

## **Editorial Introduction**

HARRIET PARRY *University of Brighton*

*Guest Editor Mediating Place Networking Knowledge*

This special issue features nine contributions from postgraduate and early career scholars who responded to a call for papers on the theme of Mediating Place for the 2020 MeCCSA PGR conference at the University of Brighton, which sadly had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to take a moment here to thank and acknowledge the hard work of the authors in writing their articles and the reviewers who freely gave their time during a period when we were all struggling with its ongoing impacts. I would also like to thank and acknowledge those who were not able to complete their papers for the multiple reasons that the social and political fallout of the pandemic has caused. The editorial team were no less affected and particular thanks go to Dr Jo Pilcher (University of Brighton) for her work in originally pulling the project together, and to former Editors in Chief of *Networking Knowledge* Bissie Anderson and Rebecca Jones (University of Strathclyde).

### **Mediating Place/Space**

The diversity of ways in which this issue's theme 'Mediating Place' can be considered and applied is reflected in the range of responses and disciplines from which its contributors are working. In choosing this as the journal's title, acknowledging its Western ontological positioning, the term 'place' is not used instead of or in opposition to the term 'space' as can often be the case. Rather, 'place' is applied as a useful means for imagining a setting. Somewhere where something happens or has happened, working in the full knowledge that this definition is by no means absolute. For a much richer discussion on the use of both the terms 'space' and 'place', I have posed the question of their meaning to Cultural Geographer Professor David Crouch in our interview in the following section. Crouch's reflections work well to conceptually foreground the diverse work of the post doctorate and early career researchers represented throughout the body of the journal.

The variety of the contributor's conceptions of place is reflected in their differing styles of papers and the methods they have employed. What *is* common to all however is that their work remains rooted in subjective human perception. One particular research method that has been affected by the lockdown restrictions has been replaced and in-person participant research. Journal contributor Rachel Jones took this opportunity to reflect on how she

adapted her collaborative creative research methodology to those restrictions. In her article ‘Visible Place in the Imagined Landscape’ (2022), Jones describes the act of having to dismantle and piece together her work to find new meaning. She suggests that this reframing has perhaps offered a more democratic and less mediated way of gathering her data (Jones 2022). It is exciting to see the act of dismantling and reframing to offer novel conceptual frameworks resonates throughout the issue. Here we introduce research that often interferes with and questions how ‘place’ and/or ‘space’ is traditionally conceived, between and across academic disciplines.

As Guest Editor, working in the field of heritage, design and material culture I would like to declare my own interventions. With such a rich cross-section of articles available I have decided to group them thematically rather than by the disciplines in which the authors are working. In the knowledge that I am creating separate sub-themes that are in reality intrinsically interconnected, I hope that the different foci will introduce readers to fields that they are not familiar and perhaps also encourage them to create their own connections.

Moving from the ‘material’ through to the ideational, the themes are:

