

PLAYING IN THE ABYSS: GENERATING POTENTIAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT

By hypothesizing 'potential space' as the place in which imagination is developed, as a site of mythological origination, Winnicott's theory of infant play has been accorded the import of "the source of all subsequent creative and cultural activity and experience" (Pigrum, 2004, par. 3). To the extent that this conception of potential space focuses on creativity and the 'imaginary', it sets the cognitive conditions for the formulation of myth. Thus, given that these same conditions arbitrate the founding nucleus of an individual's creative life, there is scope to consider potential space in terms of the 'abyss' (a metaphor featured in creation mythologies that connotes unfathomable creative potential).

The literary steps of this investigation begin with Derrida's discussion of *khōra* (a term literally meaning 'place' and borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*). For Derrida, *khōra* connotes 'mother', 'receptacle' and 'abyss'. Here, a line between the notion of the abyss and Winnicott's 'potential space' (wherein the infant breaks down an illusion of oneness with the mother), may be drawn. A subsequent outline of Kristeva's 'semiotic chora' reinforces this connection because, for her, *khōra* also signifies the infant/mother relationship. By capitalising on these theoretical reference points, Winnicott's 'potential space' supports a critical reading of the role of the abyss metaphor in fostering cultural creativity.

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Introduction

This essay explores the notion of potential space as it pertains to the development and interpretation of creative and cultural negotiations. Theorising the play space of the infant, Winnicott postulates 'potential space' as the place in which the imagination starts to be developed. It is in this space that, by means of transitional object use, the infant breaks down an illusion of oneness with the mother and gains irreversible entry into the symbolic order. Thus for Winnicott, this space is accorded the import of being "the source of all subsequent creative and cultural activity and experience" (Pigrum, Transitional Practices and Place par. 3). He argues that the lack of an area in which the infant can play means a lack in the infant's opportunity to have "cultural experience" - that "no link with the cultural inheritance" means that there will be "no contribution to the cultural pool" (Winnicott, Playing and Reality 101). Without this link, cultural creativity is at stake.

The denotive capacity of 'potential space' is explored within the initial section, 'A Brief Outline of the Notion of Potential Space'. This leads to a focus on Winnicott's specialist interpretation of potential space and its role in infant play in the second section, 'An Overview of Winnicott's Notion of Potential Space'. In the third section, 'Potential Space as *Khōra*', attention is shifted to the notion of potential space as conceived by Derrida in his discussion of *khōra*, and by Kristeva to refer to the pre-linguistic stage of infant development. Literally meaning 'place', *khōra* is borrowed by Derrida and Kristeva from *Timaeus*, Plato's attempt to provide an account for the origin of the world. For Derrida and Kristeva, *khōra* is a potential space that connotes 'mother' and 'receptacle' and Winnicott's notion of potential space is clearly conducive to these metaphors. However, Derrida's elucidation of potential space also finds it rendered an 'abyss', a point that is addressed in the fourth section, '*Khōra* as Abyss'. This development leads the reader to the final section of this essay, 'Potential Space as Abyssal Zone: Re-thinking Winnicott's Space for Play'. By constructing a theoretical bridge from Derrida's *khōra* back to Winnicott's 'potential space', and detouring via Kristeva's 'semiotic chora', this section offers the reader a re-thinking of Winnicott's potential space as a veritable abyssal zone in which the infant negotiates emerging creativity. Concluding the essay, this section examines the implications of postulating notions of the abyss as the groundless grounds for all creativity and everyday cultural experience. It emphasises the point that notions of potential space and the abyss play a key role in fostering cultural creativity.

A Brief Outline of the Notion of Potential Space

The notion of 'potential space' has a variety of applications and it is therefore worth prefacing these with brief definitions of the two words. Firstly, 'potential' can be taken to mean something quite positive but in a way that may seem negative in the same instance. For example, to say that an individual has much potential is to suggest that the individual has the capacity to manifest certain possibilities. This interpretation is opposed to the suggestion that they are affecting those possibilities in the moment and so there is some sense of unfulfilment inherent in this notion. Thus, the notion of potential lends itself to a capacity for something to come into being, a scope for becoming rather than being. The word 'space' can be taken to mean the extent of time between two points, where space is qualified by an adjective such as 'long' or 'short'. Again, the notion of transition emerges which is important for the following discussion on potential space. In material terms, space denotes room - perhaps it is a place containing objects and that attributes a sense of there being tangible parameters to the activities that occur within it. From the outset, then, the notion of potential space connotes the possibility for the coming into being of a context for activity across time, that which may well involve unspecified objects.

