Places and Their Pasts
by Doreen Massey

In a telling paragraph which has given me much pause for thought, Herbert Schiller asks, in an article in *Intermedia*: ‘what is national identity?’ The reply he produces is that ‘There is no totally satisfying definition. It is much easier to recognise its absence. A Kentucky Fried Chicken in Paris, for example, surely does not qualify as part of the French national identity. A McDonald’s outlet in Kyoto hardly expresses the Japanese ethos’.¹ What he is pointing to, possibly inadvertently, is a felt dislocation between the past and the present of a place.

In daily life, in politics, in battles over development and conservation, we often operate in ways which mobilise this kind of view of place. Arriving in Paris, say, on the first day of a much-needed holiday we finally reach the kind of café we are looking for – the smell of Gauloises, the taste of good coffee and croissants – ‘ah’, we sigh with satisfaction, ‘this is the real France’. (We hadn’t felt this in the airport; we had avoided the hamburger joints.) On the other side of the continent, in what used to be Yugoslavia, Serbs claim whole stretches of what is today clearly multicultural country on the basis that it is – really – Serbia. Or again, in London’s docklands ‘the local community’, itself a term with a multiplicity of interpretations, fights off new developments singing ‘this land is our land’ in the face of the London Docklands Development Corporation² but shouting also ‘this is a white working-class area’ in the teeth of a growing population which hails, at some distance, from Asia. Different as these examples are in terms of their political import and practical effect, they are all calling upon a particular way of conceptualising ‘place’. 

² See History Workshop Journal issue 39.
One aspect of this is a deeply essentialist and internalist way of thinking about a place and its character. This Isle of Dogs is essentially white working class; this land is uniquely Serbian. Influences, ‘invasions’, developments, from ‘outside’, are to be resisted. The Kentucky Fried Chicken is American, not French; the new people in the Council flats are from Bangla Desh. What such constructions fail to realise, or to admit, is that places are always already hybrid. The ‘real local character’ of Docklands could not be as it is without the deep imbrication of that area into a nineteenth-century international division of labour and pattern of trade and all the influences which that brought. (The recent battles have not really been about the local versus the global, as much as about how this local area should be inserted into the current international division of labour.) The ‘real France’ which we breathe in at the café, and into which as Schiller says a Kentucky Fried Chicken seems such a dislocating intrusion, is itself composed of influences, contacts and connections which, over time, have settled into each other, moulded each other, produced something new . . . but which we now think of as old, as established . . . the essential France. The new ‘intrusions’ are no more from outside, nor more ‘out of place’, than were in their time many of the components of the currently-accepted ‘character of the place’.

There are two points which I want to draw out of these illustrations. The first is that places, in fact, are always constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not only internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere. Their ‘local uniqueness’ is always already a product of wider contacts; the local is always already a product in part of ‘global’ forces, where global in this context refers not necessarily to the planetary scale, but to the geographical beyond, the world beyond the place itself. For the purposes of the argument here, I should like to take that point as given. But there is a second point which is raised by these various illustrations. All of them indicate a feeling that there is or has been some kind of disruption between the past of these places and at least some elements of their present or their potential future. Indeed, in all these cases ‘the past’ is seen in some sense to embody the real character of the place. It is from this kind of thinking that we find ourselves, probably all the while knowing that the term evokes a million unfortunate implications, talking of other places as ‘unspoilt’ (by which we usually mean: it is as we have imagined it to have been in some distant past).

These kinds of (implicitly or explicitly) internalist and essentialist constructions of the character of places, then, not only fail to recognise the long history of interconnectedness with elsewhere (the history of the global construction of the local), they also presuppose a particular relationship between the assumed identity of a place and its history.

The past of places
One possible response to this kind of view of place is to interpret any kind of
positive affective attitude to a particular area as being inevitably imbued with nostalgia and thus, almost equally inevitably, a hindrance to a progressive politics. Thus David Harvey expresses extreme scepticism about anything which he dubs ‘local’ (that is to say not global, which in his terminology has more the implication of ‘universal’) as a basis for the construction of a radical politics. And one reason for this scepticism is the necessity of such local struggles’ reliance on ‘tradition’ (why so-called ‘global’ struggles do not also have to rely on such foundations he does not say). Thus: ‘the assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition’. Now, it is certainly true that many place-based struggles, and struggles about places, such as the defensive struggles in Docklands, do often fall into the traps implied by such claims. They do indeed become place-bound rather than place-based (and Harvey’s use only of the former term implies that they inevitably must). And tradition may well become a hindrance to progressive change. A singular sense of the past, and its relation to the present, become assumed, closed down as areas of contestation or debate.