**Place as Material**

**Identity Through Place**

**Place in the Imaginary**

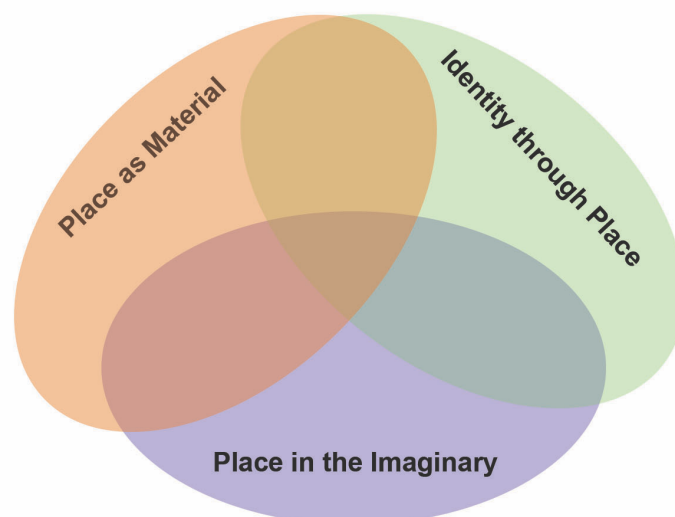


Figure 1. Venn diagram illustrating the journal’s three themes. Harriet Parry

## **Place as Material**

The theme of ‘Place as Material’ is not being applied here to describe a place’s physical nature or fixity, but to locate its role in the research being undertaken in the three pieces herein. Guided by a research practice I was introduced to through my study of design history and material culture, the enquiry is always rooted in, and remains fixed to a core object or element, the ‘material’. The first piece I have allocated in this section is an interview between myself and cultural geographer Professor David Crouch. Here the material is place in its conceptual form and through our discussion that concept resonates through earth, bodies, art and social justice (Crouch, Parry 2022). Speaking from the fields of museology and visual culture, the second piece finds place track the cultural biography of the creation and reception of Italian Street Art taken from its physical form to digital display (Vavassori 2022). Finally, founded in the field of heritage studies, the material here is place as manifested through a people centred research methodology (Parry 2022).

The opening piece is an interview I conducted with academic and artist Emeritus Professor David Crouch (University of Derby) which took place in the autumn of 2020. Crouch’s research focuses on the vibrancy of the everyday, finds joy in the human embodied connection to the ‘mundane’ and is purposefully unapologetic about drawing on the subjective and the emotional. Entitled ‘Creatively Considering Place’ the interview explores Crouch’s general conceptions of place and his choice to foreground ‘space’ throughout his work. As our email conversation unfolded over time, his responses also began to demonstrate how his academic work has a material connection with the way he expresses those conceptions through his visual art. Examples of his art are included throughout the piece, and were created between 3 and 7 years ago. He explains ‘each emerges through my felt awareness of the where I am, have been, at the time.’<sup>1</sup> Crouch has provided brief creative reflections of each artwork to help those using e-readers draw closer to the works in addition to the shorter Alt-Text descriptions that we created together. He writes with a particular cadence and quality that reflects his artistic style and serves as an alternative to some of the traditional modes of rational academic dissemination that can disembodify and displace what it means to be human.

Valentina Vavassori deals with a different form of displacement in her paper ‘(Un)placing Street Art: Augmented Reality and Urban Museums’, taking her conception of the role that

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from an email exchange between Crouch and Parry in January 2022.

Street Art has on the identity of a place through the material and into the digital (Vavassori 2022). Experiencing visual culture via digital platforms has become an increasingly familiar format in recent months, and its advantages and drawbacks much discussed. Vavassori's paper looks to the role that digital platforms have had in recording and displaying urban Street Art through online mapping, a medium that has become almost globally accessible. Through her case study of The Museum of Augmented Urban Art in Milan (2017) she brings into focus the narrative role of street art in the embodied experience of place and identity. Street Art is traditionally a genre that is inherently emplaced, contextually contingent, frequently counter-hegemonic and purposefully ephemeral. In analysing the affect of digital display and mediation on the pieces she is able to gain a deeper insight into the connection between artists, their art, the viewer, cultural identity and place through the impacts of its 'un-bounding'. Vavassori explains that these pieces have been transformed to represent multiple forms of a city's memory and heritage that shift depending on their physical and digital biographies. In being absorbed into a power structure that was not considered in their creation, Vavassori argues that their digital dissemination and interpretation acts, following James Clifford, as a novel form of 'contact zone' (Vavassori 2022).

Where the Street Art that Vavassori discusses has been recontextualised by digital museological practices, the final piece in this section, 'Places of Possibility' aims to draw the reader back to an emplaced experience of a heritage site that has been explicitly preserved to represent a particular form of British national identity (Parry 2022). The video essay was originally created for the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) 'Futures' conference in 2020, and was adapted in 2021 for publication in this digital issue. Her contribution introduces an interdisciplinary methodology developed through the theatre design art of Scenography, that encompasses the multi-faceted and multi-sensory ways of understanding and communicating experience of place. Through its audio-visual format Parry seeks to draw the viewer into the folds of a phenomenal experience of an officially designated heritage site, and in sharing these embodied encounters communicate what they might actually mean to the individual identities that they have been preserved *for*.

