

Ethics and Cities with Quill R. Kukla

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Gin Boheme]

Christiane: How much does the place where you live affect your behavior or your values? And how much could you affect the place where you live? Answering these questions on the show today is Quill Kukla. Their book *City Living* explores the symbiotic relationship between cities and the people who live in them.

Quill R. Kukla: ...who we are, how we perceive, how we experience safety and danger, the choices we make, all of those basic facts about us are shaped by the material spaces that we are in and that we're negotiating, and conversely, that we shape our material spaces. We don't just passively live in them. We rebuild them and work on them and creatively intervene on them in order to make them what we need them to be, in order to make them livable spaces for us.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Quill Kukla, we're here to discuss your book, *City Living*. This book sits at the intersection between philosophy, ethics, and geography. Briefly describe for us what you're doing in this book and why you took up this topic.

Quill R. Kukla: As to the why I took up this topic, honestly, for a long time now, I've had difficulty writing philosophy about anything that doesn't personally engage and concern me in an extremely personal, concrete way. I tend to think of my philosophical work as almost egocentric because I write about whatever is mattering to me in my life. So, earlier in my career, I wrote about pregnancy and early motherhood because that was the stage of life I was in, and that's always been my trajectory. And I just realized at a certain point that cities, and exploring cities and thinking about the logic of cities is really the thing that makes me happiest outside of my job.

I really just got to a point where I thought, well, why shouldn't I write about what I care about and what I love? So, that's the answer to how I got there. I also think that writing about urbanization right now is particularly important because the world is urbanizing incredibly quickly. And because cities are both the source of and the target of a lot of the threats that are most

important right now, like climate change. So thinking about how to make cities viable places to live is an incredibly pressing thing for us to be doing with our time.

As to what I'm doing in the book, the book really centers around a quite simple thesis, and that's right there in the title. And that's the idea that urban dwellers and urban spaces make or co-constitute one another, that who we are, how we perceive, how we experience safety and danger, the choices we make, all of those basic facts about us are shaped by the material spaces that we are in and that we're negotiating, and conversely, that we shape our material spaces. We don't just passively live in them. We rebuild them and work on them and creatively intervene on them in order to make them what we need them to be, in order to make them livable spaces for us. So, the spaces that we live in and the people that live in those spaces are in a symbiotic relationship of making one another. That's the basic core insight of the book. And then I explored that in a lot of philosophical and a lot of empirical detail. So, a lot of philosophical detail, talking about what that meant for the nature of selfhood and agency, that we are fundamentally planted in space in this way, and empirically looking at how particular cities actually come to have the shape that they have through this process of mutual making between the material spaces and the people who live there.

Christiane: One example that you write about early on in your book is the idea that people who live in cities are more open to diversity and inclusion. You write that that's not because people who are naturally attracted to those things move to cities, although they might, but it's because living in the city changes their values and their behaviors.

Quill R. Kukla: Yeah. So, to be clear, that's a hypothesis that I have that I can't prove, and I try to make it plausible. What we do know for sure, and this is well supported by tons of data, is that on average, people who live in cities are farther left politically, are more open to diversity, are more tolerant of difference, value inclusion and diversity more. That much we know. We don't have any proof of the complicated directions of causality there. So I can't say for certain that living in a city makes you be more that way, rather than that people who are more that way choose to live in cities.

But one of the things I try to do in the book is make that hypothesis plausible by showing the way that living in complicated, chaotic, diverse spaces, where we're up against strangers and bumping into them all of the time and negotiating with them about how we're going to use space changes our perceptions of safety, order, aesthetic pleasure, and many of these other things that determine our values and our sense of comfort in a space so that we end up just feeling more comfortable in and valuing more diverse spaces and spaces that have more interpersonal complexity of all sorts than you get in the suburbs, say.

Christiane: In what other ways might living in a city change somebody's behavior or maybe change their values?

Quill R. Kukla: So for example, I think that people who don't live up next to a lot of people who come from different linguistic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds will tend to hear foreign accents and perceive foreign ways of moving and using personal space and eye contact, and even dressing and eating and things like that, as threatening because they are fundamentally unknown or unparsable. And when you live in a city and you move through neighborhoods with different sorts of people and so on, first of all, you just develop a much larger repertoire of being able to make sense of and understand what you're seeing when you run into different kinds of people. But even when you can't, you're less likely to associate difference with unmanageability and threateningness, right?

