

**Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place**

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## **Abstract**

The article focuses on the importance of historic, social and material connections in belonging to place. Mauss' anthropological concept of a "gift" is deployed to understand how places are cared for by a community over time. The development of tangible and intangible connections between past, present and future people and places is explored. Drawing on in-depth, qualitative research with a group of people who have long-standing connections to their local place, memories and life-narratives are unravelled to explore the social and material relationships that place embodies. An understanding of place as an inalienable gift may create a moral duty to nurture and pass on places to subsequent generations.

The research takes a phenomenological approach in order to illuminate the largely unconsidered associations between personal biographies and material places. After a brief discussion of the data collection methods used, notably photo diaries, some empirical examples are put forward to demonstrate how the research participants act as current custodians of places. The article concludes by bringing together the different aspects of belonging in place illustrated by these vignettes and shows how they contribute to belonging in place as a moral way of being-in-the-world, that is, what the author terms an ontological belonging.

Key words: Belonging, place, gift, community, phenomenology

## **Introduction**

Belonging, although a popular subject in sociological writing (Bell, 1999; Christensen, 2009; Fortier, 1999; May, 2011; May, 2013; Savage, Bagnall et al., 2005; Valentine, Sporton et al., 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006), is a nebulous term. My starting point for examining belonging is place and people's relationship to place. This, I contend, plays an integral role in who we are

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place and, consequently, how everyday life is lived (Stevens, 2012, p. 588). Place can be understood as simultaneously imagined *and* embodied, an active site for social practices through history, memory, other people and material things (Bennett, 2012). Miller (2002, p.217) describes the three cornerstones of belonging as history, people and place. Taking this as a starting point, belonging can be seen as articulated in terms of multiple social relationships stretching between past, present and future generations and places. History is not stuck in the past but moves through the lives of people and places, and is constantly being recreated in the present through memories (Blokland, 2001; Kuhn, 2000) and the presence of material objects (Jones, 2010). It is, I argue, through the development of long term relationships to place(s) that people come to have an embodied understanding of their obligations to the past and the future, or being in “correct relation” (Miller, 2002, p.218) to the place. Belonging can then be understood as a way of being-in-the world, or what I, after Miller (2002) call an “ontological belonging”. The development of these connections between past, present and future are explored here through the metaphor of place as a Maussian gift passed from one generation of a community to the next. These inalienable gifts contain the essence of the giver and “for this reason gifts cannot ever really be kept or possessed, but are always in circulation. A gift is basically a part of a person or collective, or place, or any other entity that is given to another” (Fowler, 2004, p. 32). The gift of place creates a tangible relationship between generations through time.

Places are often described as what Bourdieu (1977) terms “symbolic capital” (Christensen, 2009; Degen, 2010; Savage, Bagnall et al, 2005; Southerton, 2002). Symbolic capital is a way of recognising the economic and social value of, in this case, land and property. Symbolic capital exists as an idea rather than in a material form and therefore differs from Bourdieu’s (1977) economic, social and cultural capitals which all have some form of

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

material representation. The reputation of a place is key to its economic success (Degen, 2010), and to attracting and keeping desirable residents who help to create social capital: these are key to the development of symbolic capital (Christensen, 2009; Southerton, 2002). Symbolic capital then reflects back upon the people who live there, adding to their personal value. A place to live is sometimes chosen in the mode of the individualistic discourse of choosing one's identity (Savage, Bagnall et al, 2005, p. 207), particularly for those with the economic resources to do so. Savage, Bagnall et al (2005) described how places to live were chosen "by particular social groups wishing to announce their identities" (p. 207). Their study of middle class areas around Manchester found that people based their choice of where to live on how well the image of the place coincided with the differing capitals of the residents. Place is then a commodity to be purchased and used to announce one's social status. As a commodity place of residence is divorced from its historical connections (Fowler, 2004, p. 34). Savage, Bagnall et al (2005) argue that in these circumstances people elect to belong by "putting down roots" (p. 207). This is achieved by incorporating the place and its symbolic capital into their own biographical narrative; that is, they are able to make sense of why they chose to live in a particular place. Such an understanding of belonging in place of individuals or family groups tends to "lose sight of the connectivity of social relations, identity and agency" (Mason, 2004, p. 178), which other authors see as essential to belonging (cf. Blokland, 2001; Fortier, 1999; May, 2013). Mason (2004), in contrast to Savage, Bagnall et al (2005), draws out the way people talk about how they chose where to live by referring to various contingent social relationships (proximity of family, for example). Rogaly and Taylor's (2009) oral history study of housing estates in Norwich also highlights the importance of intersubjective relationships to people's place-based experiences. All these authors recognise the importance of structural and cultural relationships to places in people's life stories. Other work explores the interconnectivities between the social and material networks

