

The Geography of Becoming: Thirdspace, Family Systems, and Transformative Learning in Tara Westover's *Educated*

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Abstract

This study offers a close reading of Tara Westover's memoir *Educated* (2018) through an interdisciplinary framework that joins Edward Soja's spatial theory of Thirdspace with family systems theory, transformative learning theory, and contemporary trauma and posttraumatic growth scholarship. Rather than treating the protagonist's upbringing as a case study in any particular belief system, the paper approaches her isolated rural childhood, her labor in a family scrapyard, and her eventual departure for formal schooling as a problem of space, family structure, and psychological development. Drawing on Soja's distinction between Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace, the study traces how Buck's Peak is produced, conceived, and ultimately reimagined as the narrator moves from an undifferentiated family unit toward what Murray Bowen calls differentiation of self. Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory illuminates how formal education functions less as the acquisition of facts than as a disorienting dilemma that restructures the narrator's frame of reference, while Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery, Rachel Pain's concept of geotrauma, and Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun's model of posttraumatic growth account for the psychological costs and gains of that transformation. The paper argues that *Educated* dramatizes a sustained act of self-authorship in which space, family, and learning are inseparably entangled, and proposes this combined framework as a model for reading contemporary memoir that foregrounds psychological and spatial explanation over biographical description.

Keywords: Thirdspace, family systems, transformative learning, posttraumatic growth, memoir studies, spatial trauma

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Introduction

Tara Westover's *Educated: A Memoir* (2018) narrates a young woman's passage from an isolated upbringing on a mountain in rural Idaho to a doctorate from Cambridge University, tracing how she comes to understand her family, her home, and herself through the lens of formal education. Since its publication, the memoir has generated a substantial body of scholarship reading it through trauma theory, psychoanalytic identity theory, and feminist criticism (Weisel-Barth, 2019; Robillard, 2019; Xu & Liu, 2021; Li, 2025). What remains comparatively underexplored is a sustained account of how space and family structure operate together as the conditions under which the narrator's psychological transformation becomes possible, and how that transformation is best understood as a gradual process of learning rather than a single dramatic break.

This paper addresses that gap by reading *Educated* through four interlocking frameworks: Edward Soja's notion of Thirdspace, Murray Bowen's family systems theory, Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and a cluster of trauma-and-growth scholarship comprising Judith Herman's stages of recovery, Rachel Pain's concept of geotrauma, and Tedeschi and Calhoun's posttraumatic growth theory. Soja's spatial triad allows the physical mountain, the family's internal conception of that mountain, and the narrator's eventually reimagined relationship to it to be analyzed as three distinct but interacting layers of meaning (Soja, 1996). Bowen's concept of differentiation of self gives a precise vocabulary for what the narrator is doing when she begins to think independently of her family's shared emotional system without severing connection outright (Bowen, 1978). Mezirow's theory reframes "getting educated" not as content acquisition but as a structural change in how she interprets experience: a disorienting dilemma followed by critical reflection and a revised frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). The trauma and growth literature, finally, accounts for both the cost of leaving and the constructive outcome that the narrator herself names, near the end of the memoir, as an education (Herman, 1997; Pain, 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

❖ Aim and Objectives

This research aims to read *Educated* as a single, sustained case of spatial and psychological self-formation. It examines how the family home is produced, conceived, and lived as three distinct spatial registers; how the family functions as an emotional system from which the narrator must differentiate; how her formal

schooling operates as a transformative learning process; and how trauma, memory, and growth are reconstructed across the narrative.

❖ **Rationale**

Existing scholarship on this memoir tends to isolate single variables — trauma, identity, gender, illness, narrative form — without examining how spatial experience, family structure, and educational transformation function as one connected system. A combined framework drawing on current spatial, family-systems, and adult-learning theory offers a fuller account of how the narrator's transformation actually proceeds and situates this single-text study within active, ongoing scholarly conversation about memoir, space, and psychological development.

❖ **Methodology**

This is a qualitative, library-based study employing close textual analysis of the primary text alongside verified secondary scholarship. Passages are selected for their bearing on space, family dynamics, education, and psychological change. Brief textual evidence is cited sparingly and only where exact wording matters; plot, character, and event are otherwise discussed in paraphrase.

❖ **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study is restricted to a single primary text and does not undertake comparative analysis with other memoirs. It draws on secondary scholarship located through academic databases and excludes sources that could not be independently verified.

