He says:

Soy una persona que no puede escribir sobre lo que veo. No soy reportero... sólo puedo escribir sobre cosas que imagino. Soy un escritor intuitivo. Aparentemente son cosas reales, pero no están basadas en la realidad. Ni siquiera hay situaciones paralelas. Por lo menos, en mi caso, lo que funciona es la imaginación. Recreaciones de la realidad que se alimenta de una realidad imaginada....¹⁸

[I am someone who cannot write about what he sees. I am not a reporter... I can only write about things I imagine. I am an intuitive writer. They appear to be real things, but they are not based on reality. There aren't even situations that are parallel to them. At least in my case, what works is the imagination. Re-creations of the reality that lives off an imagined reality...]

Those plastic qualities go beyond being an evocation of the spatiality of an actual world, and are also, rather, the tone and texture of the language of the narrative. This includes the ways in which the narrative succeeds in conveying rhythm and patterns of movement, and the ways in which it can draw attention to itself through myriad literary devices or figures of speech, or even, as often in the case of Rulfo, through gaps and silences, through references to presences *and* absences, so that what is not said can contribute in significant ways to the creation of the unique experience which is the reader's encounter with the text. Thus, Juan Preciado's arrival in the 'other-world' that is Comala is marked precisely by a peculiar conjunction of presence and absence:

Era la hora en que los niños juegan en las calles de todos los pueblos, llenando sus gritos la tarde... también había visto el vuelo de las palomas rompiendo el aire quieto, sacudiendo sus alas como si se desprendieran del día... Ahora estaba aquí, en este pueblo sin ruidos. (p. 69)

[It was the time of day when the children play in the streets of all the villages, their cries filling the afternoon... I had also seen the pigeons in flight, disturbing the quiet air, shaking their wings as if they were shaking off the day... Now here I was, in this village without sounds].

Rulfo manages to achieve an effect of plasticity that brings to life the strange imaginative world of the dead and half-dead, within a setting that is still recognizably related to a particular part of Mexico. He also achieves a plasticity in the language itself that makes of it both a reflection of peasant speech and a superbly evocative artistic creation. At one and the same time, his carefully crafted verbal art both echoes everyday speech and transcends it, so that, as Gutiérrez Marrone suggests, 'su aparente sencillez ha sido forjada a base de meticuloso cuidado por la forma... Detrás de los personajes campesinos de habla sencilla, se oculta el poeta Rulfo...' ¹⁹ [its apparent simplicity has been crafted on the basis of meticulous attention to form... Behind the peasant characters with their simple way of talking is hidden the poet Rulfo]. Furthermore, as Williams argues:

[I]n *Pedro Páramo*, the language of the omniscient narrator and the characters tends to be sparse. The effect of this sparse language and neutral tone is a certain mythic quality that permeates *Pedro Páramo* and makes it the transcendent

regionalist text that seems to belong to a specific regional setting, yet it has much broader thematic overtones.²⁰

That artistic sensibility around language and the textual power of Rulfo's work relate directly to his uncanny ability to evoke a world that appears to be composed of silences, absences and gaps, a world which is characterized by ethereality, one which constantly surprises us with its essential insubstantiality. This is obviously the case of *Pedro Páramo*, with its frequent, understated but insistent emphasis on the ways in which the apparent security of the world we inhabit is likely to be undermined at a moment's notice. Language, sounds and the very texture of the writing convey this, as, for instance, when Juan Preciado recounts how he arrived at the square in Comala:

Bueno, pues llegué a la plaza. Me recargué en un pilar de los portales. Vi que no había nadie, aunque seguía oyendo el murmullo como de mucha gente en día de mercado. Un rumor parejo, sin ton ni son, parecido al que hace el viento contra las ramas de un árbol en la noche, cuando no se ven ni el árbol ni las ramas, pero se oye el murmurar. Así. Ya no di un paso más. Comencé a sentir que se me acercaba y daba vueltas a mi alrededor aquel bisbiseo apretado como un enjambre, hasta que alcancé a distinguir unas palabras casi vacías de ruido: 'Ruega a dios por nosotros.' Eso oí que me decían. Entonces se me heló el alma. Por eso es que ustedes me encontraron muerto. (pp. 118–19)

[‘Well, I got to the square. I leaned against a pillar under the arches. I saw that there was nobody around, even though I could still hear the murmuring of voices, as if on a crowded market day. A kind of murmuring sound, just like the sound the wind makes against the branches of a tree in the night, when you can't see the tree or the branches, but you can hear the sound. Just like that. I couldn't go one step further. I started to feel that those muttering voices were coming closer to me and circling around me like a swarm of bees, until I could make out words that were almost empty of sound, ‘Pray to God for us.’ That's what I heard them saying to me. Then my soul froze up. That's why you found me there dead.’]

