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Khôra, invention, deconstruction and the space of complete surprise

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ABSTRACT: Borrowing from Plato, argumentation tends to imagine that invention is at home in the *khôra*—the space of the ideas—because it is the space for discovering and sorting argument options. In contrast, this paper suggests we re-conceive the idea of *inventio* as emerging possibility. *Inventio* is not only the process of sorting the set of possible arguments but is the possibility of the new idea itself; the idiomatic, the absolute surprise.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, deconstruction, Derrida, invention, *khôra*, *loci*, Plato, postmodernism, rhetoric, surprise, *topoi*.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main meta-tropes of rhetoric is that the process of *inventio* derives the material of argument from a territory of ideas. When engaged in invention, we *gather* the material of arguments from the space or territory where ideas await and inscribe them onto language. Our practical works on invention give instruction or speculate on the best methods to ‘search,’ ‘hunt’ ‘locate’ or ‘find’ or ‘discover’ the material of arguments, all terms which clearly suggest there is a place to search in and something to be sought there. Sir Francis Bacon vividly described argumentative invention as “*a chase of deer in an enclosed park*.”(qtd. in Hudson, 1921, p. 325).

Bacon was no friend to rhetoric. But the history of the spatialization of *inventio* goes back to the beginning of the study of rhetoric itself. Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* and *Topica* focus invention on the *topoi*. While in the text of his translation of *The Rhetoric*, W. Rhys Roberts translates *topoi* as “Lines of Argument”—a term also commonly used in reference to *topoi*—his footnote reveals that this is a choice for modern readers: *topos* is more directly a question of space—the *commonplaces* of argument (I:2:1358). The role of “place” in argument is enduring. Leff noted that the Latin concept of *loci* for invention (as opposed to the *loci* for memory) is a direct translation of the term *topoi* (1996, pp. 446-447). Indeed, it was usual classical rhetoricians to refer to the topics of argument as the “places or seats of argument” (McKeon, 1987, p. 14). Contemporary argument perspectives accept that our Lines of Argument are derived from a territory of invention, relying on the same language.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, for example, explain that their concept of invention is grounded in the Aristotelian concept of *loci communes*—again the commonplaces—of topics (1969, p. 83). Rubinelli, in her discussion of the different meanings of *topos* and the Latin *loci*, describes *topoi* as guides for “selecting material for arguments” yet notes that it does mean “‘area’ or ‘position’” –and, of course, selection requires a pre-existing presence of something somewhere ready-at-hand to be selected (2006, p. 254).

Yet this conception of invention is troubling. For one thing, it doesn’t sound much like what is generally implied by invention: unique *discovery* of connections or the *creation* of new knowledge. Bacon, for his part, denied that rhetorical invention is really inventional at all. Like Plato, he considered the discovering ideas to be anterior to the process of gathering arguments (Hudson, 1921). Plato and Aristotle consider true invention a product of the dialectic discovery, not rhetoric (Aristotle, 1941b), hence why the classic tradition demands that the orator be the master logician (Lundsford & Ede, 1984, p. 58). Perhaps for the same reasons, many contemporary theorists have become defensive about “invention,” contextualizing originality to a point where is entirely localized—a non-event—obscured in the big picture by the contingencies of time and space.

In contrast, what I suggest in this paper is that we re-conceive, momentarily, the idea of invention not in the tradition format of finding or sorting arguments that reflect certain or probable truths but as emerging possibility. *Inventio* is not only the process of sorting the possible set of argument to find those most likely to succeed with the audience but is also the possibility of the *new idea* itself, something that is not currently within our argument set. By taking a look back on Plato schematic of the universe, laid out in *Timaeus*, in the light of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo’s analysis of the between-space of the *khôra*, we find can find new insight in the obscure process of invention and the possibility of the absolute surprise that is both a part of and exceeds our conventions of invention.

Yet, in this case, we might have trouble imagining from where these ideas emerge and where are they conceived? The idea of creation, as several scholars have noted, is only based on what is known, very much limiting what counts as “creation.”