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

that place embodies. O'Neill and Whatmore (2000), for example, look at a successful hotel business in Australia to examine the connections between place, social networks and power through the concept of performative networks. This is a largely economic evaluation of place, although in the reuse of old buildings there is also an historical presence within the networks. Cloke and Jones (2001) also look at place as an economic space - one which has its own biography, lasting multiple human lifetimes. Their study of an orchard in Somerset brings together the place, its history and change over time and the social networks the orchard is embedded in. But, in prioritising non-human agency, the social relationships mediated through the orchard tend to be down played. Both of these studies take commercial places as their focus and then examine them from the perspective of being embedded within wider (human and non-human) networks. My research into belonging in place also brings together the historical and material aspects of places but makes far greater use of memory and narrative to capture the social relationships embedded within them. By focussing on places over time, I share with Rogaly and Taylor (2009) a perception of places as "contingent, contested and uncertain, rather than as fixed territorial units" (p. 20). Indeed, as Back (2009) emphasises, globalisation has extended the 'places' in which we live to cross national borders creating a need for a reworking of understandings of community. However, for many people local places are where they live out a large part of their lives (Rogaly and Taylor, 2009, p.14). Therefore this research chose local people with long-standing connections to their local place as participants. This focus enabled a nuanced analysis of the material connections between people and place through time; an analysis which is missing in other studies of belonging and place.

Through a focus on the family and broader future generations to whom belonging is passed on, the idea of the gift brings together the themes of temporality and materiality. Places are

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

more than social constructions or imaginaries and more than a context for social relations; places are also material and engage with all the senses and with physical bodies (Back, 2009). They are not static or reactionary but fluid, interactive and a fundamental part of social life (Massey, 1995, p. 183). When imbued with significant social encounters and absorbed into the rhythm of life, places become part of a dense web of relationships which, in turn, become inalienable from the place itself (Blokland, 2003). Over the generations, usage changes, buildings themselves change, but ultimately the place remains the same place with its identity aligning with the identity of the people inhabiting it, or vice versa (Gray, 1999, p. 455). The life of the material place and the people of that place exist in different temporalities, not synchronized but still harmonized (Ingold, 2000, p. 197). The past or the memory of it is a part of the present life story of the place (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1997). By passing on memories to subsequent generations a community ensures “collective immortality for itself” (Kuhn, 2000, p. 193). I shall discuss how this “immortality” is mediated through places, memories of younger selves and unknown others from past and future.

The next section explores the implications of seeing place as a Maussian gift, passed from one generation to the next, and ways this can aid an understanding of belonging. After a brief discussion of the practical aspects of the research and the methods used, three particular places are used as exemplars to demonstrate how the inalienable nature of places allows them to be passed on as gifts from past to future generations. In conclusion, I show how this understanding of inalienable relationships to places promotes a set of mutual obligations to the future of places by the people who inhabit them over time.

### **Place as Gift**

The paradox of a gift, in Maussian terms, is that it appears to be gratuitous, but, in fact, creates reciprocal obligations, thus creating an on-going relationship between giver and

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place receiver (Bourdieu, 1977). When looking at place as a gift this relationship between the two parties is useful in understanding why long term connections to a place can seem to confer a particular sense of belonging for people in a place.

Gifts are inextricable from a relationship between donor and recipient:

they are the fulcrums around which personal attachments pivot ...

Inalienable goods carry with them an intimate connection with each relationship they were part of: they retain a part of each person who has authored their history ... They may not be possessed: no gift object is inalienable from a single person. Inalienability is not ownership.

(Fowler, 2004, p. 33)

Inalienability endows the gift with a part of each person who held it previously (Godelier, 1999, p. 105). Using this anthropological concept metaphorically, places through time figure as inalienable gifts passed from generation to generation, symbolising the intersubjective relations between them (Godelier, 1999, p. 105). The material aspect of place is crucial here because “the materiality of objects embodies the past experiences and relationships that they have been part of, and facilitates some kind of ineffable contact with those experiences and relationships” (Jones, 2010, p. 189). Shared, communal memories provide a framework into which individuals can map their own memories (Connerton, 1989); this is helped by “referring to the material milieu that surrounds us” (Jones, 2010, p. 37). That is, memories are attached to the material place. Blokland’s (2001) respondents use these devices when two elderly women share memories whilst sitting in the new McDonald’s restaurant overlooking the main street where the remembered events took place. Places are inalienable from those who have inhabited them previously, including our past selves.