So, difference no longer shows up and complexity no longer shows up as something that is overwhelming. You can often see this actually happening. You can watch people who are visiting cities and who aren't used to them trying to do something like negotiate the subway and literally get kind of paralyzed. They can't move because they're overwhelmed by the sensory complexity of what's going on around them, and they don't know how to sort out what they're seeing. And when you don't know how to physically, at the level of the body, parse and negotiate and move through the space around you, it's not surprising that it becomes threatening, right? So, we learn these skills at the very deep bodily level.

Now, you asked how that translates into values. And I don't have a full theory of how we have the values that we have, but I do think that a lot of times what gives us pleasure and shows up as valuable to us is deeply linked with what makes us feel at home. I think city dwellers tend to be at home in a level of complexity and unpredictability and diversity that other people aren't at home in. And so that becomes a value because it feels homelike. It feels like what your body expects out of the environment around you.

Christiane: So, you mentioned feeling at home. So, I'm going to skip ahead of my questions a little bit and talk about the ways that you write about territory and how that relates to gentrification. Really quickly, for anyone who's got a kind of unclear idea of what gentrification is, could you just lay that out for us, and then kind of explain what your intervention is in writing about gentrification?

Quill R. Kukla: There's lots of theories of exactly what gentrification is, so anything I say is going to annoy some subset of geographers and sociologists. But very roughly, gentrification is the process by which a neighborhood that is inhabited by poor people, who are often people of color or people of a particular ethnicity, becomes attractive to wealthier, usually whiter people who start to buy up the residences and take over the businesses in that neighborhood, so that slowly over time, it transforms into a wealthier, whiter neighborhood that has services that serve that newer influx of residents. And just gradually, the neighborhood transforms from a poorer, usually less white neighborhood into a wealthier, usually more white neighborhood. And oftentimes, part of what attracts the wealthier, whiter residents to the neighborhood is the fact that the property was relatively cheap and that there was a lot of diversity there and character there, but that diversity and character often gets killed off by the process of gentrification.

So there have been many, many, many studies of what gentrification is, why it happens, what exactly happens during gentrification. It's been studied from the point of view of economics, from the point of view of geography, from the point of view of sociology and anthropology, and probably other disciplines that I'm forgetting. I did not want to try to intervene on that giant literature about the mechanisms of gentrification, so my interest in gentrification in the book was very specific.

I wanted to ask how, at the level of the body and at the level of how we experience and move through and occupy space, does the process of gentrification affect us? How does it affect the original residents of the neighborhood? And how does it affect the new residents of the neighborhood? And then more specifically within that, I was particularly interested in still at that level of the body, how different groups of people in a gentrifying neighborhood, original residents and newer residents, and so forth can end up struggling with one another over territory. So, spaces within the gentrifying neighborhood that serve as territories for one group come to be co-opted by another group, or both groups will be trying to use the space for different things in different ways at the same time. And I was interested in this embodied experience of struggle over territory.

And the last thing I'll mention that I was particularly interested in is the way that a gentrifying neighborhood can displace its original residents, not just in the traditional way where they actually literally have to leave the neighborhood because they can't afford it, although that happens too, but displace them in the sense that it is really no longer their place. They just literally don't experience themselves as in their place anymore in the neighborhood. They've been made into strangers and foreigners and unwanted outsiders in their own neighborhood. So even if they're still living there, they may feel like they have no territory or nothing they can do with their bodies that's comfortable anymore, or no spaces that suit their needs. And they can find themselves experientially displaced in their own neighborhood, even if they aren't literally physically displaced.

Christiane: I think one of your most compelling examples of that happening is a group of Hispanic men grilling on their front porch and talking and listening to music, right? When they were in the original version of that neighborhood, that's a fun, normal thing. But once that neighborhood starts to become gentrified, without the men's behavior changing at all, it suddenly becomes a threat, and it suddenly becomes something worth calling the cops for. And that's related to an idea that you talk about called revanchism. Am I saying that right?