2. INTERPRETATIONS OF INVENTION

There is no uniform standard or definition of rhetorical or argumentative invention. The procedure of invention is related, indeed, to the purpose of rhetoric itself. In the traditional Platonic schematic, rhetoric is the expression of the Forms. Invention involves moving from dialectic—the correct method of learning the true name of things—to rhetoric. Language, as Charles Kauffman remarks, must obey dialectic, not vice-versa, lest language “ensnare” the listener and speaker in confusion (1994, pp. 110-111). For the true rhetoric, dialectic is the form of invention, wherein we discover what can be said, in the truest sense of *episteme* (Black, 1994, p. 97). Dialectic, unfortunately ill-formed for persuasion of the unsophisticated masses, must be distilled into a persuasive form to obtain its proper social function.

Inventio, in this schematic, properly is a search of existing formal ideas. In the Platonic scheme, we not merely searching for the argument we already have in our

minds but a limited set of arguments which exist. The dialectic is not a creation of ideas but insight and grasp of those immaterial forms which exist eternally. The *inventio* of rhetoric is not even the search for ideas but the search for the words which communicate the importance of the idea. In some sense, these words will appear when properly understand the idea. Plato remarks in *Phaedrus*, “Far more noble and splendid is the serious pursuit of the dialectician, who finds a congenial soul and then proceeds to plant sow in it words which are able to help themselves and help him who planted them; words which will be unproductive, for they can transit their seed to other natures and cause the growth of fresh words in them...words which bring their possessor to the highest degree of happiness possible” (p. 71). We take Ideas, we find their particular manifestation in particular *topoi* or *loci* (spaces) of the *khôra* (the general space) and they are converted into sensible things for us to say (Caputo, 1997b, p. 85). Hence, we when look for words, the spatial metaphor of searching within a territory where Ideas accumulate or are assembled has enduring power. Contemporary writers also use the spatial metaphor, referring to it as the process of “locating” arguments (Zompetti, 2006, p. 15), the process of “finding” arguments wherein *topoi* serve as “search criteria” (Kienpointer, 1987, pp. 224, 226) or the process of where one goes “looking for argument in the *places* of the mind” (Clark, 1950, p. 293).

There is, however, more detail to it. Plato’s concept of rhetorical invention is laid out in *Phaedrus*, but for Plato rhetorical invention is merely following the dictates of the dialectic. It is in his description the metaphysics of the cosmos that Plato truly discusses invention. In *Timaeus*, Plato faced the problem of how the Forms might be converted into something material. To resolve this situation gap, he imagined a peculiar between-place, space of ideas-come-material, a non-place between being and non-being: the *khôra*. In *Timaeus*, *khôra* is described as “receptacle...of all creation” and the place where the immaterial perfection of the forms is inscribed on material. It is, “an invisible, formless receptacle of everything, which is in some highly obscure fashion linked with the intelligible realm.” We do not merely gather ideas in the territory of the forms—we gather and assemble in sensible forms in the *khôra*.

There are, of course, other ideas of invention—the conception that invention is *creation* or *innovation* in finding new ideas that will work. Aristotle and to an even larger degree, Bacon, focused on inductive reasoning in the process of invention. Of course, while Aristotle considered rhetorical invention a kind of public reasoning, Bacon thought no such thing, removing invention from rhetoric. Kant believed that *inventio* is an aesthetic force that escapes methodology and is derived from inspiration (Gadamer, 2004, p. 47). Some contemporary scholars consider rhetorical invention within a broad a category of a “search for wisdom” or a subset of invention writ large, not of discovery, per se, but the process of “creation of what is new in any discipline or endeavor.” (LeFevre, 1987, p. 2). Perelman, no Platonist, adheres to the idea that argumentation distinguishes its value from formal demonstration by providing its practitioner the ability to “justify a choice (read: a sorting) of axioms” (Perelman 9). Several writers have argued that the process of invention lies between the notion of creation and discovery, reliant upon convention and oriented toward the new, involved in creating new knowledge off the

springboard of old knowledge (Muckelbauer, 2008, pp. 13-14). Yameng Liu remarks that, “To be inventive is to strive for the new without attempting a clean severance with the old and to search the unique though an identification with the common” (2002, 60). Hawhee summarizes the between-ness of invention by remarking that true invention has a *kairic* quality—it is always created at the moment by use of particular language brought about in unique moments in time in something related to creation, discovery, and place. (18). Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks that if Kant is right, and there is something fundamentally aesthetic about *inventio*, we must constantly see it unfinished—our encounter with it always unfinished just as art itself is always unfinished (Gadamer, 2004, p. 85).

