An evolutionary process that assembles phenotypes through space rather than through time

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In classical evolutionary theory, traits evolve because they facilitate organismal survival and/or reproduction. We discuss a different type of evolutionary mechanism that relies upon differential dispersal. Traits that enhance rates of dispersal inevitably accumulate at expanding range edges, and assortative mating between fast-dispersing individuals at the invasion front results in an evolutionary increase in dispersal rates in successive generations. This cumulative process (which we dub “spatial sorting”) generates novel phenotypes that are adept at rapid dispersal, irrespective of how the underlying genes affect an organism’s survival or its reproductive success. Although the concept is not original with us, its evolutionary implications for evolutionary theory have been overlooked. A range of biological phenomena (e.g., acceleration of invasion fronts, insular flightlessness, preadaptation) may have evolved via spatial sorting as well as (or rather than) by natural selection, and this evolutionary mechanism warrants further study.

Spatial Sorting

Imagine a species expanding its range into hitherto unoccupied territory and with a genetic basis to variation among individuals in dispersal rates (6–8). For example, continuously distributed variation may occur in dispersal-relevant morphological traits [e.g., seed shape (5), flight musculature and wing size (7, 10), leg length (11), foot size (12)], behavior [movement patterns (13)], and physiology [locomotor endurance (14)]. Alleles that confer the highest rates of dispersal inevitably accumulate at the expanding range edge. The reason is straightforward: If a cohort of individuals all start out (at birth) from a fixed point and move away from that point consistently, the ones that move quickest will be the only ones at the expanding range edge. Because an organism’s rate of dispersal is influenced by many phenotypic traits, it will be affected by many genes (15). Some of the organisms that disperse fast enough to be at the invasion front are there because of speed, others because of endurance, others because of directional movement, and still others because of lowered investment in processes that tradeoff against dispersal (e.g., immune function (16)).

Those fast-dispersing individuals at the edges of the dispersing front inevitably will breed with each other, because any individuals that disperse slowly or non-directionally will have been left behind (8). Interbreeding at the fast-moving invasion front thus will produce offspring with higher mean dispersal rates (and hence higher extreme maximum values for dispersal-enhancing traits, given additive genetic variance) than was the case in the parental generation. Successive generations evolve faster and faster dispersal by the colocation of such traits (e.g., genes conferring speed, endurance, and high activity levels) within the same individuals, even without new mutations (17). Such mutations may be readily available, however, because they “surf” expanding range fronts where selection against them is ineffective (18–20). The end result is evolution—the cumulative assembly of a novel phenotype that is adept at dispersal—but without requiring the genes involved to affect an organism’s survival or reproduction (i.e., without the operation of classical natural selection).

By analogy, imagine a race between rowboats (organisms) crewed by randomly allocated oarsmen (genes). If all boats begin simultaneously and head the same way, the proportion of skilled oarsmen per boat (dispersal-enhancing genes per organism) will be highest among the race leaders. If we stop the race at intervals and interchange oarsmen at random among boats that are close together at that part of the race (i.e., breeding between syntopic individuals), some crews formed by exchanging oarsmen among the fastest-moving boats will contain an even higher proportion of skilled rowers. There will be an increasing spatial assortment of rowing ability (dispersal rate) as the race progresses, because interchange (breeding) at the vanguard produces “offspring” that inherit their parent’s high mean dispersal rate (Fig. 1).

An expanding range edge inevitably imposes a complex mixture of selective forces driven both by classical natural selection and by spatial sorting. For example, the departure of fast-dispersing individuals from the core population means that if we look only within that core area, there appears to be classical natural selection for lower dispersal rates (i.e., the departing individuals do not contribute to future generations and so are genetically dead at that spatial scale of comparison). The critical point is that classical...
natural selection is not the only driver of evolution in this system; the spatial sorting of genotypes caused by differential dispersal, followed by random mating (at the periphery) will result in significant and predictable evolutionary changes.

An extensive literature has identified a wide range of circumstances under which we would expect to see evolved increases in dispersal ability at an expanding range edge. To our knowledge, however, all these analyses have dealt with an amalgam of spatial sorting and classical natural selection; for example, individuals at the invasion vanguard may have higher LRS because of reduced competition from conspecifics (6, 21) or because local populations have high rates of extinction and all surviving populations are founded by former migrants (22, 23), or because dispersal reduces competition among kin (24). Clearly, classical natural selection often favors dispersal-enhancing phenotypes in non-equilibrium systems. However, even if these classical selective forces on dispersal-enhancing traits are absent (i.e., faster dispersal does not increase the number of genes coding for dispersal-enhancing traits in subsequent generations), spatial assortment alone can generate the evolution of a highly dispersive phenotype by cumulative directional change.