It is worth noting, however, that a similar effect can be achieved in Rulfo's stories, including, for example, in the story ‘Nos han dado la tierra’ [‘They Have Given Us the Land’]. There, the bleak infertile land assigned to the peasants is a land of emptiness and frustration, which the characters traverse in silence and with a growing sense of despair. The profusion of negatives in the following lines, for example, serves to reinforce the direct connection between the plastic qualities of the text and the static spatial quality of the setting, seen as being devoid of all life. The useless land that the peasants have been assigned is depicted in the story in these terms:

No, el llano no es cosa que sirva. No hay ni conejos ni pájaros. No hay nada. A no ser unos cuantos huizaches trespeleques y una que otra manchita de zacate con las hojas enroscadas; a no ser eso no hay nada. (p. 40)

[No, the plain is useless. There aren't even rabbits or birds on it. There is nothing. Apart from a few stunted acacias and a bit of grass that's all dried up. Other than that, there's nothing at all there.]

In an analogous manner, in *Pedro Páramo*, the repeated mentions of words such as *murmillos* [murmurings] and *sueños* [dreams] operate both at the phonic level and the

level of denotation to convey the same intimate link. In the novel, these, and many other terms, point towards the ‘presence of absences’, the emptying out of the real, and what Ciaran Cosgrove has called ‘[a]cts of dissolubility and the erosion of form’, conveyed in phrases such as the following, cited by Cosgrove:

‘Se disolvieron como sombras’; ‘nubes ya desmenuzadas por el viento’; ‘las nubes deshaciéndose’; ‘el cuerpo [...] se desbarataba como si estuviera deritiéndose’; ‘se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras’²¹

[‘They vanished like shadows’; ‘clouds picked apart by the wind’; ‘clouds melting away’; ‘the body [...] kept disintegrating as if it was dissolving’; ‘he went on crumbling to pieces as if he was just a pile of stones’]

It is this quality — the ability to convey how space seems to disintegrate before us — that leads Fares, in turn, to suggest that Rulfo carries out a kind of *espacidio*, or ‘killing of space’, in *Pedro Páramo*.²²

In a similar vein, we might note the effect of the sibilants and hard ‘r’ sounds, especially when combined with the inversion of agency between wind and branches, in the following text from the story ‘Luvina’, in which the landscape is evoked in the following terms:

El chicalote se marchita. Entonces uno lo oye rasguñando el aire con sus ramas espinosas, haciendo un ruido como el de un cuchillo sobre una piedra de afilar. (p. 120)

[The poppy withers. Then you can hear it scratching the air with its spiny branches, making a sound like the sound of a knife on a sharpening stone.]

Power

The fourth ‘p’, *power*, is central to the work of Rulfo, as it is to the work of the many authors like him who reference either directly or indirectly the socio-historical contexts in which their works are located. This dimension relates to the spaces that people share, and to the transformation of those spaces through social and political action; it evokes the ways in which literature reflects socio-political concerns. Space and place are seen here as territory that can be competed for and as possessions that can, and do, generate passionate responses. To be human means to live in places, or, as the French sociologist and theoretician of space, Henri Lefebvre, stated the case:

(Social) space is a (social) product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.²³

Thus, places are replete with meanings, and we interact with those places in terms of making, defining and re-defining them, naming and claiming them, and disputing ownership of them. This is one of the chief thematic focuses of *Pedro Páramo*. We witness the fact that Pedro Páramo as *cacique* can exercise immense power over the territory around the *Media Luna* ranch, seizing land with impunity, and the image of the land being deliberately devastated out of the *rencor*, or bitterness, that overcomes the protagonist on the death of Susana and the reaction of the people of Comala to it.