This intentionally brief stroll through some primary definitions of potential and space can be built upon with insights into the various applications of potential space as a technical term. In anatomy, potential space is used to denote spaces within the body that do not contain structures and that do not, under normal circumstances, present themselves as spaces. To clarify, one example of a bodily potential space is the peritoneal cavity that exists between the parietal and visceral layers of the peritoneum. In other words, the peritoneal cavity is classified as a potential space between the membrane that lines the body cavity and the thin membrane that lines the inside of the abdominal cavity keeping the abdominal organs in place. The potential inherent in this space can be realised during an operation, for example, when organs are moved away from an area in need of repair or examination. In anatomy also, the vagina is considered to function as a potential space. In a relaxed state, the walls of the vagina are in contact with each other but can also change in shape and size. The vagina's capacity to "contract and expand", enables it to accommodate an intermediary, or transitional, object whether this be for the purposes of intercourse or to "accommodate the passage of the baby during childbirth"

(Masters et al. 58). The resulting space is contingent on the volume of the object being accommodated.

In this introduction to the notion of potential space, relationships between spaciality and the transitional, i.e. the temporary, and the female body are key – and they emerge when articulating potential space as proposed by D. W. Winnicott in his analysis of the development of the individual infant. For Winnicott, potential space is a place in which the infant conducts creative play. Perhaps reminiscent of the aforementioned ‘coming into being’ of potential, is the belief that potential space *becomes* the source of all later creativity and cultural experience (Lesser, 27); (Nicholson, par. 2); (Pigrum, Transitional Practices and Place par. 2).

The following discussion of Winnicott’s ‘potential space’ contextualises this claim in preparation for an elucidation of Derrida’s *khōra* and the subsequent framing of potential space as an abyss. It should be noted that, while Winnicott’s framing of the mother as the primary caregiver may arouse dispute by single parent fathers and others, it is perhaps important to keep in mind Curthoys’ point that “the biological facts of birth and lactation [mean] that a woman’s relationship to a child is more primary and indisputable than that of a man”. (32). With this in mind, it seems appropriate to reflect Winnicott’s framing of the mother as primary caregiver in the context of a discussion of his theory.

An Overview of Winnicott’s Notion of Potential Space

Winnicott’s notion of potential space arose from his observations of how the infant’s use of toys and other transitional objects enables them to negotiate “the move from omnipotence to a grasp of the reality principal” (Giddens, 38). According to Winnicott, there is no such thing as the infant because of “the total dependency on the mother that gives the infant the illusion of oneness, of total unity with the mother” (cited in Pigrum, Transitional Practices and Place 2). Thus, in the early stages of development, the infant maintains a non-distinction between itself and the primary caregiver, experiencing existence as if he or she were simply an extension of the mother.

Potential space exists neither completely within the infant’s imagination nor completely in an external reality. It is a third area between, and thus distinct from, both the “inner or personal psychic reality” and the “actual world in

which the individual lives” (Winnicott, Playing and Reality 103). Thus, whilst potential space gives both a time and a place to play, to creativity and, in turn, to the place where imagination is developed in as much as “[i]magination is the result of the transformation phantasy undergoes when it is brought into ‘potential space’” (Pigrum, The ‘Ontology’ of the Artist’s Studio as Workplace 3).

As Lesser points out, potential space “define[s] a ‘place’ that has no physical attributes, or a specific location”. (26). Rather, it is a kind of bridge that is generated through the infant’s use of, what Winnicott refers to as, “transitional objects”. These are toys that are either found or created, such a doll or a teddy bear. Examples might be a stick that a child pretends is a magic wand or pirate’s sword, or a cardboard box that, with circles drawn on opposing sides, is now a car. Transitional objects “belong to the realm of illusion” (Winnicott, Playing and Reality 14). Described by Leiman, they are “the first ‘not-me possession[s]’”. (par. 43). Transitional objects occupy the “playground [that] is a potential space” between the mother and the infant (Winnicott, Playing and Reality 47). In addition, Winnicott notes that the “transitional object is *not an internal object* (which is a mental concept) – it is a possession (Playing and Reality 9). Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either”.