Review of the Literature

Scholarship on *Educated* clusters around several recurring concerns: trauma, family-of-origin dynamics, identity formation, and the meaning of education itself. Xu and Liu (2021) read the narrator's psychological development through trauma theory, arguing that two childhood conditions, an overbearing parental authority and an abusive sibling relationship, generate trauma symptoms that persist into adulthood and that recovery proceeds through identifiable stages: establishing safety, processing memory, and reconnecting with others (pp. 51–53). Their reading is valuable for isolating domestic abuse, rather than any single ideological cause, as the operative source of harm, and this paper extends that emphasis by adding a

spatial dimension Xu and Liu do not pursue: where, specifically, that trauma is held, and how place itself participates in both injury and recovery.

Robillard (2019) approaches the same family dynamic from a different angle, arguing that sibling violence is systematically minimized in cultural discourse as ordinary "rivalry," which delays both the victim's own recognition of abuse and any external intervention. Reading the narrator's relationship with her older brother alongside a comparable memoir, Robillard demonstrates that physical intimidation between siblings can constitute domestic violence in the fullest sense, with effects on trust and intimacy that persist well beyond childhood. This paper draws on Robillard's framing of sibling abuse as a structural family-system problem rather than an isolated incident, which aligns naturally with Bowen's (1978) account of the family as an interconnected emotional unit.

Weisel-Barth's (2019) psychoanalytic review situates the narrator's father as an authoritarian, paranoid, and survivalist figure whose worldview organizes the household's relationship to the outside world, and whose charisma and rigidity together produce a family climate of fear and uncritical obedience. The review is useful for the present study chiefly for its psychological vocabulary, authoritarianism, paranoia, survivalism, which this paper adopts in place of doctrinal description, since the same family dynamic can be fully accounted for in terms of personality and family structure without reference to any specific belief system.

Li's (2025) recent study applies a cluster of mid-century psychoanalytic theories, drawing on Karen Horney's account of neurosis as a product of early relational deprivation, Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality, Erich Fromm's concept of "productive love," and Erik Erikson's stage theory of identity formation (Erikson, 1950), to trace how the narrator's sense of self is damaged within the family and gradually repaired through academic relationships at university (pp. 733–741). Li identifies a recurring mirror motif across the narrative as a marker of identity transition, and reads the protagonist's eventual estrangement from her family not as a rejection of any one value system but as the achievement of what Erikson calls positive identity, a self no longer dependent on external labels for its stability (pp. 740–741). This paper shares Li's interest in identity formation but reorients it spatially: where Li tracks the self through relationships, the present

study tracks the self through the spaces those relationships occur in and the family system that produces them.

Jadoon, Kamran, and Sarfraz (2020) read the memoir as a feminist narrative of marginality, emphasizing how the protagonist's gender shapes both the restrictions placed on her within the household and the particular obstacles she encounters once she leaves it. Ishaq et al. (2024), more recently, apply Erikson's framework directly to argue that the narrator's repeated identity crises across adolescence and early adulthood resolve into a stable, autonomous identity only after sustained academic engagement, a finding that aligns closely with the transformative learning model developed in this paper. Finally, in an interview conducted shortly after the memoir's publication, the author herself describes the experience of writing the book as a process of "freeing herself from her own stories," and notes that family members who remained in contact helped her verify the accuracy of certain memories, an account that lends the memoir's claims to factual recovery a degree of external corroboration (Vanderhoof, 2018).

Taken together, this literature establishes trauma, family dynamics, and identity as the three dominant lenses through which *Educated* has been read. What it has not yet done, and what this paper undertakes, is to integrate a sustained spatial framework with family systems theory and adult learning theory so that the physical and conceived geography of the family home, the structure of the family as an emotional system, and the mechanics of the narrator's educational transformation can be analyzed as a single, continuous process rather than three separate critical projects.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four bodies of theory: Edward Soja's spatial theory of Thirdspace, Murray Bowen's family systems theory, Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and a cluster of trauma and posttraumatic growth scholarship. Each section below establishes the relevant concepts before they are applied in Chapter Four.

Edward Soja's Notion of Thirdspace. **Soja's Thirdspace:** *Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996) builds on Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad to argue that every space carries at least three simultaneous dimensions of meaning.