Quill Kukla: Yeah.

Christiane: So, what is revanchism? And how does it change the way that city dwellers behave?

Quill R. Kukla: Yeah, so revanchism isn't my notion. I'm mostly using it in the sense that it's used by theorists of gentrification, including Neil Smith in particular. It's the idea that we actually

want to—"we" being wealthy white people—actually want to stamp out and punish people and behaviors that don't fit how we see our neighborhoods. So, it's not just that we are just going about our business and we happen to have more money, so because we have more market power, our desires for how the neighborhood should look and develop tend to win out, although that's also true and that's an important part of the motor of gentrification, but it's also that we are actively uncomfortable with and want to denigrate, punish, and eliminate elements of the neighborhood that don't fit what we want it to become.

And you see this, even with people who think of themselves as very liberal, very tolerant, very anti-racist, that they will say, "Oh, I love that this neighborhood is diverse. I value diversity," but then those are the same people who are calling the cops on their neighbors when their neighbors don't happen to have the exact same sense of what an appropriate noise level on a Friday evening is as they do, which is a cultural difference. It's not a difference of absolute morality or anything like that. They actually want to use a carceral approach to getting rid of any elements of the neighborhood that don't fit the kind of neighborhood that they want it to be.

So, that's what revanchism is, and we see it over and over again. And I love that example that you brought up as well, because what seems powerful about it to me is, here are these people in the neighborhood using their bodies in ways that have been comfortable for them to use their bodies for a very long time, and all of the sudden the very same uses of space and the very same uses of their body become something transgressive and aggressive and resistant, and they find themselves making some sort of statement just by doing the thing that they were doing all along. So, the space around them has changed and it changes the significance of what they're doing with their bodies in this way that is deeply alienating, and I think unjust.

Christiane: We're going to shift here from talking about sort of behaviors and the way that the cities might change us as people and talk about what it means to have a right to a city and how cities ought to be designed. So yeah, what does it mean to have a right to the city?

Quill R. Kukla: Geographers for a few decades have talked about this idea of the right to the city. And there isn't really a lot of uniformity in terms of what they mean by that, right? In the broadest sense, the right to the city is something like right of access to the city, but it's not clear what kind of access is meant there. And I interpret the right to the city as most usefully being what I call the right to actually inhabit the city, which means not just the right to literally physically stay in there or be contained by it, but the right to actually live your life and use spaces in ways that allow you to be at home in the city and to have territory in the city.

The right to the city for me is the right of everybody who lives in the city, not just to not get kicked out of it or lose their home, though that's important too, but the right to actually have what I call spatial agency within the city, to have mobility, to have access to territory, to be able to live there and feel like an insider to some of the spaces in the city. And I mean, you might ask why that's right. Why should everybody have the right to that? And I think that there's two different kinds of answers, one of which interests me much more in the book. The standard kind of answer is that it's important that people get to have control over where they are because where

you are instrumentally determines a lot of other important things about you. So for example, geographers and urban planners love to trot out the statistic that the zip code you live in is more predictive of your lifespan than almost any other feature of you, more so than your race, more so than your gender, more so than your income, right?

If you want to predict how long somebody's going to live, their zip code is the best predictor of that. Where you live also determines things like what access to schools you have, which in turn determines how much wealth and class mobility you're likely to have later in life. Where you live determines things like whether you're in a food desert and whether you have access to good quality, nutritious, affordable food or not, which in turn determines all sorts of things about your long term health. The easy answer is that the right of access to cities and the right of mobility and space matters because where you are determines all sorts of other things that we think are ethically important.

I want to make the stronger claim that that kind of mobility and agency and territorialization in space is an intrinsic good in itself, that it's not just because it serves other ethical ends that it's good, but that because we are embodied and placed beings whose entire existence is about being a body in space, that the ability to actually feel at home in our spaces, to shape our spaces, to have a role in determining those spaces, and to be able to move between spaces is just a basic axis of bodily self-determination and of freedom in the most fundamental sense.