Potential space is that space which had been absent during the time that the illusion of oneness has presided. Generated when transitional objects are used by the infant, it paradoxically joins and disjoins the infant and the mother. Its status as a separating space is deferred by way of the transitional objects that are in the infant’s possession and which stand in for the mother. These objects take on the task of providing “the emotional environment that in infancy was constituted by that which Winnicott termed ‘the good enough mother’” (Pigrum, Transitional Practices and Place 3). A key role of the primary caregiver is to ensure that the infant does not destroy the illusion of oneness that it has with her too quickly and so it is important for the infant in which they can play. In this place, transitional objects can be slowly introduced to stand in for the presence of the caregiver and, in this way, to combat the anxiety of separation (Ainsworth).

Transitional objects work to stave off the threat of a premature separation between the infant and the mother. In infancy, the child is “all the time on the brink of unthinkable anxiety” (Winnicott, 1965, 57). Thus, the dependability of the mother, the basic trust that the infant generates in the acceptance of her

absence is critical to the cultivation of a sense of “ontological security” (Giddens, 39). The mother’s absence alone is not enough to change the behaviour of the infant because the infant can retain a memory of the mother. However, as Pigrum points out, transitional objects “effect a passage, across gaps in continuity, between the compelling illusion of the unity of the mother and child to the anxiety produced by her perceived absence and the process of separation. (Transitional Practices and Place 2).

The transitional object becomes a sign because it stands in for something other than what it is (the mother) and because there is a reason of its presence (providing a substitute for her presence) (Leiman, par. 43). Thus, transitional object use marks the infant’s cognitive shift into the symbolic realm. At this time in child development “the immediacy of the pre-symbolic real is lost for ever, the true object of desire becomes impossible...we are submerged in the universe of signs” (Zizek, 95).

In as much as the ideas, values, and beliefs of a culture can be identified and communicated through symbols, sign use on the part of the infant equates to the early stages of cultural participation. Leiman (par. 40) says that, at first, “[t]he infant cannot transform ‘sense-data’ into signs. He [sic] ‘emits’ them ‘into the mother’”. Until the infant begins to establish fluency within a symbolic order, the mother remains the barer of the signs, these impressions and imprints, entrusted to her by the infant.

Two key points in Winnicott’s (Playing and Reality 100) main thesis are “1. [t]he place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment ... Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play” and “2. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experiences* that take place at the early stages of the individual’s existence”. Potential space, being a mediating space between the infant and the mother means that it is “a space of becoming. It is not yet a separating space” (Leiman, par. 45). In it, the infant is a “not a ‘being’ but a ‘going-on being’, who has to be ‘called into existence’ by the nurturing environment which the caretaker provides” (Winnicott cited in Giddens, 39). It is possible to think of the cultural individual in terms of their identity as a citizen-subject existing within a symbolic order that is contingent in time and space. In asking the question, ‘Who is the citizen?’ Donald says that to “become a citizen is ... to become a subject within this symbolic order, to be subjected to it”. (175).

The point to make explicit here is that the way an infant negotiates potential space has significant implications for the future cultural negotiations of that individual. Winnicott says that “[t]he potential space between the baby and the mother, between child and family, between individual and society or world, depends on experience which leads to basic trust” (Playing and Reality 103). A deficit in the generation of potential space through transitional object use and, in this respect, a deficit in the infant’s capacity to generate basic trust (trust in the fact that the caregiver will return). The provision of inadequate play space is taken to mean an inadequate opportunity to have cultural experience and result in “an impoverishment of capacity to experience in the cultural field” (Winnicott, Playing and Reality 101). Perhaps Lesser (27) is apt in making the point that “[I]ike some other psychic developments, potential space can better be traced by its absence”. It is also possible to consider the implications of inadequate play space in the sense that it provides a critical context in which the individual’s imagination commences development. As Lewis points out, in as much as

[c]ulture is constructed by humans in order to communicate and create community Culture begins with an imagining of the world about us; these imaginings are represented in some way formed in discourse, language, symbols, signs, and texts – all concepts applied to meaning systems. (13).