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Gifts are not one-way traffic. Gifts in the sense used here are often reciprocal vehicles of exchange, although this does not have to mean that the reciprocity is towards the original giver of the gift, but rather that receiving a gift does not confer outright ownership and the gift must eventually be passed on (Fowler, 2004, p. 32). This is the case with some property inheritance in the West and sometimes with family heirlooms and family stories, although it may perhaps be dying out as a practice (Hurdley, 2007, p. 129). I show below how this concept also shapes the relationships of people with more public places such as the park and the town centre. Unlike contractual economic transactions, a moral obligation is implicated in gift exchange (Fowler, 2004, p. 33). Being a person of a place could be seen as a “type” identity (Schutz, 1962, pp. 350 - 1): that is, a moral person who holds a status within the group and acts as an incumbent of this position. Maussian gifts are exchanged by groups or moral persons, rather than individuals, and thus the exchange is made on behalf of, as an agent of, the group, not as a self-interested act (Parry, 1986, p. 456). Gifts in terms of knowledge, history and tradition are passed between these people through generations, over time, each holding the knowledge or history until the next generation is ready to receive the gift (Kuhn, 2000, p. 193). Where the gift is an inalienable one, containing the essence of previous generations, then there is a moral obligation on the holder to nurture the gift. Neighbouring, for example, can be seen as a form of gift exchange (Carrier, 1991, p. 124). The loans of tools or food between neighbours reaffirm the neighbourly relationship and allow each party to confirm themselves as good neighbours, that is, as participants in the moral project of neighbouring. One of the tasks that neighbouring involves is to care for the place, and its people. Indeed, community itself can be understood as a “moral project” (Back, 2009). Where the gift is a place passed between generations it should, then, be cared for by the current holders (Bonnett and Alexander, 2012 p.10). However, how a place should be looked after is open to interpretation and dispute and is often outside the control of those who

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

see their role as caretakers. This may cause negative feelings towards the place (Back, 2009). But change over time, does not have to preclude continuity: history is not then past but is pulled into the present by these ongoing inalienable relationships through the material aspects of the place. This is not nostalgia as a longing for home or something lost, but can act to reconfirm identities in the present (Bonnett and Alexander, 2012). Relationships to the past are held in the places and brought to life in the present through intersubjective relationships made possible through the medium of the place (Duranti, 2010, p. 29). Those who are embedded within this web of relationships between material places and the inalienable connections to past and future generations can be said to belong to the place ontologically, as an embodied way of being and doing in the world (Author, 2012).

Whilst places and their histories can be seen as gift-like by a section of the population who can connect through these inalienable relationships to known or imagined forebears, this does not in any way restrict their usage by other people (including “elective” belongers). Indeed, the building up of the “cultural biographies” (Jones, 2010, p. 199) of places and their place in a social web of relationships and obligations is an ongoing process. The next generation to whom the gift of place and memories is passed on is not fixed and not restricted to those with connections to the current gift holders; new social relationships are constantly being formed (O'Neill & Whatmore, 2000, p. 131). Someone who initially elects to belong can grow into an ontological belonging over time. In this way belonging is passed on not solely through familial connections but is also created anew through connections to the places (or other material objects) themselves (Miller, 2002, p. 223). The next section outlines the methods used in conducting this research.

## Researching the nebulous notion of belonging

I took a phenomenological approach in this research in order to look at the interactions between body, material place and action through time that may contribute to an ontological belonging. Phenomenology is, essentially, the description or explanation of directly perceived phenomena (Vaitkus, 2000 p. 273). This can either be the material object, the subject of a picture, or a memory or feeling: it is the consciousness *of* something (Ferguson, 2006 p. 24). The method of phenomenology is a particular way of seeing the world as contingent, as “just one of a series of possibilities” (Ferguson, 2006 p. 48 - 9). This is accomplished through what Husserl calls the phenomenological reduction, that is bracketing our everyday knowledge and commonsense understandings. This opens up the researcher to the possibility of a reflective attentiveness to the life-world(s) being researched (Ferguson, 2006 p. 48-9). In taking this approach I investigated how people in a place live their everyday lives; how they present the stories of their lives; and how they fit within their life-world. The family is central to my research strategy because family narratives have the potential to cover several generations (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1997). Family narratives enabled me to follow lines of connection to places over multiple lifetimes as well as throwing light on social change over time (Bertaux and Delcroix, 2000). Narratives, both individual and family ones, are interpretive methods: they can thus be both told and understood in different ways by different people at different times (Bruner, 1991). In grounding explanation “in the first-order construction of the actors” (Aspers, 2004 p. 2) a phenomenological approach also fulfils the requirements of an ethnography that understands knowledge to be constructed through practical action within the world (Bourdieu, 1977 p. 96): how *this* person is engaged in the world at *this* point in time is what I aim to capture and decipher in order to explore their relations to their life-world, in particular to their place.