Firstspace is the material, measurable environment: the physical structure of a place as it can be mapped and built. Secondspace is the conceived dimension: the mental and ideological understanding that planners, authorities, or, in a domestic setting, parents impose on a space and the people within it. Thirdspace is the lived dimension, the space as it is actually experienced and given personal meaning by the individuals who inhabit it, a meaning that is, in Soja's words, "simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical" (1996, p. 65). Soja describes the lived space as one in which "everything comes together," subjectivity and objectivity, structure and agency, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary (1996, p. 57), and he argues that those who genuinely inhabit a space can "actively transform" its inherited meaning (1996, p. 67) through a process he calls thirding, which breaks the binary opposition between a space's physical form and its official conception and opens room for an alternative, individually authored meaning. As Meskell-Brocken (2020) summarizes, Thirdspace is "a space of reimagining and recreation" in which power hierarchies embedded in a place can be challenged and reworked by those who live within it (pp. 244–245). Applied to a domestic setting, this framework allows a family home to be read simultaneously as a physical structure, an ideological project imposed by parental authority, and a space whose ultimate meaning is authored, and can be re-authored, by the people who grow up inside it.

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory: Bowen's family systems theory, developed across the 1950s and consolidated in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (1978), treats the family not as a collection of separate individuals but as a single emotional unit in which anxiety, behavior, and even thought patterns circulate and reinforce one another across generations. The theory's central construct is differentiation of self: the capacity to remain a thinking, autonomous individual while still remaining emotionally connected to one's family. Members of a family with low differentiation tend toward emotional fusion, in which individual judgment is absorbed into the family's shared anxiety and a single dominant figure's perceptions become the household's perceptions. Members with higher differentiation are able to hold an independent position under pressure without either capitulating to the family's emotional climate or cutting off contact entirely. Bowen's framework is particularly suited to a family organized around one parent's strong, anxiety-driven worldview, since it allows the household's collective distrust of outside institutions, its rigid roles, and its difficulty tolerating dissent to be read as features of an emotional system rather than as the personal failing of any one

member, and it gives precise vocabulary to the distinct task a child raised in such a system faces: not rejection of the family, but differentiation from it.

Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory: Mezirow's transformative learning theory, most concisely set out in "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice" (1997), describes adult learning as a process that can restructure a person's entire frame of reference rather than simply add to their stock of information. The process typically begins with what Mezirow calls a disorienting dilemma, an experience that cannot be absorbed into the learner's existing assumptions and therefore forces a period of critical self-examination. This is followed by critical reflection on the assumptions that produced the original frame of reference, exploration of new roles and relationships, the building of competence in unfamiliar domains, and eventually a reintegration of experience into a new, more inclusive frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, pp. 5–9). Mezirow places particular weight on rational discourse with others as the mechanism through which a learner tests and revises these new perspectives, and he insists that the goal of adult education is to produce "autonomous, socially responsible thinkers" rather than passive recipients of instruction (Mezirow, 1997, p. 12). This model offers a precise alternative to thinking of "becoming educated" as the simple acquisition of facts: it treats formal schooling as a structured sequence of disorientation, reflection, and reintegration, a sequence that maps with unusual clarity onto a narrator who enters a classroom for the first time as a young adult.

Trauma, Geotrauma, and Posttraumatic Growth: Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) describes recovery from chronic interpersonal trauma as proceeding through three broad stages: establishing safety, remembering and mourning what was lost or endured, and reconnecting with ordinary life and other people. Herman's model resists the idea that trauma is simply forgotten or resolved; instead, recovery is an active, often nonlinear process of integration. Rachel Pain's (2021) more recent concept of geotrauma extends this insight spatially, arguing that trauma is not located only in the mind and body but is held in the "social, environmental and structural contexts around us" (p. 974), so that particular places can function as memorial sites, sites of retraumatization, or sites of healing depending on how survivors are able to reposition themselves in relation to that place over time (pp. 972–975). Finally, Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) theory of posttraumatic growth proposes that highly challenging life crises can, through sustained cognitive processing, produce genuine positive change rather than mere

recovery to a prior baseline, including, among its documented domains, a deepened appreciation for life, more meaningful relationships with others, an increased sense of personal strength, and the recognition of new possibilities (pp. 1–3). Read together, these three frameworks allow the narrator's psychological trajectory to be tracked not simply as injury followed by healing, but as injury, held in a specific place, that is gradually transformed into a more complex form of strength.