Potential Space as *Khōra*

From an outline of Winnicott’s theory, potential space is found to be as intangible as it is transitory. This is due to its contingency upon the objects that occupy it and that it receives. An initial link between Winnicott’s potential space and the notion of *khōra* stems from the latter’s literal meaning as ‘place’ when, in Plato’s *Timaeus*, *khōra* is appointed as “the receptacle ... the nurse of all becoming and change”. (67).

Timaeus is Plato’s attempt to give a thorough account of the physical laws as well as the metaphysical and religious principles that characterise the world and that describe the universe. Keeping in mind that opportunities to further conceptualise *khōra* will come through elucidations of both Derrida’s and Kristeva’s interpretations, it is enough here to point out that, in the context of *Timaeus*, *khōra* provides a name for the space or place in space in which

forms materialise. It denotes a place before the beginning of the world, an original chaos. In keeping with this notion, Plato speaks of *khōra* as the receptacle, a primitive chaos of unfixed visual appearance and without balance. Of the receptacle, Plato makes the claim that “all its contents were in constant process of movement and separation [and] the four basic constituents [water, fire, earth, and air] were shaken by the receptacle, which acted as a kind of shaking implement”. (72). For Plato, the *khōra* is both *dis*-order and *pre*-order. Thus, what we find to be a primeval location or condition is, perhaps, also something of a *pre-dis*-position.

Both Derrida and Kristeva borrow the term *khōra* from Plato’s *Timaeus*, using it in a way that connotes potential space and, in Derrida’s case in particular, in a way that pronounces it as an abyss. In this section, both Derrida’s and Kristeva’s conception of *khōra* are helpful for the task of demonstrating Winnicott’s play space as a veritable abyssal zone and for the subsequent *telos* of examining the implications of this re-thinking.

In introducing *Khōra*, Derrida’s essay dedicated to the notion of *khōra* in Plato’s *Timaeus*, Dutoit notes Derrida’s preference for transcribing “the greek letter χ (*khi*) with *kh* instead of *ch*” (Derrida, *On The Name* xii). Also, Derrida insists that “[t]he definite article presupposes the existence of a thing [and yet] *khōra* is neither sensible nor intelligible” (Derrida, *On The Name* 96). As a result, he omits the definite article so that we consistently find reference to ‘*khōra*’ as opposed to ‘the *khōra*’ as it has always been done (Derrida, *On The Name* p. xii). Derrida’s conventions have been adopted in this essay except in instances where the alternative spelling, ‘*chora*’, appears in quoted text.

Derrida takes issue with *khōra*, saying that it is undecideable and adverse to distinction, that it should be viewed in an aporetic way, i.e. in a way that is inclined to doubt, as well as saying that it is anachronistic. Addressing these conceptions helps tie *khōra*, alongside Kristeva’s ‘semiotic *chora*’, to Winnicott’s ‘potential space’.

Both the notion of the abyss and that of potential space are explicit in Derrida’s articulation of *khōra* which, for him, is neither “sensible” nor “intelligible”, belongs to a “third genus” (Derrida, *On The Name* 89). This makes *khōra* a liminal space, a space in-between that, in as much as “[t]he thought of the *khōra* would trouble the very order of polarity” (Derrida, *On The Name* 92), is an undecideable space. Collins suggests that undecideables are threatening because they disrupt the comfort of the idea that human beings

“inhabit a world governed by decideable categories” (Collins & Mayblin, 19). For Derrida, *khōra* does not have any determinations of “her” own, “does not possess them as properties” (1995, 99). While Winnicott’s potential space suggests the threat of separation of the infant from the mother, Derrida (1995, 99) suggests an alternative approach by saying that “this is how one can glimpse *khōra* – in a difficult, aporetic way and as if in a dream”. He (*On The Name* 103) asks:

Won’t the discourse on *khōra* have opened, between the sensible and the intelligible, belonging neither to one nor to the other ... an apparently empty space ...? Didn’t it name a gaping opening, an abyss or a chasm? Isn’t it starting out from this chasm, “in” it, that the cleavage between the sensible and the intelligible, indeed, between body and soul, can have place and take place?