Yet ‘tradition’ need not be thought of in this way. On the one hand, and as hinted above, it need not be place-bound. The pre-Kentucky-Fried-Chicken ‘real France’ is itself formed out of a long history of interconnections with the beyond. (Globalisation in the wider sense of the global construction of the local is by no means new. What is different about the current phase is its intensity and – perhaps even more pertinently – the fact that this time the direction of the flows is different, the First World and its identity are being more obviously challenged.)

On the other hand, traditions do not only exist in the past. They are actively built in the present also. The concept of tradition which sees in it only nostalgia understands it as something already completed which can now only be maintained or lost. It is something from which we feel ourselves inexorably, inevitably, distant. Talking of places as ‘unspoilt’ evokes just this notion. So do many aspects of place-conservation, which are all too often attempts to freeze a (particular view of a) place at a (selected) moment in time. And, to return to our opening examples, even that innocent feeling in the Parisian café of a dislocation between past and present, that somehow coffee is French but Kentucky Fried Chicken is not, is at least potentially falling into that notion of tradition as something which is almost inevitably in the past and to be lost.

Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic (1993) presents an interpretation of something which might be called tradition (he dubs it ‘the changing same’) but which overturns these static and bounded notions. Here, in black culture on both sides of the ocean, is a ‘tradition’ which is internally varied, constantly being built, moulded, added to, and which depends for this, and for its strength and vitality, not on an inward-looking self-preservation but precisely on the dynamism which comes from interconnection.

There is, moreover, a further issue arising from the fact that the past of a
place is as open to a multiplicity of readings as is the present. Moreover, the
claims and counter-claims about the present character of a place depend in
almost all cases on particular, rival, interpretations of its past. A small
example may help to illustrate this point. In 1993, there was a flurry of
dispute over a proposed development in a small area in the Wye Valley on
the borders of England and Wales. The proposal was to turn an existing set
of buildings into a ‘traditional farm’ where local products, including crafts,
would be sold, and where there would be a restaurant and car park. This
scheme would, it was argued by its proponents, serve as a tourist attraction
and bring in a source of income. The proposal aroused considerable, high-
profile, opposition. The opposition, perhaps unusually in such cases, came
in major part from newcomers to the area: professional people in the arts,
the media, and suchlike who, presumably, had migrated here from other
parts of the country. Their opposition to the development centred on the
argument that it was ‘inappropriate’, a term which implied agreement on the
nature of the place. Their view of the place, conditioned and manifested in
their decision to move there, was clothed in quotations from Wordsworth.
For them the place offered a romantic association with nature and what was
termed ‘seclusion’: one of them called the place ‘an area which for centuries
has been sought for its seclusion’. (One immediate line of enquiry might be
to ask: seclusion from what/whom? Seclusion, presumably, from the very
worlds from which the incomes which enable them to retreat to this place are
drawn.) This view of the place was greeted with a mixture of anger and wry
amusement by those local people who supported the scheme. For them, the
place was where they had always lived and, crucially, where they made their
living, largely from farming. ‘Nature’ was the physical basis for agricultural
activity. ‘Seclusion’ probably just meant long distances to suppliers and
markets. For them this was a place of work, and this has been its history too.
As one of the proposers of the development remarked, ‘they quoted Words-
worth when once the Wye Valley was highly-industrialized with iron works,
charcoal works, all sorts of things. It’s now a major tourist area . . .’.

