Whistler’s Fog and the Aesthetics of Place / Bruce Janz

Abstract: The concept of place has usually been understood as either a phenomenological, epistemological, or ethical category. An understanding of place as a aesthetic/historical, on the other hand, tends to focus on the wide range of uses of the concept. First, I sketch out the wide range of uses of place, that have been drawn from writings on the concept. These uses are not derived from a definition of place, but rather functions that the term performs in the way it is put to use, and allows access to different aspects of human experience. Second, I will draw from this range of uses some ideas about the aesthetics of place, that is, the ways in which the picture that has been painted of the state of place research produces some surprising results. Finally, I will try to address some objections to or limitations of the idea of place.

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till art had invented them. (Oscar Wilde) [1]

[1] Is place an aesthetic concept? In much of the vast writing on the nature of place [3], the concept has largely been viewed as either ontological, epistemological, or ethical. Most phenomenologists (and a great deal of writing) take place to be an ontological, even giving it a kind of priority over the more metaphysical “space” in human experience (does, for instance, Edward Casey). Those who think of place in symbolic or structural terms (myself included) think of place as a kind of system or knowledge, and knowledge of place means knowledge of the symbolic structures in which shared meaning is encoded. And, its ethical status is pervasive -- it stands as a kind of original good, a rough analogue of Rousseau’s “nature”, for many writers. Attending to place means attending to what is good, wholesome, life-affirming, or correct.

[2] These are useful approaches. But what difference would it make if place was aesthetic, or if we aestheticized place? Primarily, it would mean that representational becomes the central issue for place. As with Whistler’s London fog, there is no fog without its representations. The metaphysical question of the existence of fog is beside the point; Wilde is arguing that fog did not “fit” into the mental canvas of London until someone put it into the literal canvas. Fog came to mean something in London, and as such is made available aesthetically rather than metaphorically. The same seems to be true of place, at several levels. Places are made available inasmuch as they are included in meaningful discourse the way that the London fog was included. But also, the concept of place itself has become meaningful in recent years across a wide range of disciplines, and as such has been “painted” in our intellectual canvas. It has become meaningful. I am interested in both senses.

[3] I have been avoiding making the bald claim that “place is an aesthetic concept”. That claim itself is one of certitude and exclusion, metaphysical by nature. I am more interested in a way of painting the landscape of place. Like Whistler, I want to make certain aspects of place available, even in the sense of making certain aspects of human experience available, and as some places themselves are made available in their representations. There is no fog in space from its representation. Place as a concept is never really explored but rather the notion of space -- place (to use a word he avoids) is not just perceived or physical space, nor is it the representation of space (conceptualized space), it is representational space. “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” [4]. But Lefebvre stopped short of considering the range of uses of place as generative.

[4] What must be realized, to have an aesthetics of place, is that the idea of place is as much a window on its intentions of use as it is a descriptor of an aspect of human experience. The concept does work, it accomplishes something, and that accomplishment is different for different people. Indeed, the term is so malleable, yet so fecund, that it is pressed into service for a wide variety of reasons, some of them contradictory to each other (or even internally contradictory). If our goal is to determine the meaning of place in some metaphysical manner, to nail down just what it is we are talking about before we go out and ask what qualifies as a place, we will be frustrated. “Place” suffers not from too few meanings, but from far too many. Rather than setting through those uses to find the most relevant to a particular occasion, I am more interested in thinking about what this overdetermination might suggest for the pictures of place that scholars and writers are trying to paint. In short, I am more interested in the place of place, and in the range of its uses, and in the ways that those uses, taken together, produce interesting and unexpected results. It is remarkable that every little has been done on its range of uses and what that range implies, despite the thousands of papers and books that have been published on the idea of place or which use the idea as a significant conceptual tool. Most writers either simply take a stand on the version of place they are using (or, more often, simply make unspoken assumptions about it), or regard the profusion of versions of place as something to be simplified or overcome. I would like to argue that this profusion is a strength of the idea, and that taking it seriously makes for a rich canvas and a wide-ranging palette.