In this context, *khōra* is something of a space between two others, i.e. between a tangible reality and capacity for understanding, as opposed to the senses. This interpretation finds *khōra* to be reminiscent of a space that exists neither completely within the infant’s imagination nor completely in an external reality. It also denotes a third (potential) area between, and distinct from, both the “inner or personal psychic reality” and the “actual world in which the individual lives” that Winnicott (*Playing and Reality* 103) names potential space. However, this is not yet enough to consolidate their association. The opportunity to do so arises where Derrida (*On The Name* 124) reads *khōra* as feminine, as the body in possession of the ‘cleavage’, through his assertions that “*khōra* does not couple with the father”, and that *khōra* is “properly a mother, a nurse, a receptacle, a bearer of imprints” (*On The Name* 92).

Not only is meaning imprinted upon *khōra*, that which itself remains devoid of distinction, but *khōra* must remain so devoid of character in order to remain that which

receives everything or gives place to everything Since it is blank, everything that is printed on it is automatically effaced. It remains foreign to the imprint it receives; so in a sense, it does not receive anything Everything inscribed in it erases itself immediately, while remaining in it. Thus it is an impossible surface – it is not even a surface because it has no depth” (Derrida cited in Ulmer, 65).

Kristeva’s semiotic *khōra* denotes a pre-linguistic stage in the infant’s development, that time during which unarticulated infant sounds have pre-

symbolic significance “relating to the play of timbre, rhythm, gesture etc.” and which are always present “in the everyday language of communication” (Lechte, 129). For Kristeva, these are the “operations of the semiotic” underlying which is the *khōra*, “the locus of the drive activity (Lechte, 129). Consisting of positive and negative, creative and destructive drives, *khōra* provides Kristeva with a name for a stage in psychosexual development where the infant is “dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings, and needs” (Felluga). This stage coincides with that point in time which, in Winnicott’s theory, finds the infant in possession of transitional objects, using them as ‘stand ins’ for the mother and that serve to defer a premature rupture in the infant’s illusion of oneness with her. Like Derrida, Kristeva also identifies *khōra* as a bearer of imprints in that it “where social and family structures make their imprint through the mediation of the maternal body” (Roudiez in Kristeva, 6). Lechte makes the point that *khōra* “is connotative of the mother’s body – an unrepresentable body. The mother and the body as such in fact go together for Kristeva”. (129).

For Derrida (On The Name 94), “*khōra* is anachronistic; it “is” the anachrony within being, or better; the anachrony of being. It anachronizes being”. His claim rests upon the idea that translations of *khōra* “remain caught in networks of interpretation. They are led astray by retrospective projections, which can always be suspected of being anachronistic” (Derrida, On The Name 93). The indeterminacy of *khōra* stems from its lack of discernible essence. Like Winnicott’s potential space, *khōra* is contingent on what it receives, on what enters into it rather than being that which provides a fixed structure. Derrida notes that there are interpretations which would give form to ‘*khōra*’ [a]nd yet, ‘*khōra*’ seems never to let itself be reached or touched” (On The Name 95).

***Khōra* as Abyss**

In On the Name, Derrida speaks to Plato’s concept of the khora: the reception space for positioning. The khora is an abyss, an empty space waiting to be filled by the object but there is no bounded site known as an “empty space,” with space substituting for placement. Rather, the site of empty space is in fact a virtual space, a potential opening the zone of alterity. (Pinsky, 36).

There is a manifest parity in Derrida’s and Kristeva’s adoption of ‘feminine’, ‘receptacle’ and ‘potential space’ as approaches to *khōra* that are

offered in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In both instances, theory on the notion of *khōra* echoes Winnicott’s play space, the creative and chaotic realm of the developing infant that underscores its “entry into the symbolic signalled in particular by the mastery of language, and ... a capacity indicated, for instance, by the mastery of the pronouns ‘I/you’” (Lechte, 132).

This parity is not ruptured by Derrida’s rendering of *khōra* as an abyss, for there are many precedents in which the abyss, denoting an arguably unrepresentable and liminal space, has been imposed upon by the imprints of its cultural representations and interpretations that call it ‘chaotic’, ‘empty’, ‘chasm’, ‘receptacle’, and ‘feminine’. However, by addressing Derrida’s (On The Name 103) question of whether “the discourse on *khōra* [will] have opened ... an apparently empty space ... [or] name a gaping opening, an abyss or a chasm?” in this section, another will be raised. This is will be the question of how, through a re-thinking of Winnicott’s ‘potential space’, to theorise the abyss as the grounds for all creativity and cultural experience.

