



reflections on place-based policy

Notes from a presentation to the
Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy
(2019)

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great expectations of place

“This complex, mysterious aggregation that we call "place" resists the clinical reductionism towards which we are spurred by our heavy epistemological baggage. We have almost retrieved the concept and the reality from the extended hegemony of economics, but at times we uncritically swoon in adulation of the notion, which its elusive definition and its metaphoric allure. We are somewhat perplexed in the current age of globalization to witness the time-space compression, which at once appears to threaten the relevance of our places while facilitating something of a resurgence in our awarnes of place, and perhaps its revaluation.”

David Douglas

preface to *Place Peripheral*, 2015



reflections on place-based policy

... some thoughts shared with the Scottish Parliament's
Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy | Delivered October 29, 2019

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During the fall of 2019, I received funding support from the Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) Research and Exchange Mobility Grant program to complete research in Scotland to support my doctoral research program on place-based innovation and future-oriented public policy. This funding allowed me to spend time as a Visiting Researcher at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) in Edinburgh. I am incredibly fortunate to have been supported by the RPLC, as well as mentored, advised, and generously given opportunities to learn and participate by Dr. Jane Atterton and the team at the Rural Policy Centre at SRUC, where I was primarily based during my time in Scotland. This support is in addition to the mentorship and advice of Drs. Ryan Gibson, Sean Markey, and Wayne Caldwell, who are my Dissertation Advisory Committee at the University of Guelph.

During my time in Scotland, I had the great privilege to have five minutes to share some reflections on place-based policy with the Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Rural Policy. I was the last speaker in an excellent program of rapid-fire, five-minute interventions that highlighted issues related to demographic change in rural Scotland and place-based responses to those changes. As an outsider - a Canadian - and someone who has worked on all sides of questions of place-based interventions - from policy to practice to research - it was a tremendous opportunity to learn from experts in Scotland and to share my insights and experiences.

What follows are my notes from that presentation, and an invitation to continue to conversation through the research on place, rural development, and public policy being undertaken by RPLC members and everyone invested in the future of rural places.



As I was thinking about what I might share in five short minutes to wrap up an evening full of insightful speakers, I thought it was interesting to note that I am a recovering public servant turned academic who has worked on nearly every side of questions of place and policy throughout my career so far. There is robust evidence in the broad range of research that is pursued to explore in great detail about the challenges and opportunities of demographic change in rural places. But I thought I might pull us back to ask a more basic question:

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PLACE?

I have two examples that might help indicate where I'm coming from when I ask this question. As a Canadian in Scotland, my sense of place-identity is national. When asked where I'm from, I simply say Canada. However, at home, depending on who I'm speaking with, I might say I'm from the Grey-Bruce area of Ontario, where I have spent the better part of the last decade living and working and which is something of a spiritual home to me, or I might say Woodstock, which is the small town where I grew up, or I might say I am Jim and Marjorie Weeden's daughter, with connections to Paisley (where my Dad is from) and Embro (where my Mom is from), and we live on the old Royackers farm. My ties to place are fluid, layered, and complex — and all of the above answers are more or less meaningful in different contexts. Each answer tells a different story about the role of place in my identity and my identity as it is tied to place.

The second example comes from something I think about every time I travel by train and comes from the imitable Doreen Massey, a pioneer in how we think about space, place, and power. Professor Massey reminded us that when you are taking a train, you are not simply zooming across a flat, empty surface. You are slicing across a myriad of stories. While the woman you see waiting at the platform at a stop along the way may be forever frozen there in your mind, in reality, she continued on about her life. Her ghost hovers in your story while her own continues on, and these stories all overlap with the stories of the land and people we navigate every day.



Doreen Massey on place...

In this way, Professor Massey had a wonderful way of inviting those of us interested in place to think deeper. In 1991, she encouraged us to reframe our sense of place, that places are not just areas with boundaries around them, but are more like articulated moments in networks of social relations. In practical terms, nearly two decades later, place-based approaches to rural policy (or any policy, really) still struggle with Massey's four arguments for developing this progressive sense of place.. Massey argued:

PLACES ARE DYNAMIC, NOT FROZEN IN TIME.

PLACES ARE NOT SIMPLY AREAS OF GEOGRAPHY WITH BOUNDARIES AROUND THEM.

PLACES HAVE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES.