Yet, despite these open and sophisticated description of these contemporary authors, it remains unclear *what* invention consists of and how it functions. Muckelbauer and Liu, describe their invention as an “oscillation” and as a “discursive production” but do not have much account for how originality itself is possible. Liu’s essay, for his part, mainly describes why we should avoid applying stringent standards of originality to rhetorical invention and so that rhetoric “no longer has to feel apologetic for failing to measure up to the standard of originality that is central to the concept of discovery or creation” (2002, p. 60). Muckelbauer encourages us to give up the idea of originality in favor of “immanent inhabitation” of *topos*, a term which at the very least mirrors Liu’s defensiveness about the originality standard (2008, p. 140). Even Hawhee requests that we be less focused on the subject-generated standards of “discovery” and “invention.” Her model—which begins to give a hint of what I’m getting at—indicates argumentative invention lies in a between-ness of arguer and audience.

Perhaps this defensiveness is necessary. Invention is often casually treated in easy categories and yet it remains a complex and obscure process. And, as several scholars remind us, the new is always closely related to the old and the terms ‘discovery’ and ‘creation’ are laden down with troubling implications.

But ironically, in attempting to create a ‘postmodern’ account of argumentative invention, each of these scholars is bumping against the very un-postmodern dialectic problem that led Plato to name *khôra*. Like Plato, each scholar attempts to account for how disparate ideas, based in existing principles, come together is something like what we see in language daily. And like Plato, each concedes that the inventive element is nearly “incomprehensible,” to explain but nevertheless insists we think of it (*inventio*) as a place where things *happen*; where an idea becomes *something*. The language we have for invention: ‘creation’, ‘discovery’, ‘originality’, etc. is, like the language of the ‘space’, ‘nurse’, ‘place’, ‘gap’, or ‘mother’ of ideas (all terms Plato uses for *khôra* yet disavows), all wrong for what we mean yet all that we have. “This problem of rhetoric—particular of the possibility of naming—is...no mere side issues...It is perhaps because its scope goes beyond or falls short of the polarity of metaphorical sense versus proper sense that the thought of *khôra* exceeds the polarity...of the *mythos* and the *logos*” (Derrida, 1995, p. 92). Every declaration of what *inventio* is preceded and followed by caution, rubbing up against the limits of language of itself. When we use language to describe the origin of language—even in particular if not in general—we inevitably encounter the folding over of language, the point where language deconstructs itself,

where metaphor fails to do what Aristotle demands and guide us to a language proper to the object of discussion: namely a language proper to invention (Derrida, 1982).

Yet it is just as surely the case that we *do* encounter the new in rhetoric, the previously unknown in many terms of the word, the surprising development that might invoke the term ‘originality’, a sublime quality of work that exceeds our close, rational readings that seek to reveal a work’s pedestrian reliance on a network of prior ideas and linguistic structures and cultural contexts. How do we account for it? To grasp what is happening here, I suggest that we see the *khôra* not as space of inscribing the weight of history, culture, and the networked grid of identity on language but precisely as experience—an esoteric, strange, non-place defined by (as Derrida calls it) its ability to produce the idiomatic surprise.