In order for the task of addressing this question to be conducted effectively, it is critical to draw attention to a range of interpretations of the notion of the abyss, the imprints that it has beared and/or continues to bear. The word itself is derived from the Greek word ἀβυσσος (*a-*, privative [expressing negation], *bussos*, bottom) and the Late Latin word *abyssus* (bottomless gulf) (Brown, 11). One example of this interpretation being used is Spivak’s suggestion that “[t]he fall into the abyss [of deconstruction]... inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom” (in Derrida, Of Grammatology lxxvii). In addition, the abyss is interpreted as a “great deep believed in the old cosmogony to lie beneath the earth; the primal chaos; the bowels of the earth; the infernal pit (Brown, 11).

Because the notion of the abyss is used to refer, not only to the unknown, but also to the unknowable, the unfathomable and the indeterminable, it is unavoidably problematic. The abyss is indeterminate, like the creative and destructive, positive and negative infantile drives as viewed by Kristeva (Sarup, 124). To claim to know that which is posited beyond the limits of knowledge, beyond the individual’s faculties of determination, is to play into the problem, such as that which has been experienced in painting for example, “of finding a form for chaos the chaos of the Pit” (Hughes, 156). Such attempts run the risk of becoming testaments to their own inadequacy so far as they seek to imprint, thus impose, a finitude upon that very thing they conceive of as

unstable (Prescott-Steed, The Import of the Sensation of the Abyss). The chaotic abyss appeals to the same characterisation as potential space in that it too is characterised by “dialectical relationships between annihilation and creativity, destruction and recreation, and regression and progression” (Poulin & Diamond, par. 3). Likewise, for Derrida (On The Name 94), “[r]ich, numerous, inexhaustible, the interpretations come, in short, to give form to the meaning of *khōra*”. But while it is possible for human beings to conceive of the “infinitely great”, every attempt to make this object visible “appears to us painfully inadequate” (Lyotard, 78). Representations of the abyss, to follow along Derrida’s point about *khōra*, “remain caught in networks of interpretation. They are led astray by retrospective projections, which can always be suspected of being anachronistic” (Derrida, On The Name 93). In so far as conceptions of the abyss refer predominantly to a space beyond societal norms, they remain subject to, and embedded in, those very norms. Subject to cultural change and sensitivity, conceptions of the abyss play into the interpretation of cultural negotiations.

Khōra as ‘feminine’, ‘receptacle’, and ‘potential space’ echoes the abyss as it is conceived of in a variety of creation mythologies spanning thousands of years of civilisation. Derrida (On The Name 126) confirms that, “in order to think *khōra*, it is necessary to go back to a beginning that is older than the beginning, namely, the birth of the cosmos”. Three conceptions of an abyss of original chaos, these being Sumerian/Babylonian, Norse, and Judeo-Christian accounts, shall be introduced. Creation mythology represents the abyss as a space of infinite creative potential for, while ‘potential’ can connote ‘unfulfilled’, this conception of the abyss lays claim to the potential for universal creation. These mythologies also tell of a vast aquatic abyss, a conception that continues to influence oceanographic terminology (Prescott-Steed, Contemporary Mass Media Representation of the Abyssal Zone 29).

Sumerian creation mythology, adopted almost in its entirety by Babylonian culture, is one such example of where the abyss is believed to be a primeval sea before universal creation, a kind of “first cause” and “prime mover” (Kramer, 76). This place is rendered a “boundless sea” by the Sumerian thinkers, who never considered that there might be anything “prior to the sea in time and in space” (Kramer, 76). Kramer agrees that it is not unlikely that the Sumerians considered the sea to have existed “eternally”. (82). This abyss, the Sumerian’s primary deity, was personified as the goddess Nammu. Described as

“the mother, who gave birth to heaven and earth”, Nammu is “written in a Sumerian tablet with the pictograph for primeval ‘sea’” (Kramer, 81).