Much of the content of the stories in *El Llano en llamas* is also directly related to this aspect of space, since so much of this work is concerned with questions of power and the lack of it, and, in particular, power over land and territory. We recall, for example, the struggle for hegemony over the 'burning plains' in the story 'El llano en llamas'. We also witness a kind of negation of place constituted by the tract of arid highland assigned to Faustino, Estéban, Melitón and the unnamed narrator in the story 'Nos han dado la tierra', referred to above. In it, the plastic qualities alluded to earlier are complemented by, and form part of the texture for, the historical and geographical background in which it is set. That socio-political background is central to the narrative, to the extent that Alberto Vital can refer to this story in the following terms: 'Estamos ya de lleno en el orbe literario de Rulfo: "Nos han dado la tierra", "manifiesto oculto" o "cuento-manifiesto" o "cuento-programa" de la obra rulfiana'.²⁴ [With this story, we can be immersed in Rulfo's literary universe: 'They Have Given Us the Land': a 'secret manifesto', or 'manifesto-story', or 'programme-story' in Rulfo's work.] The story constitutes, therefore, a direct commentary on social power, relating implicitly — but without equivocation — to the questionable attempts at agrarian reform undertaken during the post-Revolutionary regimes of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles in 1920s Mexico. Thus, we see how Rulfo highlights the relationship between location and power, between the appropriation of place and the inequalities and exploitation associated with the ownership of land in Mexico, conjuring up a territory which is inspired by the forbidding Jalisco landscape, with its history of grief and its litany of contestation. In this way he turns it into a spatial imaginary that is the locus for our engagement with the hopes, aspirations and frequent despairs of peasants whose hold on territory is only ever tenuous and whose powerlessness is repeatedly brought home to us, as well as to them.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the concept of the 'production of space' as propounded by Henri Lefebvre,²⁵ and how Rulfo's implicit engagement with that concept leads to an illustration of its obverse. As mentioned above, Lefebvre's presentation of this idea stresses the centrality of the notion of power to ideas about space and place, and critiques the hegemony of powerful social classes. He points up the way in which places and spaces are 'produced', as individuals and groups exercise their ability to create, name and define them. In *Pedro Páramo*, what Juan Preciado is engaged in is, in one sense, a quest to 'produce' Comala, which, before he arrives there, is for him a figment of his mother's imagination. The paradisiacal vision she had offered him is consistently contrasted with the *Comala-infierno* [Comala-Hell] he encounters, as he moves about this place attempting to identify its location and failing to appropriate its substance. The novel culminates in destruction of place, and the ironic outcome of Preciado's quest is a series of displacements that the reader experiences, as the ground shifts beneath his or her feet, and the supposed objectives of the journey become subsumed within new layers of narrative and dialogue, each one leading us further and further away from a sense of concreteness and solidity. The lawyer Gerardo Trujillo summarizes the process that this entails when he says to Pedro Páramo: 'Vivimos rompiendo nuestro mundo a cada rato' (p. 158) ['As we go on living, we break our world down around us'] and the final dissolution of this

world is figured in the image of the shapeless heap of stones that Páramo becomes at the end of the novel.

The story 'Tell Them Not to Kill Me!' is also particularly noteworthy in regard to socio-political considerations and the question of how power relates to spatiality. In it, the initial killing, the murder of Don Lupe by Juvencio Nava, is motivated by a dispute over land, a dispute which is related, crucially, to the land's fecundity, as Juvencio insists on using Don Lupe's more fertile ground to graze his livestock, and the theme of the link between land and the giving of life — land as the ultimate source of all life — is central to all the subsequent action. We have noted already the explicit reference to the close identification between Juvencio Nava's very existence and the land on which he walks, and which he has been traversing as a fugitive for 35 years, summarized in the sentence, 'Allí en la tierra estaba toda su vida' [His whole life was there, in the land]. But images of connections with the soil are also implicitly evoked in the contrasting comment of the colonel who turns out to be Don Lupe's son, when he alludes to the cause of his desire for revenge, declaring: 'Es algo difícil crecer sabiendo que la cosa de donde podemos agarrarnos para enraizar está muerta' (p. 117) [It's very hard to grow up knowing that the only thing that we can hold on to in order to give us some roots is dead]. The imagery is further strengthened by the references made by Juvencio to the manner of his capture, since he regrets his foolhardiness in approaching the strangers who are stepping on the crop of maize to tell them not to damage it; after all, the crop was doomed by the intensely hot weather anyway:

Así que ni valía la pena de haber bajado; haberse metido entre aquellos hombres como en un agujero, para ya no volver a salir. (p. 116)

[So it wasn't even worth it to have gone down, to have gone down among those men as if you were going down a hole, never to get out again.]