[5] My goal here is straightforward. First, I will sketch out the wide range of uses of place, that have been drawn from writings on the concept. These uses are not definitions of place, but rather functions that the term performs (although a large part of the definition), charting uses might be functionally equivalent to definitions). Place stands in for other ideas, and allows access to different aspects of human experience. This first section is not intended as a literature overview, so while in some cases I will make specific citations to identify the sources, in other cases the uses will be widespread enough that I expect the use will be readily recognizable. Second, I will draw from this range of uses some ideas about the aesthetics of place, that is, the way in which the picture that has been painted of the state of place...
A. Seeing Fog: A Survey of Uses of Place

<6> I have divided 21 uses of place into three categories. Categorizing is a form of spatialization (mapping, to be precise), and I am not unaware of the irony of using a spatial approach to think about place. "Place and particularity" address the concept of place, which is to try to identify some specific experience, object, or feature as key to determining place. Related to this is the general impulse to resist conceptual universalization. "Place and relation or context" deals mainly with subject/object relations. "Place and meaning" groups together senses of place that try to connect human significance with geography or origin. Each category is necessarily loose, and is meant only to provide an initial conceptual mapping. Of course, each of the 21 uses of place contain within them shades of difference (in some cases, the variations are vast and nuanced), and so each use is itself a category.

1. Place and Particularity

<7> a. Place as Spatial Location Place is sometimes thought of as the coordinates on a map, or in modernist modes of understanding space, place becomes secondary to and derivative of space. Finding one's place on a global positioning system, for instance, means the prior identification of abstract lines of longitude and latitude. In this use place, then, becomes evidence of a prior discourse about space. Some, however, argue that place is at least equal to space (that is, place does not "follow" space by being an inference of it), and perhaps (e.g., Edward Casey) place is even prior to space.

<8> b. Place as the Immediate, Concrete, or Present Place often refers to what is near me or those with whom I identify (and as such, is also a relational notion of place). To talk about place can mean to talk about the directly experienced or sensed, the empirically available. Some writers of place emphasize that place is prior to conceptualization or language. Place can be understood not just as the immediate, but as the present, the lens through which all else is seen and the ordering principle for time and space.

<9> c. Place as Exclusivity Ancient and mediaeval thinkers regarded place as a claim on a part of space, usually defined by a material object. Objects always exist in place, and part of that existence means that they have exclusive claim on whatever space they are in. For Descartes the fundamental feature of one of the two primary substances is that it is extended, which means that it takes up space and denies other objects claim on that space while it is there. It does mean that place is associated with what is not (and perhaps cannot be) thought, since thought requires universals. And yet, as Aristotle recognized, place is not an integral part of the object, since it is abandoned the minute the object moves in space.

<10> d. Place as the Unique The term "genius loci" evolved from referring to nymphs, dryads, and other place-related spirits, and eventually became the "spirit of the place", that is, the unique features of a place that call for or require a unique response. Even within the modernist/humanist notion of space one might argue that a fundamental use of the concept of place is to designate the features of something that are utterly like nothing else, that past the fact that it takes up a specific space, it also has other characteristics unlike any other place. Much romantic work on place imagined this uniqueness, and geomantic techniques such as feng shui or ley lines also assume that the uniqueness of place is available given the proper training and intuitive insight.

<11> e. Place as Static, Fixed, Unchanging, Permanent For Aristotle (Physics IV), place was static, where things were "at rest." Motion could be explained as the striving of things to their natural place of rest. More recently, people use the term "place" to describe change, particularly modernization. "The idea of place as we once knew it has changed in that the emphasis now lies not in permanent structures but those things (ex roads) that allow for an increasingly globalized world to move" [9].

<12> f. Place as Chaotic, Complex, Impermanent Barry Lopez in Arctic Dreams argues that "Place is collectively made up of the conglomeration of many different elements within this locale" [6]. It is not easily graspable, and indeed may run ahead of our ability to conceptualize it. Place disrupts the orderliness of space by saying that some places (even this particular place) must be taken seriously; it is not interchangeable with another. As well, place can also resist the tendency to homogenize culture. The chaos, then, can be a creative one, in which difference is maintained.