Continuing in this line of thinking, the Sumerian word “Abzu” has been translated into the English language as “[s]ea, abyss; home of the water-god Enki [Enki is the son of Nammu; also, the god of wisdom and of the seas and rivers]” (Kramer, 358-60). Tiamatu (Tiamat - the great chaotic primeval ocean and the dragon, a great maternal goddess) referred to the abyss (ocean) (Guisepi, 2003). The Sumerian word “Abzu” also means “primeval source” (Guisepi, 2003). A variation of Abzu, “Apsu”, has been translated into the English language as “deepwater” and “beginning (one who exists from the beginning)” (Guisepi, 2003). Throughout Sumerian incantations, reference is made to “the abzu, the pure place” and it is associated with “sacred water” (Cunningham, 116).

Norse creation mythology, outlined in the *Prose Edda* by the Christian Scholar Snorre Sturluson tells not of a feminine receptacle though, nevertheless, of a vast and bottomless “open void” which defines the centre of space and from which the cosmos was created. (32). Ginnungagap is the name given to this chasm, flanked in the south by the Muspell; a region of fire, and in the north by the Niflheim; a region of ice and frost (Sturluson, 33). It is said that “[a]n infinite number of winters before the earth was created there was only the Great Abyss, a gorge of unfathomable depth. The abyss of emptiness was called Ginnungagap” (Rosala Viking Centre, 2005). An encounter between ice and fire caused drops of water fill the abyss, resulting in the formation of the God Ymir who subsequently died in a chaotic battle waged by rebelling Gods. As the story goes, a number of other Gods “took Ymir and carried him into the middle of Ginnungagap, and made the world from Him: from his blood the sea and lakes” (Sturluson, 35). In Norse creation mythology, Ginnungagap is a masculine receptacle and a potential (in-between) space, undecideable to the extent that his form emerges from the collision of the two polarities ‘fire’ and ‘ice’.

The final example, Genesis, the creation myth opening the Old Testament, offers a Judeo-Christian interpretation of the beginning of the universe. This myth tells of a place before the creation of the universe where “[t]he earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the deep” (Tyndale’s Old Testament, 15). This ‘deep’ denotes a first and ‘formless’ original chaos. This creation mythology maintains an abyss that is elemental, a body of water, partially reminiscent of Plato’s reference to the contents of the receptacle, “all

... in constant process of movement and separation the four basic constituents [water, fire, earth, and air]". (72). According to Genesis, the beginning of mankind is marked by something of a dark and chaotic ocean, a vast and watery abyss.

By asking that we "not forget that *The Origin* deals with the essence of truth, the truth of essence and the abyss", Derrida (*The Truth in Painting* 306) elucidates the focus on the abyss as an original chaos. However, while he echoes Plato's *Timaeus* attempts to provide "a religious and teleological account of the origin of the world and of the phenomena of nature" (Lee, in Plato, 7), is it important to compliment the theory that has been presented so far by acknowledging the conception of the abyss as hell. The word 'abyss' is used to denote hell in the New Testament and, in this text, "the abode of the dead, limbo ... [and] the abode of the evil spirits, hell" are the only two meanings for the abyss to be found (Maas, par. 1). The word 'hell' is derived from the Old English 'hel' which means 'underworld' (Brown, 1214). Referring to the underworld Sheol, Van Scott notes that "depictions of the underworld as a crowded, cavernous chasm have derived from pits used as mass graves during this time [700 B.C.]". (258). According to many religious beliefs regarding the afterlife, hell, an "abode of the dead" and the "place of departed spirits", is a region of "darkness", of "chaos" and "suffering" (Brown, 1214-15). But, in her discussion of the abyss in the apocalyptic landscape, Pippin draws attention to a feminine aspect of hell. Pippin warns that "[a]pproaching the mouth of the abyss is dangerous [and asks] Does this mouth have lips? Could this be the poison kiss – the kiss of death? Or are these 'lips' the vulva? Does the mouth devour?" (71).

Potential Space as Abyssal Zone: Re-thinking Winnicott's 'Space for Play'

Metaphors of receptacle, mother, and potential space resonate throughout interpretations of the abyss as an original chaos, that is, as a pre-symbolic order of pre-cosmic and seemingly immeasurable proportions. They do this more so than when considered in relation to interpretations of the abyss as hell, even though the notion of hell can be treated as a metaphor for negative and destructive drives as negotiated in potential space as identified by Kristeva in her 'semiotic chora'. These metaphors are useful for making sense of the difficult notion of *khōra* that Plato offered and which, by way of Derrida and Kristeva, this essay has devised a way to view Winnicott's notion of potential

space. Throughout this essay, drawing upon Derrida's and Kristeva's conceptions of *khōra* has meant an opportunity to re-think Winnicott's potential space - an opportunity to articulate how potential space signifies a veritable abyssal zone, one that is transitionally and creatively generated by the developing infant and that provides both a stage and a critical precedent for creative cultural negotiations. Establishing this theoretical context has been the *telos* of the previous sections, the implications of which may now be addressed.