3. KHÔRA AND THE PLACE OF COMPLETE SURPRISE

For Plato, the *khôra* is a place of mystery—a non-thing that is no place but where-in thing-ness is conferred by drawing on the form ideas. *Timaeus* reflects Plato’s reticence about the topic. In *khôra*, things are named and given labels but, as Plato says, “the point is that it’s hard to say, with any degree of reliability and stability, that any of them is such that it should be called ‘water’ rather than ‘fire’, of that any of them is such that it should be called by any particular name rather than by all four names.” For Plato all things come from a raw material and hence might be anything else until inscribed with the name in *khôra*. The *khôra*—like invention—is not that which is inscribed/invented but is instead something else, abstract and hard to describe. The *khôral* ‘process’ of inscribing, like the ‘process’ of invention, not really a process at all. To be specific, what happens in the *khôra*, when moving from Idea → Name, is utterly different from both the Idea and the Word.

Plato inability to describe what precisely the *khôra* is, despite being quite positive it exists as the third class of things after the Forms and the Material, reflects the folding of language in its limits and its invention. Plato demands that we acknowledge that *khôra* is a class of things, but understand it isn’t a thing but is space but it also isn’t a space that is anywhere. In it is everything and from it all emerges. But it is neither intelligible (Forms) nor sensible (Material) (Derrida, 1995, p. 96). *Khôra* is below the field of ideas, the realm of philosophy but above the natural or material (making it perfect for rhetoric [Caputo 1997b, p. 84]). Plato is also unable to describe what the *khôra* does to in order to write thing-ness and the name of material things onto them. Moreover, he admits that the names given to ideas are certainly not their *proper* names, no matter what he says in *Phaedrus*. Certainly, while a grasp of the *logos* may help guide our words, the ambiguity and arbitrariness of the *khôra* means we can never be certain we are using the *right words*, no matter how effective and splendid those words seem—after all, there are no words in the Forms. This is more than a *kairic* quality, where we search for the right words at the right time. Argument is always situated locally. Plato acknowledges as much in *Phaedrus*. But what Plato is saying that there are not even absolutely Right Words for the Right Time. The perfection of terminology and its

preciseness is always subject to erosion or deconstruction by another event of language.

It is precisely at this limit of language—the point at which language fails to operate in the way we want, the point which Derrida calls auto-deconstruction—that it comes clear that *khôra* is not a location or a process. It is an *event*; more particularly it is an event that manifests itself as the possibility of the completely new. As Derrida describes, “There is *khôra* but *the khôra* does not exist.” (1995, p. 97). The event of the *khôra*, is the event of language, constantly haunted by its own inability to ‘properly’ or eternally express meaning. *Khôra* is constantly happening, constantly inscribing, but it is not quite *right* and always revising or renewing itself. Of course, the need for renewal is born in the instability of experience itself, not an attempt to better get the Forms. Derrida has no expectation there is a formal meaning, in the way that Plato means, and that language represents it. Language is itself inhabits the realm of inadequacy—of requiring constant restatements which never quite entirely encompass the point, or alternatively, encompass a lot more than the point: “With its ceaseless re-launchings, its failures, its superimpositions, its overwritings and reprintings, this history wipes itself out in advance since it programs itself, reproduces itself, and reflects itself by anticipation” (Derrida, 1995, p. 99).

This isn’t to say that the problem is just that language is inadequate to represent objective reality, empirical or formal. Far from imagining language as merely inadequate at representation, language is, as Heidegger recognized a dwelling place for our own way of thinking of ourselves, and consequently, the space in which we create the other (Gross, 2005, p. 19). In language we do not merely express ideas but find and invent ourselves and others—hence, why hermeneutics involves invention just as much as writing or speaking involves invention. The event of *khôra* is the surprising event of ourselves and the other. These small inventions—the moment when we bump against the limit of language or ideas—are signals (“tip-offs” to use Caputo’s language) of something broader, of not just small surprises, or unique twists, or innovative phrasing, assemblies, or styles, but of the idea of the “newness.” Every small surprise, every event of everyday invention wherein something is made new by the *difference* of language, is linked back the possibility of a “new” itself—a possibility that lies within the potential of language as well as within its limit: “Deconstruction is nourished by a dream of invention of the other, of something to come, something absolutely unique and idiomatic, the invention, the in-coming, of an absolutely surprise event. Such a work would likewise involve the invention of its readers, the forming or constituting of a new community of readers around it, a community which does not exist—how could it?” (Caputo, 1997a, p. 70).