Discourse Analysis

Firstspace: The Material Geography of Buck's Peak. Soja's (1996) Firstspace, the physical structure of an environment as it can be mapped and measured, is established early and insistently in the memoir. The mountain itself, the family's scrapyard, and the house at its base form a tightly bounded material world largely cut off from the institutions, public schools, hospitals, and government offices that structure most childhoods in the surrounding region. The narrator's labor in the junkyard is described in physically exacting terms, and the absence of routine medical care is treated as an ordinary fact of daily life rather than an exception. This material environment is not incidental scenery; it is the literal ground on which the family's authority is exercised, since a household with no birth certificates on file, no school registration, and no medical records is, in the most basic sense, invisible to the structures that would otherwise have some claim on how its children are raised.

Secondspace: The Family's Conceived World. Layered onto this physical environment is a Secondspace, the conceived, ideological understanding of what the mountain and the household mean (Soja, 1996). The family's worldview holds that catastrophe is imminent and that mainstream institutions, schools, hospitals, and government agencies cannot be trusted to protect them when it arrives; survival depends instead on self-sufficiency and continuous preparation. This conceived space is reinforced through everyday domestic ritual, from food storage to home remedies for serious injuries, and it is this ideological layer, rather than the mountain's physical features, that produces the household's deep suspicion of outside knowledge. Crucially, this Secondspace is not equally available to interrogation by every family member; it is authored chiefly by one parent and accepted, with varying degrees of internal resistance, by the rest of the household, which is precisely the dynamic Bowen's (1978) theory is built to explain.

An Undifferentiated Family System: Read through Bowen's (1978) framework, the household functions as a low-differentiation emotional system organized around a single authoritative figure whose anxieties about the outside world become, in effect, the family's shared reality. The father's conviction that public institutions threaten the family is rarely challenged from within; even visible injuries are managed by avoiding hospitals, and any member who begins to question the family's premises is treated as a threat to the unit's stability rather than as an individual exercising independent judgment. The mother's role in this system is one of accommodation: she defers to her husband's authority on matters from medical care to the children's daily activities, a pattern of fusion in which her own perceptions become difficult to distinguish from his. The narrator's gradual willingness to ask questions her parents do not ask, beginning with small acts of curiosity and escalating into open disagreement, constitutes the earliest visible sign of differentiation, the capacity Bowen describes as remaining a distinct, thinking individual while still emotionally tied to the family that produced her.

Sibling Power and the Psychology of Domestic Violence: Within this same emotional system, the narrator's relationship with her older brother illustrates how patterns of authority can be transmitted laterally as well as from parent to child. The brother's repeated physical intimidation, including incidents in which he forcibly restrains her, is consistently minimized within the family as ordinary sibling friction rather than recognized as abuse, a pattern Robillard (2019) identifies as a common cultural mechanism by which sibling violence escapes both naming and intervention. When the narrator eventually attempts to raise the issue directly with her parents, she is met not with corrective action but with disbelief and, eventually, blame, a response that deepens her isolation within the household precisely at the moment she most needs an ally inside it. This dynamic matters for the paper's broader argument because it demonstrates that the harm driving the narrator's eventual departure is best located in concrete, observable patterns of family power and denial rather than in any single belief or doctrine; the abuse is structural to the family system itself (Bowen, 1978; Robillard, 2019).

The Disorienting Dilemma: Education as Transformative Learning. The narrator's arrival at university supplies, almost immediately, the disorienting dilemma at the center of Mezirow's (1997) model. She discovers, in short order, that she has never heard of major historical events taken for granted by her peers, that she lacks basic study skills, and that her own physical habits and assumptions mark her as

conspicuously out of step with the world around her. Rather than producing simple humiliation, these experiences initiate the critical self-examination Mezirow's theory predicts: she begins to ask why she did not know what others knew, and that question opens onto a far larger reassessment of the household that raised her. Mentors play a structurally important role in this process. A professor's offer of a clear, achievable path to a top grade gives her the first concrete evidence that her own effort, independent of her family's judgment of her, can produce results; later, a tutor who recognizes her intellectual seriousness encourages her toward Cambridge and models, through patient correction rather than dismissal, what it looks like to be taken seriously as a thinker. Each of these relationships supplies the rational discourse Mezirow identifies as essential to transformative learning, since it is through dialogue with others, not solitary study, that her revised frame of reference is tested and confirmed (Mezirow, 1997).