The colonel who has captured him now has complete control over the life and death of the man who killed his father, and Juvencio's powerlessness in the face of this is brought home to the reader by means of spatial imagery, as Juvencio is eventually led from the vast hinterland on which he has been roaming as a fugitive to the door of the colonel's makeshift office, but is unable to go any further; he can only hear the latter's voice emerge from inside. Within just a few short lines in the story we are reminded several times of Juvencio's status as supplicant in this situation, by means of phrases such as the following:

Él, con el sombrero en la mano, por respeto, esperando ver salir a alguien. Pero sólo salió la voz... (p. 116)

[And he was there outside, with his hat in his hand, out of respect, waiting to see someone come out. But the only thing that came out was that voice...]

And later:

Entonces la voz de allá adentro cambió de tono:

Ya sé que murió — dijo. Y siguió hablando como si platicara con alguien allá, al otro lado de la pared de carrizos. (p. 117)

[The voice coming from inside changed tone:

‘I know he died’, he said. And he went on speaking as if he was talking to someone who was there with him, on the other side of the wall of reeds.]

Finally, this spatial division — the separation between the powerful individual inside this makeshift building and the pathetic condemned man left lingering outside it — is evoked one last time as the message is brought home to us unequivocally that Juvencio’s fate is sealed and that there can be no forgiveness, no matter how he pleads:

Desde acá, desde afuera, se oyó bien claro cuanto dijo. Después ordenó:

‘¡Llévenselo y amárrenlo un rato, para que padezca, y luego fusílenlo!’ (117)

[From here, from outside, you could clearly hear what he said. Then he ordered, ‘Take him away and tie him up for a while, so he suffers for a bit, and then shoot him!’]

The control that the colonel exercises over the life of Juvencio Nava is figured spatially in the clear separation between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that we are witness to at this juncture, and the colonel’s mastery of this territory is absolute: at his bidding, Juvencio’s pleadings are to be ignored, and he is to be taken away and shot.

Thus, power and place converge to both communicate an atmosphere of despair and capture in words the conjunction of human destiny and the drama of unrelenting oppression, articulated within a context with recognizable social and political parameters. For all the universality of his work, Rulfo is still speaking to us about the Mexico of the early twentieth century, drawing our attention to the conflicts at the heart of a particular society in an identifiable time and place. And he does this, at least partly, by specifically highlighting aspects of how people relate to places.

The schema presented here is an attempt to set out a framework within which it may be possible to capture some of the more crucial aspects of how patterns of space and place function within the context of cultural expression generally, and literature in particular, and, in this case, within the work of Juan Rulfo. The latter’s work — both the literary production and the photographs — is particularly evocative of place, and people’s relationships with the locations in which they find themselves are a central focus of that work. What has been presented here has been merely an outline of a topic that warrants a more detailed examination, but even within the limited terms in which the issue has been discussed above, we can see that the work of Rulfo is particularly rich in this regard, and, in the specific cases of the novel and the stories discussed in this essay, we can appreciate the many layers of rich meaning that Rulfo manages to convey and the depth and power of the means by which he conveys them.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Gustavo C. Fares, *Juan Rulfo: la lengua, el tiempo y el espacio* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Almagesto, 1994), p. 75.
2. All translations from the Spanish are by the author.
3. The following are some of the more pertinent studies of spatial issues in Rulfo’s work: Diógenes Fajardo Valenzuela, ‘Pedro Páramo o la inmortalidad del espacio’, *Thesaurus: Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo*, 44.1 (1989), 92–111, <<http://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/thesaurus/pdf/44/>>