So, even if it weren't true that our spatial access determined things like our health and our longevity and our wealth, which it does, and that's important, even if all of that weren't true, just the ability to use space freely and move our body in space freely and feel at home in the spaces that we're in is just as fundamental as anything is to our sense of flourishing as an embodied being. And so that's why the right to the city is important to me. Not that everybody has to be in cities, but if you are going to be in a city, being able to live in it and flourish in it and have spatial agency within it is a fundamental need I want to claim.

Christiane: What are some examples of folks who aren't always made to feel at home or aren't always able to access cities? And what might we do to begin addressing that problem?

Quill R. Kukla: Probably the most obvious example is that we as a culture, at least in the United States don't allow young black men to have almost any comfortable territory, right? Anywhere they go, if they're just literally standing there, just literally standing there, that becomes read culturally as some sort of threat, as requiring surveillance, as requiring possible intervention, as requiring possibly applying loitering, anti-loitering laws to them, right? Their bodies are open to police surveillance and control in a way that other people's bodies are not. And so if you are a young black man, it is very hard to just literally be in a space without having people constantly, suspiciously eyeing you, surveying you, maybe even calling the cops on you, questioning what you're doing in the space, questioning your right to be in the space, and so forth.

Again, the point isn't that they're not literally allowed to be there. We got rid of the literal segregation laws that we used to have that said that young black men can't be in physical

spaces, but they are displaced from those spaces, even though they're legally allowed to be in them, because they aren't allowed to be at home in them or use them or relax in them. So, that's probably the example that has the most current visibility, especially because when they are seen as misusing space, they're often literally shot and killed by police, right? So, it can be a deadly mistake.

I'll just give one more example, because it's a different sort of example, the problem of bodies with nonstandard shapes or capacities. So, disabled bodies, fat bodies, and so on often find that they're just in spaces that are not built for the kind of bodies that they have. And the spaces that are built for their capacities are often very rigid and limited, and so they're very restricted in terms of how they can be used. So they find themselves streamed into spaces with very narrow and not particularly agency-enhancing uses.

In terms of what we can do about it, I don't have well-developed, full theories about how we can solve these kinds of problems of spatial agency. I do think that there's a role for urban planners in the sense that we need to actually plan spaces that can be territories for different kinds of people. But the problem is there's only so much you can do through urban planning, because spaces that are over-planned and planned top-down tend to be overly rigid and not really allow for spatial agency and repurposing and rebuilding of those spaces. So, we need to do urban planning, but we need to do it with a light touch. We need to create spaces where different kinds of people feel comfortable and can come together, but then we need to allow their agency and creativity to take over at a certain point so that they can rebuild the spaces into what they want them to be.

For all groups of people, I think it's important that we have spaces not only that we can use, but where we can express our creativity and remake them to our needs and turn them into the kind of territories that we want to have. So, urban planning, but with a light hand. And I'm really inspired here by Jane Jacobs, who has this idea that the point of urban planning is basically to hand the city back over to the people who live in it so that they can make it what they want it to be. So, we need to plan cities just enough to allow people to take over, but we need to be careful to plan them in such a way so that it's not just the people who have the market power and the money that take over and rebuild the cities, right? We need to make spaces for different kinds of people who don't normally have agency in the city so that they can be creative in spaces as well.

Christiane: You talk about, in other chapters, what happens with dog parks, right?

Quill R. Kukla: Yeah.

Christiane: A park that was once just a park for people and their pets becomes a space that is just for dogs, or that maybe makes people who don't like dogs uncomfortable and shuts them out. How can we ensure that the changing of the space isn't then exclusionary? Or is that okay?

Quill R. Kukla: Yeah. I mean, this is one of the things that I insist on in the book that I think is the most controversial, is oftentimes people who are worried about building an inclusive city, which is something that I'm very concerned with, assume that what that means is that the whole city needs to be inclusive for everybody. That's just a natural interpretation of this idea of the inclusive city. And one of the things that I defend very strongly that I think not everybody is going to like is the idea that not every space in the city has to be for everybody because territorialization is a basic need. We all need territories where we are insiders and not everybody is an insider, where we can build community along various lines. Not every insider territory has to be everybody's insider territory. So, a certain amount of exclusionary result here is something that I'm willing to live with.