<13> g. Place as Embodiment Embodiment is more than just physicality, it is the recognition that the place we are in is made possible by the specific sensory way we understand the world. This sense of place can be representational as well as literal. It is the way one represents one's place in a social order or hierarchy. This might be intentional (through modification, clothing, etc.) or unintentional/unreflective. This makes "virtual" space ambiguous as a place, and is consequently the focus of much discussion. A good example is Nancy Mairs autobiographical account of her life from inside "the bonehouse" or the body as a place from where her story can be told [7].

2. Place and Relation or Context

<14> a. Place as the Local Place often refers to what is near me or those with whom I identify. Rather than referring to a discrete "thing", place may be thought of as a continuum, with "closer" and "further". The local also comes with metaphorical implications - it is not simply proximity, but emotional or meaningful nearness. Lucy Lippard, in The Lure of the Local[8] does not see the local as just proximity, but about the aspects of the proximate which endure, for good reasons, and which speak of intimate human relations rather than bureaucratic or technological relations.

<15> b. Place as Nature or Landscape There is an almost Rousseauian sense of authenticity and primordiality which is tied to Nature, which makes all other places derivative, and in many cases, alienating. Some writers regard nature as the quintessential place, the place which draws out a "truer" self or subjectivity. Wilderness is sometimes seen in this way, as a necessary place for the true human self (e.g., Thoreau). Landscape is nature viewed or nature experienced.
It could be considered to be place created, as a landscape painter makes nature into a place.

<16> c. Place as Relation Locke thought of place as the relation (distance and attachment) between discrete objects – a “chessboard on a ship” is in the same place, even though the ship is moving [9]. Similarly, place may designate the continuity of relationships between people, even though the social space of those people may change. The relation may be rhizomatic, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest; that is, the place may in fact not be geographically anchored, but may be a range of activity. Or, it may be a mutual reference point, which would suggest that the place is not something that a single person could lay claim to.

<17> Place is also the context of social relations, reciprocity, and/or symbolic constructions. In some cases place has been a term of resistance, preferring the layered, complex, heterogenous, and multi-perspectival over the monocultural. Phenomenologically, place may be thought of as “between” subject and object.

<18> d. Place as Mediation It is the “common-place” in communitarian politics, the place of the meeting of both people and minds. Place “provides the spaces essential to association and mediation and it represents a city to its inhabitants” [10]. Place is, for some, equivalent to culture (as opposed to nature).

<19> e. Place as a Term of Opposition Place is often oppositional, sometimes to disciplinary methods or structures (perceived as alienating or as insufficiently able to access human meaning), or modernity (perceived as overly concerned with structural components at the expense of individual experience), or even post-modernity (perceived as too willing to frolic in the free-play of signifiers, and not sufficiently interested in anything that might matter to someone). It is disruptive of received ways of understanding the world or even of other places. Place resists the homogenization of culture. “New spaces of resistance are being opened up, where our ‘place’ (in all its meanings) is considered fundamentally important to our perspective, our location in the world, and our right and ability to challenge dominant discourses of power” [11].

<20> f. Place as Other For some thinkers, places must resist total subsumption under the self. Place must bear a sense of foreignness. Place must not be immediately or intuitively known (and thus be completely brought into or identified with the self), but rather it should let itself be shown forth. It stands at a distance from the self [12].

3. Place and Meaning

<21> a. Place as the Personally or Comm单元ly Significant Place points to “what we are loyal to”, “what we care about”, or “what matters.” This sense of meaning may be expressed as subjectivity (vs. objectivity) or habit(us) (vs. space as the reflexive or known). It may point to a personal sense of freedom, over against a “spatialization” which locks a person into external causes. Places, for many, are tied to the stories that can be told about them, or that they evoke. So, place may in some cases be the site (or more properly, situation) of personal meaning, or for others the cause of personal meaning, or for others the precondition of personal meaning.

