

# Introduction to understandings of place: a multidisciplinary symposium

Brandn Green<sup>1</sup> · Kristal Jones<sup>2</sup>

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## Introduction

Place is central to Environmental Studies and Sciences. As a colloquial concept, it informs and structures the ways we teach, undertake research, and communicate about environmental problems. Place is often used to bring meaning to observations of change in impersonal analytical categories, where it proves to be essential and at times imprecise. Our goal with this symposium, and the conference panels and lecture series that generated it, has been to explore and clarify how place can be a useful descriptive and analytical concept for Environmental Studies and Sciences. Place, and our strategy for examining it, align with the experiences of those us working in Environmental Studies and Sciences who share “a common experience that broad advances in environmental knowledge usually require disciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches together with humility about what we know and don’t know as individuals and as disciplines” (Rosenbaum 2011: 1).

Place as a descriptive term is fundamental to human experience because it reminds us of the occurrence of the unique. In an era of globalization, mass production, khaki housing developments, and blowhard television announcers, our students and colleagues are working to unearth and protect the distinctive, the historically contingent, and the ecologically valuable. This is done not as it was in past eras, where dualisms and essentialism sought to create the unique by

identifying the pure or untouched, but in a manner fitting the current cultural climate of mash-ups, collage, and pastiche. Place as an analytical frame guides systematic inquiries to identify the idiosyncratic ways that global forces are impacting communities at all scales. Our cultural histories are emblazoned on the landscapes and spaces in which we live and through which we pass; place helps us to help our students and ourselves identify and analyze these relationships.

The symposium follows this methodological orientation, and we sought and received submissions from colleagues with a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. Authors were first recruited from a semester-long lecture series at Bucknell University called Understanding Place. This lecture series was conceptualized and coordinated by co-editor Brandn Green, Director of the Place Studies Program in the Bucknell Center for Sustainability and the Environment. Four of the participants in the lectures series have contributed articles to this symposium. The coeditors also organized two sessions, Using Place I and II, at the 2014 AESS conference held in New York City. Of the presenters who participated in these panels, five contributed articles to the symposium. A total of nine papers are included, plus this introduction and a conclusion authored by coeditor Jason Cons.

The methodological and conceptual approach developed within the Place Studies Program at Bucknell is multidisciplinary and applied, studying natural and human communities as coupled and complementary systems. Each piece of knowledge that is gained as one tries to understand a place is used in concert with other pieces, not as a singular contribution to a given academic tradition but as a quilt for understanding socially, historically, and geographically defined locales. Place studies in this sense do not have a disciplinary intellectual home, which gives it freedom for research and thinking that exists on disciplinary boundaries. In the context of a liberal arts university, we have seen the education process about understanding place strengthened by basic and integrated usage

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✉ Brandn Green  
bgreen@bucknell.edu  
Kristal Jones  
kjones@sesync.org

<sup>1</sup> Center for Sustainability and the Environment, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, USA

<sup>2</sup> National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center, Annapolis, MD, USA

of history, sociology, geography, philosophy, ethics, physical sciences, management, visual art, digital humanities, public health, literary studies, and environmental studies. Teaching that generates applied, community-based projects builds upon itself, as small projects evolve to become research projects that generate insights and innovations in discipline-specific research. As a process, the first step in our research and teaching is to develop an expertise in a locale by putting a range of disciplinary methods and perspectives together into a holistic understanding of place. Theory and primary research in an individual faculty member or student's given field then adds nuance and illumination to the quilt of our understanding of the place. It is a research dialectic that integrates knowledge of a particular place with theories that can help us to understand any place.

This is an approach we see in the wide range of thinkers using place both inside and outside Environmental Studies and Sciences. Within the tradition, can we imagine *A Sand County Almanac* happening outside of the sand counties? Muir is the Sierras, Thoreau the woods of New England, Annie Dillard is Tinker Creek. Each of these authors reflect the same dialectic of knowing a place, where an individual invests in a material geography, and then uses these particular experiences to elucidate and identify the forces that lead to the creation of that given place at that given time. When it works, they are able to use these experiences to illuminate broader trends and forces. We know types and aspects of all places then, through reading about and experiencing particular places. In this symposium, we see the same pattern, as authors use the Arctic and the Sahel, the Low country of South Carolina and the coastline of Jamaica Bay, as well as Fire Island, Quebec, and the Mississippi River as the particular that can help elucidate the general.