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Wigan, situated between Liverpool and Manchester in the north west of England, was chosen as the locale for this research because the population tends not to be mobile. It has one of the lowest rates of in and out migration in England (Office for National Statistics, 2012). This has resulted in there being a considerable number of families of several generations who grew up in the same area.

The research took place during 2009 and 2010. Five family groups, three of two generations and two of three generations, took part in the research, along with some individuals, totalling twenty-two people in all ranging from sixteen to eighty-five years old, with a fairly even split of men and women. All participants were interviewed either as couples, family groups or individuals. Ten participants then kept a photo diary for a week taking photos of places they visited and six of these took part in a post-diary interview.

The use of photos and diaries made it possible for the author to engage directly with the places which have specific meaning for the respondents. At the post-diary interviews the photos were used as prompts to talk about the different places pictured and their role in interviewees' biographies; this engaged interviewees in stories of the places as demonstrated below. Biographical interviews also brought up particular, important places which sometimes became thematic, such as Mesnes Park in Joan's life (see below). The idea of place and history as inalienable gift can be used to unravel complex entanglements between people and places now, in the past and in the future: what Jones (2010, p. 189) refers to as "magical" relationships, which illustrate the deep-seated attachment indicative of an ontological belonging. Joan's lifelong connection with the park provides the first empirical example below. This example shows how place, as both an inalienable gift from one generation of

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Wiganers to the next and as a gift that accompanies people throughout their lives, brings pasts (and sometimes futures) into the present. This is followed by examples which connect with wider groups of people. Where buildings are demolished the inalienable connections inevitably go too; the effect of this is looked at through the example of the former rugby league ground of Central Park. Wigan town centre is also at the heart of many changes to buildings and various narratives show the way that gifts to be passed on can be cobbled together from selective mixes of new and old places.

It is worth emphasising that the places talked about in the following sections can be viewed in terms of “the common” as a way of organising mutual interest. Common land allows different people to use it in different ways (Wright & Davies, 2010). The specific views and uses of the following places depicted here are those of these particular people and may not apply to others, whether those who consider themselves to belong to Wigan or not. It should also be noted that this research looks specifically at the experience of a particular group of people who have remained living in one place all their lives. It is not expected that the findings would apply to other groups in the same way.

### **Mesnes Park: Joan’s Life Story**

Joan’s first interview made apparent the fact that the park has been an ongoing part of her life. I suggested we go for a walk around the park during her post-diary interview.

Joan (66) has been visiting the park for as long as she can remember, first with her parents, then her children and now her grandchildren. She has seen changes over the last fifty plus years but essentially the park has remained very much the same. Many of the places in the park hold particular memories for Joan and much of her life story can be traced out here. In

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

taking me around the park (in September 2009), she was able to show me the places she had talked about in her initial interview. Joan has had a continuous relationship with the park and at times her child and adult selves overlap in different places, bringing her past childhood self into the present (Kuhn, 2000, p.183). Joan has already metaphorically passed the park on as a gift to her grandchildren but she also demonstrated an understanding of the park as belonging to the people of Wigan in a wider sense, as it was originally intended, as shown below.

In 1878 the park was built for the people of Wigan on land bought from the Rector of Wigan by Mr Eckersley, a local mill owner. In common with many Victorian parks it has a bandstand and a café and it was a popular place for a Sunday afternoon outing. Joan recalled regular Sunday visits with her parents in the 1950s:

Every Sunday, me Mum and Dad'd get dressed up and we had outfits that we only kept for Sunday, Sunday best, we'd go to church, we'd have a lovely Sunday dinner, roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, the whole thing, then we'd all get dressed up and go in the park and there would be hundreds of mums and dads doing the same thing. And inside the café there was like what they called a "mezzanay" and you could sit up on the balcony and look down below, and we used to have milk shakes and ice cream and we used to chat, 'cos there was no televisions in them days and it was a place where everybody went.

(Joan's interview)

Our tour started at the playground. The swings were dilapidated but they hold significance for Joan nonetheless; this is where she brought her grandchildren and the five of whom fought

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

over the two swings. We walked past the duck pond which she helped to clear out with the Friends of the park and then we stopped at the cafe, still open with the plans for renovations, including the restoration of the mezzanine level, on display. Then we looked at the statue of the Wigan MP who brought clean water to the town and whose foot was shiny and worn due to its being rubbed for good luck. Finally we looked at the park keeper's lodge, covered in scaffolding and hidden behind layers of plastic<sup>1</sup>.