<22> Given this sense, it may even be possible to have place without space:

“Using the example of LambdaMOO, the online environment, they explore the possibility of a place without a space. The LambdaMOO has meanings for its users – sometimes quite rich and deep ones. Yet it did not exist physically in space – it took “place” only in the outputs of a computer. This was a place without a space.” [13]

This significance may or may not be recognized, or may or may not be created by the subject. Many people speak of a “sense of place”, which suggests that some can recognize or feel the “placeness” of (a) place, that is, its significance as a place rather than as an interchangeable aspect of space.

<23> b. Place as Identity Many uses of “place” are really about personal, community, regional, or national identity. This identity can be understood either as accruing from place in a relatively linear or causal manner, or more commonly that the construction of place is also the construction of self, so that place and identity need to be approached dialectically or reciprocally. Regionalism, in particular, has been a popular way of linking place and identity, as regions seem less constructed by mechanisms of state formation and more by the practices of people. The sense of identity is reinforced by considering the “liminal” or borderline “places”, the events in a person’s life of transition or change or movement from one role to another. There is a contradiction between the identity maintained and the identity exchanged. On the other hand, for some place means indigenously [14].

<24> c. Place as Home Home is in-habited, the lived place made livable (and expressed as livable) by the habits we bring. There is a reciprocal relationship between ourselves and the places that we “dwell”. In other words, just as we transform our environment into “home” at the same time our environment serves to create us as well [15].

<25> True place, then, has some features of “home” to it, for some people, and the extent to which we are “un-homed” (unheimlich to use a Heideggerian term) is the extent to which we are also “dis-placed”. We must, to use another of Heidegger’s terms, dwell, and find what it means to dwell [16].

<26> d. Place as Feeling or Mood For some, place is “feeling measured in one’s muscles and bones.” Place may cause this feeling, or may simply be indicated by this feeling, but in either case place is attached to a long or short term psychological state. It might be that one simply has a feeling about place, and there is no further definition. For instance, in Paul Gruchow’s The Necessity of Empty Places [17], place as a concept is never really explored but rather the reader gets the feel of place as experiential. Place may be an immediate, pre-conceptual experience, and its knowledge then is intuitive rather than discursive.

<27> Place may also evoke feeling, a subtly different understanding than place being feeling. “Place attachment”, for instance, designates the feelings people have about their places.
And, finally, place might communicate or represent feeling. Writers and cinematographers have long known that a well-represented place can be a character in the story. For example, we are prepared to understand narrative difference through the visual representation of places such as the forests of Rivendell, Lothlorien and Fangorn Forest in the movie adaptation of Lord of the Rings. The place, even without action or dialogue, tells some of the story, or at least prepares us for the kind of action or life that is possible in these places.

Place as the Social or Intentional Place is not only geographical location, but also what happens. One geographical point may be several places; one place may have several locations. Places may “quote” or refer to other places (“little Italy”, “Chinatown”). Place also seems to be intricately linked to social roles, and with the shattering of these traditional roles comes the profound sense of “placelessness” [18].

Place as Symbolic Order Place is space invested with symbolic meaning. Michel de Certeau refers to space as “practical place”, or place that has had the meaning of practices imposed upon it. A street is a place that becomes a space when people walk on it and use it [19]. Place is culture, the earth is “terra incognita”, empty space, until culture (or in some cases, a particular culture) places its imprint. Culture may be the difference between the “place” of animals, which we call their habitat, and the place of humans, and to the extent that we are willing to see symbolic order in the animal world (through bio- or zoo-semiotics), we may also speak of the Other as having place. Other places can be described, and perhaps until there is a human imprint that leaves an indication of symbolic order. To this extent, the moon is a place in a way that Pluto is not.