To test this proposition, we need to exclude any advantage to faster dispersers in terms of LRS. In previous models, population growth has been dictated by local density dependence, and thus the evolution of increased dispersal on the invasion front (where densities are lower) may have been driven by classical natural selection processes rather than by spatial sorting. We constructed an individual-based coupled map lattice model to exclude conventional natural selection (i.e., an organism’s genotype has no effect on its LRS). The lattice model shows that spatial sorting alone can generate evolutionary change (Fig. 2 and SI Text). This sorting process clearly results in evolution [a net directional change over many generations (25)] but does not arise from classical natural selection in that traits evolve in a predictable direction despite never conferring any benefit in survival or reproduction to the organisms that exhibit them. The simplicity of this process (cumulative spatial assortment of dispersal-enhancing genes) means that spatial sorting will operate at expanding range edges unless the system lacks additive genetic variation for traits that influence dispersal rate. Such a lack is unlikely. Additive genetic variation for such traits is common (26). Whether spatial sorting is significant is a more difficult question to answer; for example, its effects on invasion rate might be trivial relative to classical natural selection. To answer this question, we will need detailed data on selective factors at invasion fronts.

**Evidence for Spatial Sorting**

If selection at an invasion front favors faster dispersal (via spatial assortment and/or classical natural-selection advantages), we expect such fronts to be dominated by unusually fast-dispersing individuals. Several systems show this pattern. For example, wing-dimorphic crickets exhibit more large-winged individuals at the expanding front (10); wind-dispersed seeds in lodgepole pines have a higher ratio of wing to seed mass on the expanding front (5); range-expanding populations of butterflies have more strongly developed flight muscles and wing aspect ratios (7); and ants have higher proportions of dispersing females in invasion-front pop-
Spatial sorting could favor the elaboration of any trait that enhances an organism's ability to disperse, not just locomotor structures or physiological traits as described above. For example, some taxa are transported by attaching themselves to other structures or physiological traits as described above. For example, imagine an insular hypothesis: Insular flightlessness can evolve regardless of whether dispersing individuals have higher or lower LRS than their sedentary conspecifics (46).

Another classical topic in evolutionary theory is preadaptation as an explanation for complex traits that (i) enhance the bearer's current LRS but (ii) differ so much from the ancestral condition that they would require multiple sequential changes to exhibit their current form, and (iii) for which it is difficult to imagine functional advantages (i.e., enhanced LRS) for the intermediate stages. Wings are clearly useful for birds, but what use is half a wing (47)? Possible solutions to this puzzle include gradually accumulating functional advantages (e.g., vertebrate visual systems) or shifts in function [e.g., feathers evolve for thermoregulation and then are co-opted for locomotion (47)]. Spatial sorting offers another solution, because it can construct complex arrays of phenotypic traits, in novel combinations, without requiring the modifications to enhance LRS. This process might amplify the phenotypic variation upon which conventional natural selection can operate, allowing lineages to cross adaptive valleys between fitness peaks (48).

Overview
Both spatial sorting and classical natural selection require heritable variation, but the two evolutionary processes differ in the mechanism causing trait evolution (spatial versus temporal filtering). The assumptions underlying spatial sorting are simple and realistic, and the process itself has been recognized for decades (5). Nonetheless, it has not been widely understood that spatial sorting differs from classical natural selection in not requiring differential LRS and thus does not constitute natural selection as that process currently is defined. There are at least two potential solutions to this nomenclatural problem:

i) Expand our definition of “natural selection” to include processes driven by spatial as well as temporal filtering.

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i) Expand our definition of “natural selection” to include processes driven by spatial as well as temporal filtering.
Classical natural selection and spatial sorting thus would be viewed as subsets of natural selection (the former based on differentials in survival and/or reproductive success through time, and the latter on differentials in dispersal rate through space). We would have to envisage selection working on variance among individuals in dispersal-enhancing traits as well as on mating ability, fertility, fecundity, and/or survivorship (25). Because all the other measures have their effect via LRS, but dispersal-driven selection does not, combining categories in this way would conceal an important difference.

ii) Retain the current definition of “natural selection” (25), and treat spatial sorting as a different (additional) type of evolutionary process. This option avoids potentially confusing implications of the term “selection” (which implies differential LRS to most evolutionary biologists) and identifies spatial sorting as fundamentally different from the processes that Charles Darwin described. Under this terminology, deterministic evolutionary change can occur via either of two processes—not only through natural selection (as currently understood) but also through spatial sorting. This option is the one we advocate.

Spatial sorting operates on a more limited set of traits (those that affect dispersal rate or ability) and within a more restricted set of conditions (range edges) than does classical natural selection. Nonetheless, the possibility that some traits have evolved via “mating between the quickest” rather than “survival of the fittest” warrants further attention (15). In a nonequilibrium world where many taxa are changing their distributions because of anthropogenic challenges, the evolutionary forces operating on the edges of expanding populations deserve careful study. Many species exhibit strong metapopulation structure, with frequent local extinctions followed by recolonizations (49), and each of those recolonization events provides an opportunity for spatial sorting to mold phenotypic attributes. Spatial sorting may prove to be classical natural selection’s shy younger sibling, not as important as Darwinian processes but nonetheless capable of shaping biological diversity by a process so far largely neglected. Determining whether cumulative spatial assortment has played a significant role in biological evolution is an exciting challenge both for modelers and for empiricists.

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