Thirdspace Reimagined: Reconstructing the Meaning of Home. As the narrator's frame of reference shifts, the meaning of Buck's Peak shifts with it, illustrating Soja's (1996) claim that lived space is continually open to reinterpretation by those who inhabit it. The mountain that once represented the entirety of the known world becomes, gradually, one place among many, no longer the unquestioned center of reality but a specific location with a specific, contestable history. This reauthoring of space is dramatized across the memoir through a recurring motif: the narrator's own reflection, returned to at several distinct points in the narrative, each time registering a different stage of psychological change, until she is finally able to recognize that the person she has become is no longer continuous with the frightened teenager the mirror once reflected (Li, 2025). This is Soja's thirding in its most literal form: the same physical space, the same family, the same mountain, comes to hold an entirely different meaning once the person inhabiting it has changed.

Geotrauma, Recovery, and Posttraumatic Growth: The cost of this transformation is considerable, and the memoir does not minimize it. Long after she has physically left the household, the narrator continues to experience intrusive memories, disrupted sleep, and moments of emotional numbness consistent with Herman's (1997) account of unresolved trauma, and her relationship to Buck's Peak itself remains unstable: it is simultaneously the place she came from and a place she associates with serious harm, precisely the layered, ambivalent relationship Pain's (2021) concept of geotrauma is designed to describe. Attempts at reconciliation with

her parents repeatedly stall, not because she refuses connection but because the family system's denial of the abuse she experienced has not changed even as she has, which forecloses the kind of reconnection Herman identifies as the final stage of recovery with her parents specifically, while remaining open with the siblings who supported her departure. Yet the memoir's trajectory is not simply one of damage managed; read through Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model, the narrator's outcome shows clear markers of posttraumatic growth rather than mere stabilization; she reports a sharpened sense of personal strength, substantially altered priorities, and new, previously unimaginable possibilities for her own life, gains that coexist with, rather than erase, the residue of what she went through. The memoir's closing reflection on her own transformation, in which she declines several available labels for what has happened to her and instead simply states, "I call it an education" (Westover, 2018), draws together precisely the three strands this paper has traced: a changed relationship to space, a renegotiated position within her family system, and a learning process that has produced not just new knowledge but a new self.

Conclusion

Findings: This paper set out to read *Educated* as a single, integrated case of spatial and psychological self-formation rather than as a series of separable critical problems. The analysis suggests that the household at the center of the memoir is best understood through three layered spatial registers, in Soja's (1996) terms a Firstspace of physical isolation and labor, a Secondspace of survivalist ideology and institutional distrust, and an eventual Thirdspace in which the narrator reauthors the meaning of that same place once her own frame of reference has changed. Bowen's (1978) family systems theory clarifies that the harm she experiences within that household, including a sibling relationship that escalates into outright violence, originates in the structural dynamics of a low-differentiation family system rather than in any single belief or external cause, and that her gradual departure represents differentiation rather than simple rebellion. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, in turn, demonstrates that her formal education functions as a sustained disorienting dilemma whose disruptive early effects are eventually resolved into a new and more autonomous frame of reference through sustained reflection and dialogue with mentors and peers. Finally, the combined lens of trauma and posttraumatic growth theory (Herman, 1997; Pain, 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) shows that her outcome cannot be reduced to either pure injury or

simple triumph; it is, more precisely, the coexistence of unresolved difficulty with genuine, measurable psychological growth. Taken together, these findings support the paper's central claim that space, family structure, and education are not three separate themes in this memoir but three faces of a single process of becoming.

Scope for Further Studies: This study has been deliberately confined to a single text and a four-part theoretical framework in order to develop each lens with sufficient depth. Future research might extend this combined spatial, family-systems, and transformative-learning framework to other contemporary memoirs of self-directed or non-traditional education, including life-writing from South Asian and other Global South contexts, where questions of family authority, gendered access to schooling, and the spatial geography of the home carry their own distinct histories. Further work might also bring embodied cognition or narrative empathy theory, both increasingly active in current memoir scholarship, into conversation with the spatial and family-systems framework developed here, or apply quantitative measures of posttraumatic growth to first-person narrative data drawn from comparable memoirs to test the qualitative claims advanced in this paper against a larger sample.

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