What we have here are two different interpretations of the identity of a
place, each clearly based on the different socio-geographical position of the
groups which promote them. Moreover, each of these contesting interpre-
tations depends on the mobilisation of a particular reading of the area’s past.
(Just how different, indeed contradictory, these readings are is indicated by
the fact that farming and farmers – the economic activity and the daily,
yearly round of labour in the area – are completely erased in the protestors’
interpretation. The latter are cited as having campaigned partially to remove
farm work even from the present, with a scheme to prevent tractors and
noisy machines being operated for two days each week!) And these conflict-
ing interpretations of the past, serving to legitimate a particular understand-
ing of the present, are put to use in a battle over what is to come. What are at
issue are competing histories of the present, wielded as arguments over what
should be the future.
Both of these histories of the past, moreover, are constructed so as to confirm the views and convictions of the present. It is this which enables them to warrant the building of particular futures. It is indeed a form of the ‘invention of tradition’ discussed by such authors as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm; what is evident here, however, is that such invention for the purpose of establishing the nature and coherence of a place is by no means confined to the level of the nation state. It is the kind of structure of argument in play in the working-class defence of London’s docklands against the building of Canary Wharf, in the white working-class defence of the same area against new, ethnic minority, neighbours, as well as in claims for a greater Serbia. It is, of course, a way of relating past and present (and – implicitly or explicitly – arguments about potential futures) which has been widely and thoroughly criticised. However, I want to argue here that debates over how to think the relationship between past, present and future can help us to reinvigorate the way in which we conceptualise geographical places. Put briefly, it helps us to think of them as temporal and not just spatial: as set in time as well as space.

Places, then, on the argument so far, can be understood as articulations of social relationships some of which will be to the beyond (the global), and these global relationships as much as the internal relationships of an area will influence its character, its ‘identity’. Moreover, this constitution through interconnection with other places is not something which is new (with our newly-appreciated globalisation, with foreign food on the High Street, or ‘immigrants’ in the neighbourhood); it has been as true of the past as it is true of today (although clearly the intensity, depth and direction of connections and influences all change over time). The identity of a place is thus not to be seen as inevitably to be destroyed by new importations. On this alternative reading that identity is always, and always has been, in process of formation: it is in a sense forever unachieved. (This, of course, does not mean that some things are not more ‘absorbed’ or incorporated into the place than others, nor conversely that some ‘foreign’ imports have not had more influence than others. Nor, more importantly from a political point of view, does it mean that no distinctions can be made, no judgments or political stances taken, on what might be the interpretation of the past or the most preferred directions for the future. These are issues which will be addressed later.) What is important to note for now, however, is that much will depend on the nature of the links made, in the construction of notions of the identity of place, between past, present and future. The identity of places is very much bound up with the histories which are told of them, how those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant.

The construction of the present of places
The past is present in places in a variety of ways.

It is present materially. Patrick Wright has described a building on Hackney High Street. Originally built as an entertainment palace, ‘with
exotic domes thrown in for orientalist effect’, it subsequently became a cinema, to be converted by the 1980s into a Turkish mosque and community centre. For the older white working class of the area the place is an ex-cinema, a physical reminder of days when the High Street used to be different, when there were proper shops and a dominant, settled, long-local community (or so the memory runs).

Or the past may be present in resonance, whether actually from the past or reinserted as a self-conscious building-in of ‘local character’. Words, language, names, can be important here. The significance of naming in London Docklands is notable. Is the area Docklands, Millwall, the Isle of Dogs or the Venice of the North? For self-conscious long-time locals the names of streets have been used to evoke a romance of its working-class past: all pubs and football, hard work and community. The use of the same street names today, and the careful naming and renaming of warehouses-converted-into-apartments is also an attempt to evoke a connection with a past, equally romanticised but this time in a different version. In his considerations of the worlds that were nineteenth-century Paris, Walter Benjamin writes that the only thing that remains of the increasingly rapid succession of perceptual worlds is their names: ‘The forces of perversion work deep within these names, which is why we maintain a world in the names of old streets’. And the past may be present in the unembodied memories of people, and in the conscious and unconscious constructions of the histories of the place.

The past, then, helps make the present. But it is a two-way process. For all these presences of the past are multi-vocal. The building with orientalist effects on Hackney High Street may for some recall days of strong local community. But what ambiguity do the ‘exotic domes’ produce in those from that very ‘Orient’, the Turkish community among others, who now live in this place? Thoughts of a history of somewhere else entirely? Distant images of some village on the Anatolian plateau? Or possibly an understanding that that Hackney local community built its self-assuredness in part precisely in relation to other places, on the basis of stories of other places, and on their interpretation of the identity of those places? The street names of Docklands, equally, evoke different meanings and can be used to different effect, when embedded in different histories. It is not just that a world is ‘maintained’ in the names of old streets. It is also that a (historical) world is created. If the past transforms the present, helps thereby to make it, so too does the present make the past. All of which is really a way of saying that in trying to understand the identity of places we cannot – or, perhaps, should not – separate space from time, or geography from history.