PLACES ARE SOMEWHERE IN PARTICULAR.

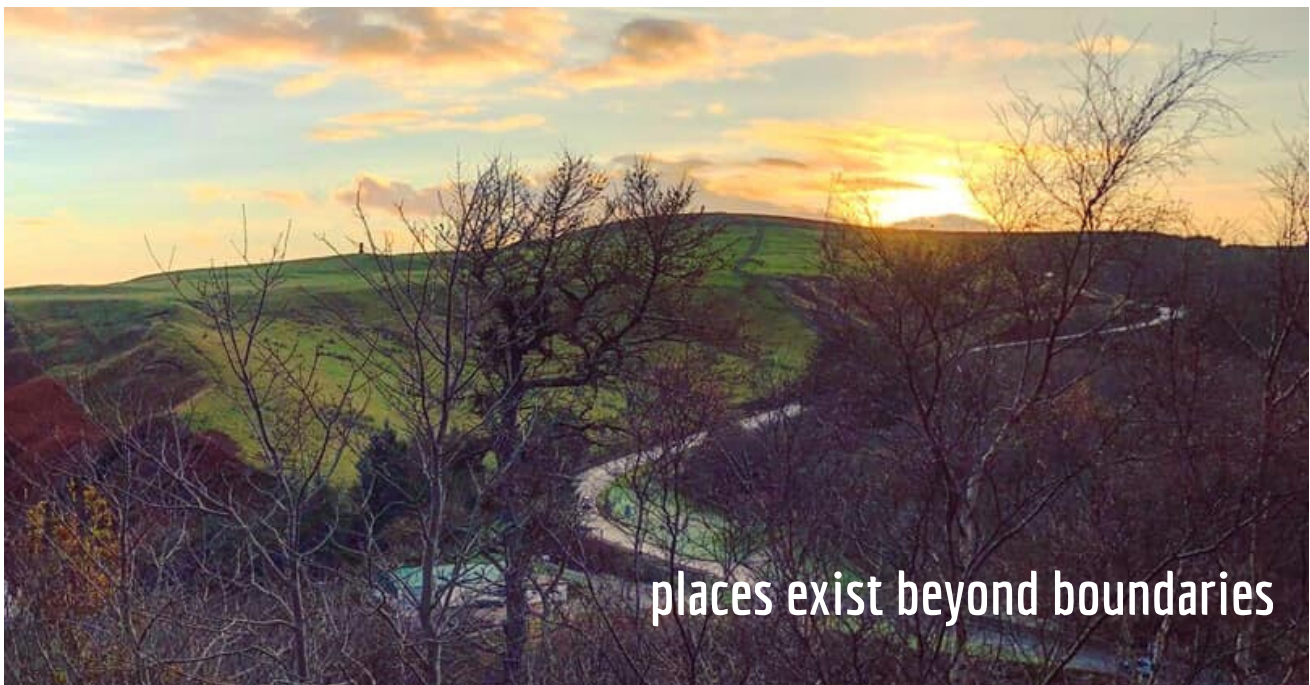




Firstly, when dealing with place-based policy approaches to rural development, we must be careful not to frame place as static and frozen in time. Places are processes. As Massey highlights, just as “capital is not a thing, it is a process”, and so too are places. So we must be careful not to reduce the great complexity of rural places to the statistics we gather at a certain point in time. I’m thinking in particular about the remarkable research by Highlands and Islands Enterprise about the attachment of youth in the Highlands and Islands regions of Scotland to those places. I’m also thinking about how, in some places, the addition of two people or one new business may have a major impact on the quality of life and experience of that place — while the addition of 200 people may be barely felt elsewhere.



We must also be careful to note what narratives we’re highlighting or hiding in data — whether consciously or unconsciously. At the Sustainable Communities Conference in St. John’s this fall, Ray Bollman highlighted how successful rural development actually transitions rural places into small urban — and statistics sometimes don’t show the stories under the numbers. Numbers can tell us broad trends of the recent past and they may indicate the immediate future, but they are only partial tools for developing the kind of foresight we need to see the possibility of place through the lens of multiple uncertain futures.