- TH_44_001_102_0.pdf> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Francisco Antolín, *Los espacios en Juan Rulfo* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1991); Gustavo C. Fares, *Imaginar Comala: el espacio en la obra de Juan Rulfo* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Gustavo C. Fares, *Juan Rulfo: la lengua, el tiempo y el espacio* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Almagesto, 1994); Marina Martín, 'Espacio urbano y espacio "psíquico" en Juan Rulfo', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 54.1 (June, 2001), 126–39 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30203660>> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Jean Franco, 'El viaje al país de los muertos', in *La ficción de la memoria: Juan Rulfo ante la crítica*, ed. by Federico Campbell (México: Ediciones Era, 2003), pp. 136–55; Yoon Bong Seo, 'El espacio y el tiempo en la obra de Rulfo: un lugar para pensar', *Espéculo: Revista de estudios literarios* (2004), <<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero26/rulfo.html>> [accessed 8 June 2015]; C. Fiallega, 'Los muertos no tienen tiempo ni espacio: el cronotopo en *Pedro Páramo*', in *Rulfo: perspectivas críticas. Ensayos inéditos*, ed. by Pol Popovic Karic (México D.F.: Siglo XXI, 2007), pp. 117–37.
4. Julio Ortega, *La contemplación y la fiesta: ensayos sobre la nueva novela latinoamericana* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1968), p. 22.
 5. A more extensive and detailed account of the theoretical framework being employed here is presented in my monograph, Bill Richardson, *Borges and Space* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 197–218.
 6. The editions of the texts used here are Juan Rulfo, *El Llano en llamas* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985) and Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, ed. by José Carlos González Boixo (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004); page numbers cited refer to these editions and will appear after each citation in parentheses.
 7. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (Spring 1986), 22–27 (p.23).
 8. Jean Franco, 'El viaje al país de los muertos', p. 142.
 9. Note Julio Ortega's claim that this sequence is suggestive of a character confined to hell: 'Esta imagen de los caminos — aunque no precisa un arriba y un abajo y tal vez sí un fuera y un dentro — sugiere [...] el espacio del infierno.' [This image of the paths — although it does not require an up and a down and perhaps does need an outside and an inside — suggests the space of hell.] *La contemplación y la fiesta*, p. 23; c.f. 'Comala es el paraíso convertido en infierno en la tierra' [Comala is heaven converted into hell on earth]. Fajardo Valenzuela, 'Pedro Páramo o la inmortalidad del espacio', p. 103.
 10. Mikhail Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas, 1981).
 11. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); others who make a similar point include, notably, Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), who argues that the connection between place and its inhabitants helps form people's identities.
 12. Hedy Habra, 'Recuperación de la imagen materna a la luz de elementos fantásticos en *Pedro Páramo*', *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana*, 33.2 (2004), 90–103 (p. 102).
 13. Including, for example, 'Nos han dado la tierra' [They Have Given Us the Land], 'La cuesta de las Comadres' [The Hill of the Comadres], 'En la madrugada' [At Dawn], 'El Llano en llamas' [The Burning Plain] and 'Luvina'.
 14. See Stanley Brandes's study on the subject, *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).
 15. Ricardo Gullón, *Espacio y novela* (Barcelona: A. Bosch, 1980), p. 6.
 16. See, for example, *Inframundo: el México de Juan Rulfo*, ed. by Juan Rulfo and Frank Janney, 2nd edn (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1983); Alberto Vital Díaz, *Noticias Sobre Juan Rulfo, 1784–2003* (México, D.F.: Ediciones RM, 2004); *Juan Rulfo, fotógrafo*, ed. by Andrew Dempsey (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Publicaciones, 2005).
 17. Octavio Paz, 'Paisaje y novela en México', in *Corriente alterna* (México City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1967), 16–18 (p. 18). Both Rulfo's photographs and the text have that quality of suggesting that they provide an image of an alternative world that somehow is both an imaginary place and a place rooted in a Mexican reality. In this regard, it is worth noting Erika Billeter's comment in relation to Rulfo's photographs, to the effect that '[s]us fotos no cuentan nada. Sólo muestran. Muestran a los hombres y su tierra' [His photographs do not tell you anything. They just show.

- They show men and their land.] Erika Billeter, 'Juan Rulfo: imágenes del recuerdo', in *Juan Rulfo: fotógrafo*, ed. by Andrew Dempsey, p. 40.
18. Quoted in Norma Klahn, 'La ficción de Juan Rulfo', in *Juan Rulfo, Toda la obra*, ed. by Claude Fell (Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1996), pp. 521–29 (p. 525).
 19. Nila Gutiérrez Marrone, *El estilo de Juan Rulfo: estudio lingüístico* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1978), p. 17.
 20. Raymond Leslie Williams, *The Twentieth-Century Spanish American Novel* (University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 115.
 21. Ciaran Cosgrove, 'Abstract Gestures and Elemental Pressures in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*', *The Modern Language Review*, 86.1 (January 1991), 79–88 (p. 80).
 22. Fares, *Imaginar Comala*, p. 1.
 23. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 11.
 24. Vital, *Noticias sobre Juan Rulfo*, p. 24.
 25. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.