When presented with the name of a place what form does the concept take in your mind? Manchester? Germany? Hackney? Most often, I believe, when asked to think of places we think of them mainly in spatial terms. If pushed, we might indicate them on a map. It is there; it covers that area. After all, places are part of the basic subject-matter of geography. We know,
or we ought to know, that they are difficult to demarcate. Where do ‘the Home Counties’ begin and end? Could you draw a line around the Scottish Lowlands? Where, exactly, is ‘Europe’? In some cases the frontiers are deliberately maintained. The boundaries of nation-states are held in place by political power, legal agreement, physical force. They cut across a million social interactions. They are one of the many ways we have of ordering, and of subjecting to power-relations, the incredible complexity of social space.

But, more importantly, what I want to consider here is the ways in which places also stretch through time. Places as depicted on maps are places caught in a moment; they are slices through time. Yet, not only does that particular articulation of social relations which we are at the moment naming as that place have a history (as we have seen, it is the product of the historical accumulation and combination of numerous layers of such articulations over time) but also any claim to establish the identity of that place depends upon presenting a particular reading of that history. The competing claims about the ‘essential nature’ of the Wye Valley were competing claims not just about its present but about its history. The differences lay in the interpretation of that history. The claims made by some for the essentially working-class nature of London’s docklands depend not only upon a particular reading of that area’s past but also on a particular demarcation of it: a longer period of history, for example, would have taken in other dramatic changes, not least that when the docks were first constructed and an area of agricultural land and settlements was built over in the physical manifestation of a new articulation of social relations – when a community of dockers was created.

These kinds of dispute, then, involve a contestation of claims each of which is trying to stabilise, and to establish as dominant, the meaning, not just of a particular place-on-a-map as a slice through time, but of what I call an ‘envelope of space-time’. The interpretation of Docklands as working class, or of the Wye Valley as secluded, depends not just on a particular characterisation of a place as it is now but on a demarcation of, and a reading of, the historically changing form of that (always externally-connected) nexus of social relations. The invention of tradition is here about the invention of the coherence of a place, about defining and naming it as a ‘place’ at all. It is for this reason that it may be useful to think of places, not as areas on maps, but as constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time; and to think of particular attempts to characterise them as attempts to define, and claim coherence and a particular meaning for, specific envelopes of space-time.

It might be easiest to illustrate this notion of places in space-time by taking as an example one of the apparently most self-evident of places: the nation state. Quite apart, for the moment, from the constant struggles to define, and to make cohere, their internal characters, what are they simply in terms of bounded spaces? Think of Poland, of Paraguay, or another of
today's nation states. They once did not exist; during their existence their boundaries have frequently shifted; and maybe one day in the future they will not exist again. The boundaries of nation states are temporary, shifting phenomena which enclose, not simply 'spaces', but relatively ephemeral envelopes of space-time. The boundaries, and the naming of the space-time within them, are the reflections of power, and their existence has effects. Within them there is an active attempt to 'make places'.

The local confrontation over the establishment of a tourist attraction in the Wye Valley involved similar, though less formal, attempts to establish as dominant competing readings of a particular envelope of space-time to which that name – the Wye Valley – could be attached.

And currently before us there lies a question of place-definition which brings together all these considerations. The issue is the identity of a place called 'Europe'. This is a project which represents an attempt to impose a boundary where there has for long been a lack of distinction, or a limit which has shifted or been debated. (I was taught at school that Europe 'really' stretched east to the Urals, and that 'Africa' only 'really' began south of the Sahara.) To call the current Economic Union 'Europe' is therefore to appropriate a name with a history of a much wider resonance. It is also to claim a name for a place whose boundaries will shift in the future, as other countries join, or even leave, its membership. But more interesting than the delimitation of its boundaries are the attempts to define the character of this place. All of the attempts depend on a reading of both history and geography: what is at issue here is space-time. And each attempt at identity-definition depends on a particular reading of that history. Moreover, those claims for European identity which look set to become the dominant ones generally evoke a continuous and singular history, an uninterrupted progress to the present, and it is by and large an internal one. They seek the European character within, denying its constant external connections: the fact of the construction of the local character of Europe through its constant association with the global, whether invasions from the vast openesses of the East in the distant past, the initial connections of mercantilism and imperialism (from the China Seas to North Africa to the Caribbean), or the physical presence of 'ethnic minorities' within its borders now. If the 'outside world' is recognised at all in this approach to place-definition it is through negative counterposition (this place is not Islamic, not part of the Muslim world), rather than through positive interrelation.