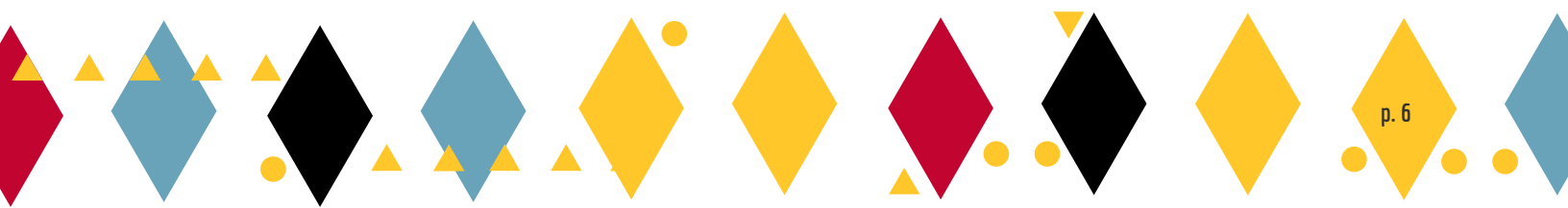


Second, places do not have simple boundaries. While boundaries might be necessary in government and research in order to make things manageable or align priorities, they are not a precondition of understanding or experiencing place. Spatial realities certainly play a significant role in shaping place, as our interaction with the landscape, built environment, and our imaginings about our place in relationship to our geography shape our identities and the way we see and feel our way through the world. However, these things lie beyond administrative boundaries.



Rather than being defined solely in relation to the outside — as rural is so often defined in opposition to the urban — places can and should be defined through their linkages to each other. Zita Cobb from the Fogo Island Inn in Newfoundland perhaps unknowingly echoed Massey's counter argument to the flattening effects of globalization on policy and programming when she argued at the the Sustainable Communities Conference in St. John's this fall that we should be striving towards a globalized network of highly localized places.

Moving beyond rather arbitrary spatial definitions of place may help us overcome the divisiveness we see playing out across the world — here in the UK through Brexit, at home in Canada through the renewed strength of western alienation (and calls for a 'Wexit') and ongoing questions over Quebec's desire for sovereignty, and the simmering tensions that come from the ahistorical drawing of borders that ignores the contexts of the people who came before colonialism. This is a struggle for policy makers and researchers alike — and we must be careful not to reduce places to isolated dots on the map or geographic areas alone.

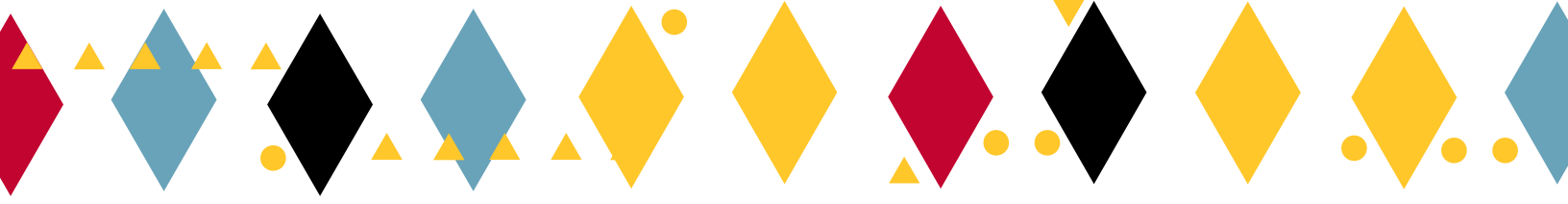


Third, and building on the previous two points, no place has a single, unique identity. Just as people are layered and complex, places hold layers and layers of internal conflicts — conflict over the past, over the present, over the future, over who and what gets to belong to a place. Future oriented rural policy must be sensitive to this — or risk strengthening the slippery slopes of nationalism, sentimentalized heritages, and antagonism of newcomers.



As I shared above, our personal place-identities are complex — and they change with time. Rural places have life-cycles just as people do, as highlighted by a recent piece in The Guardian about Little Bay, Newfoundland. Place and identity are transitive and transformative. This is a good reflection for those working in policy to exercise caution and curiosity in terms of the way we might be superimposing ideas of place in our well-intentioned interventions. Who are we designing these policies and programs for? Do they have a voice in the future of their place? Are we prepared for the identities of places to change, shift, and evolve over time — or are we clinging to some imagined past that may or may not have existed?