The irony is, of course, that is precisely because Being and language are both limited that both are unlimited. Being is not all that it might be, providing the opening for both other-ness and becoming. Language—where much of our formulation of Being resides—is limited by its context and the subject-position of ourselves and others, requiring that it also be unlimited, meeting the need of constant redescription and constant tailoring to place and time. The three things—the formulation of ourselves, the formulation of others, and the formulation of the

rhetoric which lies between us (including not just language, writ small, but all the elements of arrangement, style, delivery, and memory we normally think of when considering an argument and its presentation but are also invented) are deeply and fundamentally linked together. *Khôra*—Plato’s essential but indescribable non-place/non-thing—is his (and our) name for that emergent possibility of ourselves, others, and rhetoric. It is the opaque non-process of invention.

4. INVENTION AND DUE PROCESSES OF NON-PROCESS

The idea of invention that I am positing here is not so far away from what we already know about invention—a supplement, not a replacement. Perhaps unlike others in tradition I am working in, I am less apt to describe my criticisms of standard concepts on invention as a “radical criticism” or the like. In any case, the ‘processes’ of invention—the tips that we use to help writers and speakers and artists to come up with something to write, speak, and make—are of significant practical value. Sophisticated or at least well educated persons might even actually use more scholarly texts (like *The Realm of Rhetoric*) to actually come up with *loci* for argument, than at least in idea (to be slightly ironic). Deconstruction isn’t, in any case, the revealing of any particular secret of invention or anything but instead is the event of language itself—Plato knew the problem he was encountering in the *khôra* and attempted to solve it. We don’t deconstruct Plato or invention—they do those things themselves if we read them closely (Caputo, 1987, p. 170).

But for us, the question of ‘what invention is’ is related not just to how to come up with something to say in an essay, play, or speech, but how to we come up with, firstly, anything at all and secondly something unique. In some sense, our studies of invention likely suffer from the problem that inhibits invention itself—we remain overburdened by the history of studies in invention and more particular in the history of ideas themselves. There is no space to find anything ‘new.’ It is easy to pick apart “invention” and invented arguments to demonstrate how the elements of something that fit together well really aren’t new at all. We use a certain “purity” of invention to make invention seem impossible. If Kant demands that in true *inventio* we see something sublime that goes beyond mere learning, taste and methodology, there is always someone standing about ready to accuse an “invention” of being a mere collage of facsimiles of rhetoric that has all been used before rather than anything outside of that triad.

What *khôra* communicates to us is somewhat the opposite of the defensiveness about invention that is forwarded by several critics, who tend to seek lower expectations for it. Those who are defensive about invention tend to downplay the idea of “originality,” critiquing its relationship to a questionable subject-position and point out that what we consider to be invention are in fact a nodal point on a grid of historical contingencies. Young, for example, writes that his goal is create a situation where “rhetoric no longer has to feel apologetic for failing to measure up to the standard of originality that is central to the concept of discovery or creation” by emphasizing that “resummoning” of knowledge is as important as its creation. It is accurate to note that invention certainly demands that we pay close attention to convention and to recall because all rhetoric is traced to its

time and place. The new *is* intrinsically linked to the old and in most practical cases the inventive ‘processes’ we have created are an acknowledgement of that we are bounded. Caputo remarks:

The invention of the other requires first the conventions of the same in reference, to which one set out to find something contravening a counter-conventional, something transgressive of the horizon of legitimation. Transgression is the controlled contravention or invention, requiring the discipline of an already standing frame or horizon to transgress, which is why it is described as a “double gesture.” (1997b, p. 81)