## Identity through Place

The ways in which places can shape or become aligned with personal and collective identities are considered across many disciplines that are curious about human interaction with their environment. The three pieces in this section, in their distinct variety, each offer examples of how this idea might manifest. Here the authors attend to the concept of identity in literature through the ‘cultural imaginary’ of the North American war veteran (Collier 2022), the ‘pilgrimage’ of Beatles fans to Liverpool (Young 2022) and the retention and inscription of identity through home-making making by Tuvaluan Pacific migrants in New Zealand (Ghezal 2022).

Rebecca Young conducted and analysed ethnographic interviews to examine the role that the City of Liverpool had in shaping the shared identities of Beatles fans visiting the band’s birth places and cultural home. She contends that through these visits to sites to which the band were connected they are conducting an act of pilgrimage ‘as a physical voyage and an inner journey’ (Young 2022). She finds that the fans are actively engaged in re-connecting with their past identities through a ‘physical experience of the site in the present’ and in some cases having what can only be described as a spiritual experience (Young 2022). The authentic experience of pilgrimage for the fans appears to rely on, for example, being able to sit where band members sat or sing where band members sang. The places remain static and the fans come to them to ‘reconfirm and connect with that part of their identity’ (Young 2022). The reassuring stability of place holding identity is one closely guarded and often culturally contested. Stability is an option no longer available to many of the continually growing diasporic communities that have been uprooted through factors such as war and climate change around the globe.

Amina Ghezal’s research focusses on the experience of Tuvaluan migrants who have migrated to New Zealand because of irreversible factors such as rising sea levels in Oceania. Migration has historically been a part of Tuvaluan and other Pacific Islander’s cultures to islands in the area for centuries. However, Ghezal explains, the shift in environmental balance and growing population have forced the Tuvaluans to seek a more permanent economically and environmentally sustainable option outside of their seafaring culture. By following a *Talanoa* approach, a Tuvaluan form of conversation and sharing, she learns of the inscription of identity that the migrants have needed to perform on the host-place in order to grow roots and make these new places ‘home’. Ghezal’s conversations with 40 participants illustrates some of the intersectionality that exists within all ‘communities’ that can so easily

considered as one. Through the participant's voices she uses her paper to discuss the many meanings of 'home', and how this is emotionally and practically reflected in the Tuvaluan migrant's work to 'expand their roots and reconfigure the sense and meaning of home in an environmentally and culturally different place' (Ghezal 2022).

As an exploration of identity through place, the above could not be more different from Sarah Collier's close reading and cultural critique of two works of fictional literature, *Cherry* (Nico Walker 2019) and *War Porn* (Roy Scranton 2016). Here it is the identity of the military war veteran and its role in the 'cultural imaginary' of the USA that serves to define a certain sense of place and legitimise geopolitical aggression (Collier 2022). Collier explains that through their narrative both authors seek to disrupt the ideologically driven concept of the white military 'trauma hero' that underpins this mythology. Her analysis unpacks the way that the authors inscribe the narratives of place, carrying the 'there' of conflict in the Middle-East to the 'here' of white suburban North America, through the bodies and minds of the book's protagonists. Collier draws her critique beyond her conclusion that the authors have been unsuccessful in their aim. Indeed she argues that these anti-heroes serve only to reinscribe and geopolitically re-territorialise a hegemonic discourse of idealised white masculinity through representing its antithesis of 'abject masculinity' (2022). And this in-turn problematises the privileged place that the author's white, male voices still hold in the critique of western warfare (Collier 2022).