But what is important is that every kind of person who lives in the city, every kind of person, including homeless people, including children, including everybody, has not just one rigidly designated little territory where they're allowed to be that has strict rules, but has lots of different kinds of territories open to them, and at least some of those have to be territories where they can express their creativity over the space and make that space their own in various ways. So, yeah, some amount of exclusionaryness is going to come along the way, but what you have to make sure is that it's not the same people who are being excluded over and over and over and over again, right? So, one of my favorite examples from the book is, down the street from my DC home, there's a black barber shop. It's only for black men.

That is never going to be my territory. I don't belong in that space. And I think it's valuable as a space that is a home turf for that community. So, is it exclusionary? I mean, in some sense. There isn't any formal rule saying that other people can't go there, so it's not literally formally exclusionary, but it's clearly an insider territory for a particular community. And I think that's fine. We should cherish places like that. And it would be inappropriately entitled of me to feel put out by the fact that I'm made to feel like an outsider in that space, right? My other home is Berlin, and down the street for me in Berlin, there are Turkish coffee shops, basically for the Turkish immigrant community in Berlin. Same thing, those coffee shops are not for me. They serve as important sources of at-homeness, territory, community, insider uses of space.

The problem is that as soon as we admit that spaces can be exclusionary, it tends to be the same people who get excluded again and again and again, because it tends to be the people who have a combination of money and social capital or social power who get to define how spaces get used. And so we need to be protecting spaces for different kinds of people, but I don't think that the goal is to make all spaces maximally inclusionary.

Christiane: You write about something called a third place. What is a third place, and why is it important for city living?

Quill R. Kukla: Third places for me are absolutely essential to having a flourishing urban life. "Third places," it's a term that comes from Ray Oldenberg from the eighties. It's not my term, but the idea is that a third place is a place that is neither your home space nor your place of

business or your school, which serves as a kind of a territory that is a point of community and socializing that doesn't fit neatly into either the public or the private, right? So, prime examples of third places are places like coffee shops, bars, barber shops, but almost anything can be a third place. I talk in the book about how the platform of the Eglinton subway station in Toronto was a third place for teenagers when I was a kid. It's just any place where there is an informal playful kind of socializing that goes on and where there are informal insiders and outsiders, and the insiders feel that this place is a place where they have community, agency and insider status.

And it seems to me that part of being at home in a city and having the right to the city and the sense of really inhabiting the city that we talked about earlier is having access to at least some kind of third place. That basically, if you're just moving through the city by going from home to work and back again, without feeling like you have community anywhere else, that is not how most of us have flourishing urban lives. And one of the things that I think is a pressing ethical issue that really nobody talks about is that some neighborhoods are third place deserts. They just have no third places that are available to their residents, through some combination of, they may be too economically poor to support the right kinds of businesses to be third places, but also when people try to make third places they're out of vacant lots or parks or corner bodegas or whatever it may be, the revanchism that we talked about earlier kicks in and people call the cops on them or use anti-loitering laws on them or don't allow them to use the place.

So, people are not given the social power to create third places in their own neighborhood out of whatever they can find. And it seems to me that it's been an urban planning priority to make sure that people are housed. It's been an economic priority to make sure that people have jobs, but people just don't talk about it as being a human rights priority to make sure that all neighborhoods provide third places for their residents, which seem to me to be just absolutely essential to a good quality urban life, particularly because in cities, we don't do most of our living at home. Home spaces tend to be small, and we tend to be organized out into the city in terms of how we live our life.

But if once we leave our home, we have nowhere we can go where we feel like it's our place and where we're connecting with other people, that's a fundamental form of alienation from the city that we're living in. So, it seems to me to be a pressing political and urban-planning priority to make sure that people have the capacity to create and sustain third places. And this is something that I think is getting very little discussion.

[Interview ends]

[music: Latché Swing, Songe D'Automne]

Christiane: Quill Kukla is so smart and has so many amazing thoughts that I wasn't able to pack them all in here. If you want to hear some bonus material from the show, you can find it at prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics. You can also find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode. Again, that's all available at prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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