Place is more than place-specific inquiries, as we can see by examining the past issues of *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* (JESS), where place is used, both implicitly and explicitly, as a descriptive and analytical concept. It is fundamental to pedagogies and our most engaging undergraduate and graduate student learning strategies (Brenner et al. 2013; Wei et al. 2014; Cooke and Vermaire 2015). Places are used as a grouping variable for both residents of a region, and travelers and researchers who have visited particular places (McGillivray 2015). Place is a verb, both in terms of place-making (Alexander et al. 2014) and in the act of placing research and environmental problems (Poole and Hudgins 2014). Place is used as a container for political struggles (Carson 2015) and as the generator of political tensions (Barkin and DeSombre 2013). Real places are used in contrast to imagined places as thinkers in environmental studies wrestle with questions of embeddedness and embodiedness (Murphy and Dunlap 2012; Warren 2011; Fredericks 2012). We see the pursuit of place being used as a salve for uncertainty in the late-modern era, where calls for more regional

ethics and economic systems reflect deep ambivalence about globalization (Romsdahl et al. 2013). In making these elements explicit, and by linking them together, we see an important theoretical thread throughout the JESS collection. It is a thread that James Proctor explicitly explores in his essay which opens this symposium, in which he provides an overview of place theory in Geography as illustrative of a future of Environmental Studies and Sciences that is better equipped to engage a transitioning, varied, ecologically diverse planet.

The call for presentations and papers for this symposium unfolded as authors were recruited from the lecture series and conference panels and were given the following prompt:

Place, as both a location for study and a heuristic, can function as a robust analytical tool for interdisciplinary understandings of human-natural systems. It enables one to demonstrate how a locale is created through layers of ecology, social systems, economic structures, community contexts and symbolic meaning. The journal articles should be organized around key concepts/thematic words that are inherent building blocks for place as a concept. These are intended to make place as an analytical and theoretical tool more accessible to different disciplines. Authors are asked to use a key concept/idea and to couple each one with place. The idea is for each author to use her/his empirical work as an example of how the given concept interacts with/illuminates/problematises Place as a conceptual frame.

Through a collaborative process with the authors, we arrived at a collection of essays covering a range of topics and key concepts. Using examples of particular places, Kristen van Hoorweghe (Sociology) examines exclusion in Jamaica Bay, and the ways that the symbolic and physical boundaries of a park foster a new type of experienced space. Angela Halfacre (Political Science) explores how nostalgia is used to create meaning in the Low Country of South Carolina. These two essays focus on place-making as a social construction that reflects histories of human interaction with the natural landscape. In a similar vein, Andrew Stuhl (Environmental History) explores the idea of a cold place and Kristal Jones (Rural Sociology) the idea of a hot, dry place, to discuss how places are experienced, imagined, and created through human-environment interactions that are shaped by particular ecological conditions.

The natural landscape can be the backdrop for symbolic place-making, and it can also actively challenge the human assumptions about places. (Rachel Brummel, Environmental Studies) demonstrates how boundaries create challenges for the management of Asian carp and associated natural resources in the Mississippi River. And Paul Pinet (Geology) provides a view on how a barrier in a particular place, in this

case barrier islands, can generate tensions for human systems oriented toward static preservation of place. Clare Hinrichs (Rural Sociology), and Duane Griffin (Geography) provide the collection with a pair of essays centered on how place can help us add nuance to the ways we understand two ubiquitous and problematic concepts, Local, and Nature.

In total, the collection of articles in this symposium provides the reader with a set of ideas that reflect the disciplinary diversity that exists within and around Environmental Studies. We do not intend for this collection to be a comprehensive overview of place literature and place theory, as this could not be contained in a single journal issue and many excellent overviews and framings have already been completed (Giesecking et al. 2014; Peck 2005; Cresswell 2004; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003; Williams and Stewart 1998; Casey 1997; Lippard 1997; Feld and Basso 1997; Tuan 1977). Instead, we want to facilitate a creative engagement with ideas around place from a diverse collection of disciplinary perspectives. To accomplish this goal we used an essay format that aligns with the Commentary format of pieces in JESS. Commentary articles are peer-reviewed, short statements of opinion, description, and synthesis or summary, and are intended to provoke discussion and debate on a specific issue. Any criticisms about a lack of representativeness in the literature of any given essay should be directed toward us, the editors of the series, for putting constraints on the word count and format.

The conversation about place and the role it has as a key descriptive and analytical concept for human-environment interactions is ongoing, and we believe that the work done by the authors in this symposium helps to move it forward. Ideally, place enables us to continue to refine the language and theories we use to articulate human-environment interactions in a dynamic fashion as it provides a way for theoretical and applied multidisciplinary work.

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