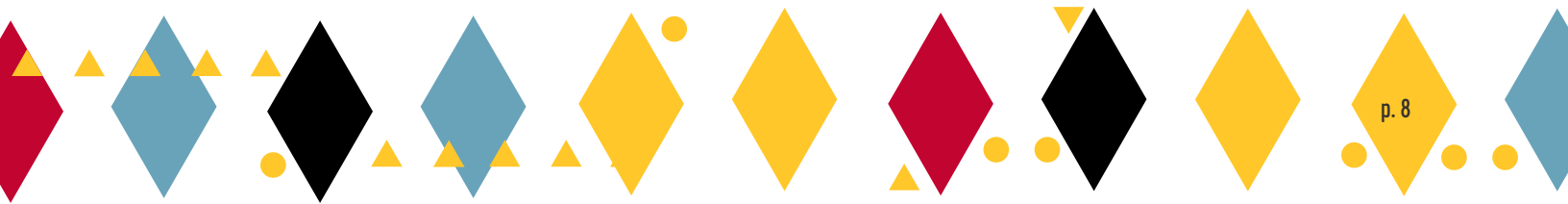


Fourth, together, these challenges mean that places are shaped by a distinct mixture of social relations that create layer upon layer of specific contexts that produce **place as somewhere in particular**.



So place-based policy must wrestle with the overlay of spatial realities, interacting and conflicting identities, and the wider networks that connect people and place. This is no small order. As place based approaches enjoy more attention, we must be careful to not to reduce places to containers where things happen — but as constantly evolving and reinforcing feedback loops that are alive with stories.

Some stories are accidents of history or geography, sometimes bad blood and legends passed down over generations — and in rural places, these stories are as important to shaping the future as any strategy for supporting local enterprise development. Indeed, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and the stories we tell ourselves about rural places, may be the most powerful leverage point in what allows or denies certain strategies to succeed or fail in any given place.





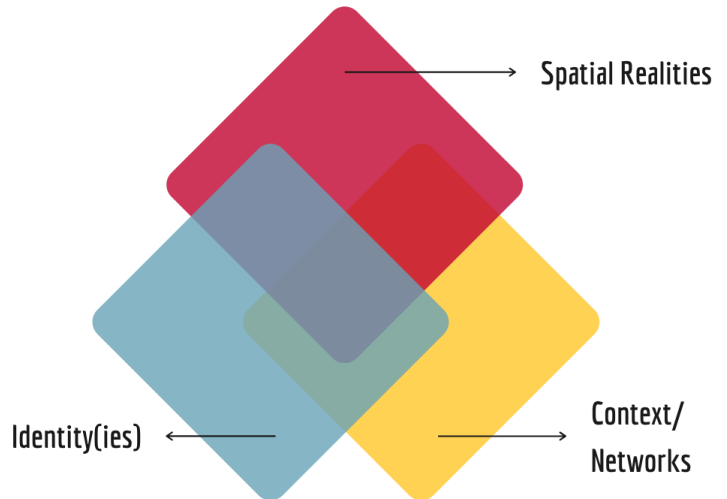
Finally, in summary, the interaction of spatial realities, identities, and the linkages of contextual networks offers us 'a way into' a progressive sense of place that may help us think differently about the way we address the challenges and opportunities faced by rural people. Place-based policy must be responsive, adaptive, and capable of nuance. As we look toward to the future, now more than ever, we need to look beyond the economic markers that draw boundaries around what is rural and what is urban to dig deeper into the stories that construct all places, and the things that link them together.

Place is somewhere in particular.

Places have multiple identities.

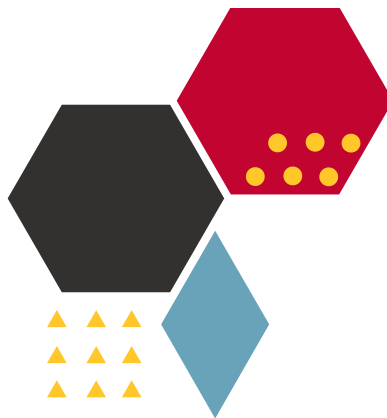
Places are dynamic processes - not frozen in time.

Places are not containers or flat surfaces - they are alive and composed of layers of stories written through time and space.



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BUILDING RURAL POLICY THROUGH INTERNATIONAL
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