### **Place in the Imaginary**

Although each of the three papers within this section are rooted in the material, I consider here the necessary leaps that the authors have made to imagine the 'place' that *becomes* through creative human interaction with that material. It is the experience of the material, through literature (Ferrer 2022), robotic avatars (Robertson 2022), and creative deconstruction and reconstruction of landscape through visual media (Jones 2022), that forms an imaginary place in the reader's mind. All the authors in this section are as interested in *how* this happens as they are in what happens, and this helps to draw focus on the imaginary in all of our interactions with place.

Berta Ferrer in her paper 'The unconventional form of the novel as a place of encounter: the reader's self-awareness' explores four authors that have applied 'unconventional visual devices' to disrupt the expected relationship that a reader might have with 'standard novel'. Beginning her journey in the mid 18th century with Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*

(1759-1767), Ferrer explores how experimentation with printing and writing conventions have sought to transform the relationship between the text and the reader, and sets these texts against the current context of transformations in the way printed books, and our reading of them, are being ‘challenged by the immediacy, dynamism and fluidity of digital media’ (Ferrer 2022). In the examples Ferrer offers, the form of the book itself can be a physical representation of the nature of recollection (*The Unfortunates* Johnson 1969) or an agent in drawing attention to the experience of reading, where conventionally that reader might normally seek to become lost in their own internalisation of the text. As places of encounter, the books that Ferrer explores will not relinquish their materiality, and the reader is an active participant in the formation of that place. It stimulates a question that can be extrapolated to think about how any place comes into being, and how memory performs to create and erase ‘place’.

Rachel Jones in her paper ‘Visible Knowledge in the Imagined Landscape’ also explores how the materiality of the ‘text’, in this instance drawings, photographs and film, can communicate and produce a particular conception of landscape. Jones offers a rich and reflective account of how her practice based research had to be adapted to work with participants over the course of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and her role in reconstructing the Cornish landscape through their responses. Jones’ insight draws comparison with those of Ferrer, that of making meaning through the process of interacting with the material, the landscape as imagined, it’s representation as the place of encounter.

The location of encounter is also pivotal to Nicola Robertson’s paper ‘Robotic Avatars and the Vicarious Realm’ where she explores the role that a small, slightly humanoid robot plays as a proxy for a young girl Jess, who is unable to attend school in person. Robertson offers a ‘speculative proposition’ of how and where encounters between the robot and the young girl’s peers occur and in-turn how Jess then might imagine herself to be present in those interactions. Robertson’s consideration of ‘intercorporeality’ has become increasingly pertinent to many of us as our working and social lives have relied on the virtual to interact with one another. Her article asks the reader to place themselves in a particular realm, the ‘vicarious realm’ to imagine the ideas she is proposing. Blurring the lines between ideas of space, place, digital and virtual, she uses the science fiction genre to help speculate how the corporeal and imaginative relationship might develop between these locations as this ‘science fiction’ becomes an increasing reality.

### **What's in a theme?**

To re-iterate, the act of allocating each of these papers a particular theme is purely subjective and should not work to diminish the broader complexity of each piece of work. Using a Venn Diagram to illustrate how the themes might intersect implies a certain amount of control and equal weighting in the relationships between place as a material focus, an imaginary and an identity. However such a scientifically constructed diagram cannot ever articulate the often sequential, generative and iterative relationships between the three themes I have applied. It is a model to illustrate inter-relatedness, but is also one to contest, and I hope here it might serve as a critical springboard to encourage connections that might not have been previously considered. Consulting literature and visual media that has meaning to certain communities, harvesting or communicating through social and digital platforms, joining participants at sites that are important to them, storytelling, filming, recording, drawing, giving participants autonomy, connecting to those that may be too vulnerable to leave their homes but have proxies in their stead, these are all ways that *places* have been found by the doctoral and early career researchers that have kindly shared their work. The often implied stability and continuity that can be associated with the term 'place' or indeed 'space', has been demonstrated as important and concrete to human experience, but in the diversity of manifestations offered throughout this special issue, are also clearly multi-modal and never static.

I hope that you enjoy the papers that follow as much as I have, this special issue is certainly a place that I will be returning to as my own research develops over time.