Place as Transcendence or Mythology: Place has been experienced as a voice, a healer, and a mystical guide. Among some religious thinkers, place becomes immemorance or incarnation, the spirit made flesh, dwelling among us. “Place is significant in that God made entry into time and space (the combination of which constitutes place) with His incarnation into Christ” [20]. And groups such as the Pintupi in Australia hold that the songlines, discernable to those who have the proper relationship to the land, stretch not only over geography but through time, back to the creation of the world [23].

B. Sketching Fog: Notes about the Uses of Place

Place is paradoxical in its uses. Writers want to have place do contradictory work – hardly anyone means to limit their application of the notion of place to only one of the senses I have listed here. This is not a bad thing; in fact, place is characterized by productive tension, the tendency to try to capture place using senses which are mutually contradictory, or which are mutually circular (i.e., one requires the other to be true first). Ultimately, place tries to approximate something which is both internal and external, both causal and caused, both held as deeply felt “content” and as structuring “form”. So, it should not be a surprise that applications of place end up working on the edges of concepts, rather than at the core of them.

Some of the tensions of place become evident as soon as we start to compare items on the list of uses of place. In many uses, it is clear that place serves or expresses an aspect of subject experience that has been lost. Many of the uses of place stand as indictments of existing modes of investigation of subjectivity, and existing social conditions. Yet, even these resisting uses exist in tension.

- If the loss of subjectivity is described by a loss of individuality (a dissipated spatialization), then place becomes the place of the individual, the solid rock on which one stands. If on the other hand, the loss of community and connection (that is, the alienation and meaninglessness of hyper-individuality), then place becomes the small-scale human connections that bring back meaning.
- If the threat is the oversimplification of life, then place is the chaotic and complex; if it is the overcomplexification of life, then place is the simple.
- Many writers equate place with rootedness, yet some versions of place are rhizomatic (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s contrast), that is, one “dwells by moving” rather than by remaining static.
- Place, for some, is mediation, the “in-between” space between self and world, between individuals; for others, place is the poles that make connection possible.
- For some, nature is a place, indeed, the quintessential place; for others, it is (as the poet Don McKay put it), “otherwise than place”. Place is “nature to which history has happened”, and as such is not nature anymore.
- Place is for some people that which is closest to us; for others, it is the “other”. On one hand it can be that which is intuitive and immediate; on the other, it can be that which is foreign and in need of disciplined investigation.
- And, if place is identity, that suggests a kind of centrality, a “home” for the self; but spiritual place is in transition, it finds itself un-homed, liminal, always at the edge, homo viator. There is an anticipation of a home that one has never had, and a definition of self in terms of that imagined place. Place, then, lies not behind but in front.

Contrasts and tensions, indeed, paradoxes, could be multiplied. The wide variation of uses becomes apparent as one looks at writers on place, and their attempts to identify exactly what it is that they are dealing with. Definitions are rare. For example, it is not always clear whether place is the cause of subjectivity, or the effect. For some, this question is simply ignored; yet, one or the other is assumed as a person either talks about the effects of the place on the person, or the way that a person might be discovered or uncovered through the place (s) they find significant.

And, there is another tension, if we imagine that place is an aesthetic production. Arjun Appadurai explains:
the problem of space in anthropology, [which is] the problem of place, that is, the
problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer. Such named
locations, which often come to be identified with the group, constitute the landscape of anthropology, in which the privileged locus is the often
unnamed location of the ethnographer. Ethnography thus reflects the circumstantial
encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntary localized
“other.” [24]

Appendurai points to yet another paradox of place, that we are both inside and outside of place,
both our own place and the place of the subject of research. There is a “circumstantial
encounter” in which one party has control over place (i.e., has become voluntarily displaced),
while the other must remain in place for the research to have any meaning. If it is the place
that the ethnographer is researching, not simply the artifacts or customs and rituals, then
the subject must maintain some access to that place and not “move around.