Creative and cultural negotiations in a late modern age, characterised in part by increased number of contexts for intercultural exchange and by a trend towards accepting knowledge as hypotheses, require cultural sensitivity and self-consciousness (Prescott-Steed, *The Import of the Sensation of the Abyss*). Thus, it follows that adequate provision for potential space in infant development leads to clear cultural communication as fostered by creative practices. In potential space, Winnicott has identified the grounds for creative and cultural negotiation then the provision of sufficient space for infant play will have a direct impact on the individual's creative capacity as expressed throughout ongoing daily life. But this also suggests that, in its unfixity, the abyss contextualises this aspect of cultural empowerment.

This is an appropriate moment in which to recall Lewis's claim that culture and cultural representations are constructed by humans and that, originating in the imagination, they become manifest in "discourse, language, symbols, signs, and texts". (13). Representations of the abyss, while inherently inadequate and, in this way, more representative of human uncertainty and ignorance than of a conclusive depiction of the abyss, echo the infant's original problem or task. The task of generating a capacity for signification and cultural communication presents itself to the infant upon their entry into potential space. The height of this task is the problem of representing the non-representable and so negotiating the idea of the abyss goes some way to revisiting this challenge of entering into creativity, of invigorating cultural innovation.

The infant's initial step towards acquiring a grasp on symbolism can be understood as a step into a lifelong dialogue with the abyss, with indeterminacy and subjectivity, and with finitude. The floating signifier 'I', by which the individual locates his or her self, floats in a dialectical chaos of potential and liminal space. This chaos becomes increasingly disciplined as meaning, contingent in its socio-historical contexts, gradually takes the form of an already present symbolic order. This can be seen in representations of the abyss in that,

having the historical significance of symbolising spaces beyond societal norms are nevertheless fabricated. The intangibility of the abyss precedes, but also continues to underscore, such attempts. Perhaps they are undermined in this way also. What can be said is that, when we take into account that when a stick becomes a sword, in play, when a blanket is thrown over furniture with the purpose of standing in for a fort or cave, participants negotiate the constructedness of cultural meaning and symbolism. Those 'at play' can be seen to entertain the primacy of creative and destructive, positive and negative drives as well as the potential of realising a dialogue with the abyss. Kristeva, in particular, theorised that *khōra* "(a receptacle, as well as a distinctive mark) corresponds to the 'poetic' in language" (Lechte, 5). But if such dialogue, be it oral, visual, or otherwise, is at the source of all creative and cultural experience then it can be said a discourse on the abyss follows this lead. The individual's negotiation of imagination and external reality, of the third 'in-between' space where the artistic act manifests, is productive when conceived of as a self-conscious space (Prescott-Steed, *Why Praxis?* 24). It is in this 'in-between' that the conditions for an interaction between personal dispositions and a broader sphere of cultural meaning and communicative practices finds support.

Culture, as the result of countless communally and individually orchestrated creative and imaginative impulses, and in so far as it emerges from potential space, can be found to originate in a dialogue with the abyss. This emergence is productive and, in keeping with the motif of 'potential', it is promising. The abyss becomes workable as a metaphor that, while it is often conceived of as negative, denotes a culturally constructive context, a context which is oriented toward enriching the cultural pool. In this context, individuals can be innovative with cultural meaning and capitalise on the potential, to use an analogy here that is synonymous with creative activity, to 'make' something of culture - perhaps even to make the most out of it. Thus, to borrow from Derrida's (cited in Ulmer, 65) interpretation of *khōra*, the abyss stands in as a veritable "blank" canvas upon which we may write ourselves as reflections upon our culture. While everything that is imprinted upon potential space is automatically erased, this condition encourages the continuation of such cultural writing - opening up a future space for an evolving dialogue with our own abyss, with our own creative potential.

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