Yet what Derrida and Caputo have to say about invention is not its *limitation* in the context of the horizon or the fact that all enactments of argument are bounded by the limits of the reality, but rather that our limits provide the possibility of the entirely new—the anticipation, the hope, the possibility of language emerging from the *khôra* which stuns us and overcomes us. The idea that invention is the “new” is not naïve, but instead the a reflection of an originality that, while it may never arrive, stands over and against the claims of historical, cultural, material, or idealistic determinism. We stand in danger of being trapped by both our idea of conventions and our critical view of conventions—i.e., we become trapped in both the idea that we must be original and in our debunking of originality. The *khôra* may be a boundary (Derrida suggests that Plato might mean it simply as ‘the cosmos’) but it is a boundary where anything may happen and always contains more. It is “bastard reasoning” (1978, p. 52) because it isn’t formally correct—it constantly lacks the ability to be the Idea. For rhetoric, our *khôra* is ‘language’ for it has no material existence but is the inscribement of language, including argument. Where does language exist? In language. Where does *khôra* exist? In *khôra*. Invention never provides the final arguments which permanently name and settle any issue, indeed, Aristotle says that rhetoric addresses that which is *not* certain. This, of course, frustrates Plato because it reflects *doxa* instead of *episteme*, but for those of us who have either given up on the Forms or, at least, the accessibility of the Forms, the bastardy of what emerges from the *khôra* ensures there is always more say and what is “new” never holds the quality of ‘new-ness’ an ontic position. The ‘new’ will eventually become the old. It undermines the entire static nature of the Platonic schema any schema that posits invention as discovery (Derrida, 1997, p. 18).

Thus we know the intervention of the ‘new’ into the conventions will, eventually, become conventional—precisely what demands more *khôral* events. *Khôra* is the ‘space’ of language—the space *in* language (of course, language has no space) in which surprise sneaks in—in which something which exceeds the horizons emerges (Caputo, 1987b, p. 103-104). It is the point in which we say something that surprises even ourselves or hear something surprising, that hasn’t been said that way before. Conventions must be taken seriously. They are the framework of culture. Yet an appreciation of this quality of *inventio* ensures we never take our conventions too seriously, lest we foreclose the possibility of new-ness in argument itself and begin to believe that in argument there is nothing new under the sun.

5. CONCLUSION

This essay has noted that argumentative invention is frequently tied to a certain metaphor of territory and space. Invention is the process of “hunting” down ideas that are likely to build conviction, belief or doubt in the audience. We gather these intelligible Ideas and fill up the space in which Idea is inscribed to sensible materiality. The *khôra* is this space, filled up by ideas ready to be converted to sensible words. Despite the significant difference in approach, the spatialization of invention can be found across the history of rhetoric and in contemporary descriptions of argument. In some sense, all these uses of the spatial metaphor reflect the premise that material for arguments is laying *somewhere out there* waiting to be found; there are *proper* topics for argument to be discovered either deductively or empirically and sorted in the process of rhetorical invention. Certainly, the “discovery” trope is not the only one used to explain invention. Others posit the idea of “creation” or “innovation” rather than “searching.” Yet many critics are skeptical of both, positing a position between both, sometimes even ironically denying both the metaphor of bounded space and the concept of “creation” while locating invention somewhere between the poles.

It is in the enigmatic problem of space in invention, however, that we begin to understand invention overall. The *khôral* qualities of language—its non-thing-ness and status as a container which holds everything and nothing specific—that gives us clue to what possibilities language holds. *Khôra* inscribes thing-ness to language in a way that we cannot understand and we do not necessarily expect. *Khôra* fundamentally reflects not only the lack of completeness of ourselves, and hence, our language but also the fact that completeness is a feature alien to language. The spatial metaphor—linked to the weakness of rhetorical invention and its secondary status in comparison to the dialectic or empirical processes—is the point where we achieve ultimate invention. In language, we invent ourselves, we invent the other, and in that, we invent argument. Yet none of these things is static—all are emergent because Being is emergent. *Khôra* is the promise of the “new” that stands against the old, against which we measure all our limited inventions and creations. It tells us that there is always more to say. We can always say more. When we formulate arguments we do not merely represent ideas we’ve hunted down or even created—we are creating them and they reveal themselves to us as revelations of ourselves.

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