37> Appendurai raises a couple of very interesting issues. One is the issue of control, not
over space but place, that is necessary for research to happen. There is a requirement of
displacement (for the researcher), and a requirement (or assumption) of displacement for the
subject. The other is the idea of the place of the research itself. What is the place of “place
in anthropology”? The place of place in a discipline, and the ability of the discipline to
reflect on its own practices as they relate to a particular discipline and to a subject of study.
How much about place is as the tie that someone might feel to a literal place. There are identities at
stake, habits, insiders and outsiders, and even forms of materiality that make the intellectual
place what it is.

38 Even the reflection on the rhetoric of place, then, is an aesthetic production. It is not
just a scientific “reading” of an external given. This means that the talk about place must
not just map the kinds of places there are out there, the way that we might classify paintings
according to the kinds of subject matter they portray. Much more interesting (to continue the
analogy) is what the act of painting itself uncovers. How were the scenes painted, for example the
place, for including (for example) the fog of London? What made that significant? It is the same
question as Appendurai’s, for it asks about the place of the researcher/painter, not just the
place that is being depicted. And yet, that place is not available to us without considering the
kind of place London is, with fog or without.

39 What do we make of these tensions? It would be tempting to say that the tensions just
reflect the different preoccupations of different competitors. Place is a concept that focusses the hopes of many people, and we should expect that these hopes
are different. That is probably true, yet I think there is more here. I think that part of the
appeal of place is precisely the tensions which it makes possible.

40 And it is this productive tension that is best understood as aesthetic, in the sense that
it makes possible the rhetorical and persuasive representation of place. The place that is
captured and described in every detail is also the place that is lost. Only in the paradoxical
tensions can we hope to make available the place which is before us. It is, perhaps, like other
paradoxes that we have been part of Western thought; for example, the only way to define the
circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere” [25]. Perhaps it is not God for whom
the circumference is everywhere and the center is nowhere, but lived place. If everything is at
the circumference, everything is at the boundary. Another implication of thinking of different
versions of place in productive tension is that place becomes an edge, boundary, or threshold.
It is at the edge of methodological approaches and different or competing uses. The difficulty
of defining place attests to its being “on the edge” of essences. It is at the border of the
subjective and objective, which is probably why phenomenology has been so interested in place.
Space is bounded, while place is boundary. Places become available when the edges become
apparent – physical edges, temporal edges, as well as the center of quotation in a very different manner. He speaks of the globalized, digitally connected world as
“a sort of omnipolitical periphery whose centre will be nowhere and circumference
everywhere” [26]. In a certain sense, this is the opposite of place, but it suggests the
productive paradoxicality of the situation, that is, that place can both be about edges, but
also about the end of edges.

41> Various other thinkers could be fruitfully explored in these terms. Liminality itself has
a host of uses, including some explicitly related to place [27]. Foucault’s heterotopia [28] and
Soja’s Thirdspace [29] are both examples of attempts to access edges. But perhaps most useful is
Nicholas Entwrick’s The Betweenness of Place[30]. which argues that the edges of place, rather
than the center, defines the place in modernity. The primary edge is between particularizing and
universalizing discourse about place, which comes with subjectifying and objectifying
discourses.

C. The Dangers of Fog

42> The standard objection to aestheticism is that it introduces relativism. After all, if
representation is integral to place, what kind of analytic tool could it possibly be? We
could not use the concept to ground empirical research in any way. It seems that it becomes a concept
more suited to literature than to either the social sciences or to philosophy.

43 One of the results of relativism is the inability to discuss place as anything other than
an uninterpretable given. What can one say, for instance, to someone whose experience and
representation of place is limited to nostalgic or romantic depictions (for example, the
overwrought landscapes of Thomas Kinkade)? Can one say no more than that this is not my
experience? Are we left with versions of place which are simply a matter of personal taste? Does
my depiction of my place amount to the same thing as my choice of painting that I would hang on
my wall?