In many political struggles, writ large or small, and in many aspects of daily life, the issue of the identification and characterisation of places is a significant component. It is important, therefore, to recognise the process for what it is. First, it involves time as well as space, and their inseparable connection. Second, the characterisation of both spatial and temporal aspects can take a variety of particular forms. And third, whichever view comes to be dominant, and by whatever means its hegemony is assured, the
particular characterisation of that envelope of space-time, that place, which it proposes is only maintained by the exercise of power relations in some form. The identity of places, indeed the very identification of places as particular places, is always in that sense temporary, uncertain, and in process.

Concluding thoughts
The description, definition and identification of a place is thus always inevitably an intervention not only into geography but also, at least implicitly, into the (re)telling of the historical constitution of the present. It is another move in the continuing struggle over the delineation and characterisation of space-time.

On what terms, then, can it be done responsibly? Some elements of a possible ‘progressive’ characterisation of place have been suggested, both here and elsewhere. Thus, it has been argued, the localism/parochialism of many characterisations of place can be avoided, or at least reduced or interrupted, by recognising always the global construction of the local. Moreover, these links with the rest of the world must be characterised as positive, active, interconnections (as in Europe’s active relation with its Empires, for instance, and the contribution to its identity which those interconnections provided) rather than as a relation of negative, exclusivist counterposition (as in ‘Europe is not Islamic’). What is at issue here, then, is relocating this place in a positive relation to a wider space-time and thus recharacterising it by redrawing its connections.

But what of the temporal dimension? What of the relation between a place’s present and its past? This essay began with perceived disjunctures between past and present. Later examples focused on competing tales of continuity. All depended, implicitly or explicitly, on notions of seamless histories and on similar notions of tradition. And one strategy is certainly to install our own version of these stories, of these relationships between past and present, which can lay an alternative basis for a (different) future: the strategy of writing a radical history. Thus, to write as I did earlier that ‘the new intrusions are no more from outside, nor more out of place than were in their time many of the components of the currently-accepted character of the place’ does not mean that any new future for a place, any proposed development, is equally acceptable, that no positions can be taken, no political judgements made. And conceiving the place as a radical envelope of space-time is an important means of arguing such cases.

And yet . . . it is important to be aware that such histories may still depend upon the same notion of tradition, on an assumption of continuity between past and present, where the only real form of change resides in the tragedy of loss. Some of the claims of docklands communities, that this land was their land and the place somehow intrinsically working class, went precisely down this road. They evoked an essentialist, and ultimately untenable, view of the nature of place.
There are some current writers, perhaps most notably Fredric Jameson, who have interpreted the current period (usually characterised as ‘post-modern’) as one in which all sense of narrative, all lines of continuity between past and present, have broken down. For Jameson the current era is characterised by a rootless, and for him alternately terrifying and intoxicating, sense of simultaneity/instantaneity. It could be seen as a kind of extreme version of Benjamin’s monadic moment of the present, blasted from the homogenous continuity of history, the difference being that Benjamin’s concept is meant to function as providing the possibility of a radical politics, while Jameson’s instantaneity is interpreted rather as provoking the death of the political. Thus Homi Bhabha seems to be setting out alternatives:

Unlike the dead hand of history that tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial causal connections, we are now confronted with what Walter Benjamin describes as the blasting of a monadic moment from the homogenous course of history ‘establishing a conception of the present as the “time of the now”’. Yet are these the only alternatives for a history of place: an essentialist continuity or a breaking of the relation altogether? Do we have to choose, in the terms in which this is usually presented, between temporality and spatiality? Perhaps the answer lies in insisting on both, but on forging a different relation between them. Perhaps a really ‘radical’ history of a place would be one which did not try to present either simple temporal continuity or only spatial simultaneity with no sense of historical depth. A way of understanding which, in the end, did not try to seal a place up into one neat and tidy ‘envelope of space-time’ but which recognised that what has come together, in this place, now, is a conjunction of many histories and many spaces.

NOTES

5 This case is examined in more detail in Pat Jess and Doreen Massey, ‘The contestation of place’, in Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (eds) A place in the world? Place, culture and globalization (Oxford University Press in association with the Open University, forthcoming).
6 Peter Dunn, ‘Valley folk divided over “farm for tourists”’, The Independent, 7 August 1993.
7 Ibid.
10 Pat Jess and Doreen Massey, 'The contestation of place'.

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