44 To simply regard place as aesthetic in a simplistic manner opens the door to regarding
one’s own representations as reductive and irrefutable. There are repressive images of an
aestheticized version of place serving as the pretext for aggressive nationalism. The Nazi “Blut
und Boden” ideology is only the most extreme aestheticization of place that lent a mythological
imetus to geographical entitlement. Equally troubling are the myths of geographical entitlement
that undergird “ethnic cleansing” euphemism. We might also see other
myths such as the myth of the Wild West in the United States, or some of the myths
surrounding Zionism, as having constructed a pretext for geographical entitlement.

45 > Even with increasing suspicion toward modernism, and the attempt to recover voices
marginalized by its universalizing tendencies, place may not be up to the task of actually
explaining those voices. Roberto Dainotto, for example, argues that place (understood in this

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case as region) mystifies rather than uncovers marginalized identity even as it attempts to
ground that identity after the failure of modernist concepts such as nationalism [31].

<46> Does place as an aesthetic concept ultimately fail, then, merely disguising latent desire
or coercion? This is an ever present possibility, but I do not think it is a necessity.
Heidegger, in "The Question Concerning Technology", quotes Holderlin as saying

But where danger is, grows
The saving power also [32].

It is significant that he also includes the line “... poetically dwells man upon this earth.”
Heidegger is interested in place here, specifically (poetic) dwelling, and one need not
necessarily subscribe to his version of dwelling to recognize that a concept like place may be a
two-edged sword. If we suppose that our task is to define place in some essentialist manner, or
turn it into a tool or methodological component in some overall disciplinary structure, we have
tamed it. We can certainly use it that way, but what we have lost is its ability to give access
to the less articulable aspects of human experience. Place, finally, shows us as we are,
individually and collectively, as researchers and as inhabitants of a society.

<47> The problem comes when we are not aware of what the concept of place is meant to
accomplish, is it serving to undergird colonizing impulses? Is it protecting tradition, with all
the positive and negative implications that has? Is it demarcating the other (even literally,
telling us who lives “on the other side of the tracks”). Is it constructing a future (or
necessitating one), and whose future is it? Is it establishing a canon? Defining a methodology
or object of study? Allowing commercial or corporate interests a point of access to a community?
What does place do? It is only in finding the contradictory impulses and uses that we can move
the pervasive concept of place from merely being another useful tool in the academic’s toolbox,
and both allow it to challenge academic assumptions and give access to lifeworlds.

Endnotes

[1] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde Ware, UK:
Wordsworth Editions, 1997: 793. I would like to thank Keith Harder for useful discussion about
aspects of this paper, including the title reference. [*]

Princeton University Press, 1969: 324. [*]

[3] To get a sense of the sheer range of scholarship on place, see my Research on Place and
Space website, at <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/> [*]


[*]

House, 1986. [*]

Row, 1989; Beacon Press, 1995. [*]

[8] Lucy Lippard, The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society New York:
The New Press, 1997. [*]

[9] John Locke, "Book II, Chapter XIII: Complex Ideas of Simple Modes, and First, of the Simple
[*]

[10] Lee Corrigan, "New Meanings of Place: The Place of the Poor and the Loss of Place as a
Center of Mediation" in Andrew Light & Jonathan Smith, Philosophies of Place: Philosophy and
Geography III. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. [*]

6. [*]

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/philosophy/resources%20tar%20files%20praise%20of%20backyards.pdf>
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[13] Barry Brown, "Geographies of Technology: Some Comments on Place, Space and Technology.”
<http://www.lxpal.com/ConferencesWorkshops/ECSCW2001/brown.doc> [*]


Hopkins Press 1997. [*]


[18] This is the argument in Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media
on Social Behaviour Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. [*]

1984: 117. [*]

[20] Keith Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," Steven Feld and
Keith H. Basso, Senses of Place. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996. [*]
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for many writers. Attending to place means

And, if place is identity, that suggests a kind of centrality, a
to the extent that

– geographical edges, temporal edges. Paul Virilio applies this circumference/center


– place, that is, its significance as a place rather than as an interchangeable

–

Nancy Mairs, or place that has had the meaning of practices

is the extent to which we are

hardly


Roberto Dainotto. Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities Cornell University Press, 2000: 3ff. [^31]