Whilst Joan still visits the park regularly her park landscape is heavily coloured by her 1950s childhood which was civilized, (and therefore, perhaps, morally good) in contrast with the next generation of park users:

And when I was a little girl ... there used to be a bandstand and there used to be a brass band there every Sunday afternoon, so people used to sit on chairs and listen to the brass band, it was very civilized. I mean nowadays we have to have an alcohol ban in there because of all the teenagers.

(Joan's post-diary interview)

These activities that "everybody" undertook, in the same way that today "everybody" watches television, connect Joan to a time in the past, although the place itself is a part of her present. Memories tend to be organised in cyclical, rather than linear, time (Kuhn, 2000, p. 191). In talking about or visiting the park Joan constantly 'bumps into' her childhood self, the Victorian Wiganers she could be descended from, her young grandchildren and her potential future great-grandchildren. This kind of repetitive performativity helps to reinforce identification with the place (Leach, 2002, p. 132).

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place  
the children walk through the park to go to the college so every three  
or four months all the Friends of Mesnes Park go in and do a litter  
pick, they don't care and it's so sad because it's their park and one day  
they'll be parents and they'll want it nice for their children.

(Joan's interview)

The passing on of the park as a gift to the next generation alluded to here ("it's their park") adds to the park's temporal continuity. Another, younger participant, Kate (32), also remembered trips to the park as a child and rubbing the foot of the statue, something that people still do as a form of "commemorative performance" (Connerton, 1989, p.8). This is not a place stagnated in a particular era but is a part of generations of children's lives. History is not written on to a (pre-objective) landscape rather the landscape is created through interactions (Ingold, 2000): here, between Joan and the other Friends, the children and the various elements of the park itself including the paths they walk on and the grass they sit on. The park circulates around and through Joan's life from childhood to grandmotherhood and back again:

and in the middle of the lake there's a great big island and as a child I  
always wanted to go on there, a lot of children have, not drowned, but  
they've had accidents in the pond and then about five years ago they  
decided that all the middle of the island needed replanting, they put a  
pontoon down and we were actually allowed to walk on the pontoon, I  
said all my youth as a child, I wanted to come on here and plant and  
now all ducks are nesting there and it's really a lovely island now...

(Joan's interview)

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

This is not a linear narrative. The telling of the story, through our walk, veers from grandchildren to Joan's own childhood, to Victorian Wigan, to more recent events; the future, in the shape of restoration plans and growing grandchildren, is present as well as the past (Kuhn, 2000, p.190). Rather than creating a nostalgic dichotomy between the past and the present as these types of reminiscences are often seen to do (Robertson, Smyth et al., 2008, p. 61), these vignettes of Joan's association with the park throughout her life pull the past into the present as well as evoking the future (Bonnett and Alexander, 2012). Time seems to melt away leaving Joan and the park in a vortex of tangible remembering. The park itself is a part of the web of Joan's life, which embeds Joan, both socially *and* materially, into the past, present and future of this place (Cloke & Jones, 2001, p. 664; Godelier, 1999, pp. 103-4; Massey, 2006, p. 34). In other words, Joan belongs here.

### **Central Park: the destruction of a gift**

As well as personal memories and those repeated through families there are events that pertain to a wider audience, events that will be remembered and retold by the community as a whole. The destruction of Central Park, home to Wigan rugby league for nearly a century, is one of those events. Rugby League is "like a family" (Joan's interview) in Wigan and therefore demolishing its home akin to demolishing the family home. Although there is a new stadium, this does not have the atmosphere, the history of both successes and failures over time, of Central Park.

As with Mesnes Park, Central Park was, effectively, a gift to the people of Wigan from the then owners, in 1902. However the legal ownership of Central Park remained with the rugby club. The owners in the late 1990s were in significant debt and sold the ground to pay off

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

their creditors. The ground was the site of many victories for Wigan which, as a team, has been very successful. Rugby, as Joan pointed out, is more than just a game in Wigan and the ashes of many people had been scattered on the ground over the years. There is now a small memorial to commemorate the existence of Central Park in the car park at Tesco's, which was built on the site. John (61) kept a diary and took a photo when he went to shop at Tesco's. At his post-diary interview he said of the photo:

There's the Tesco's we use every week and sometimes more than once a week. And of course that's where, that's on the ground of the old Central Park, which not a lot of people are happy about.

Me: Did you used to go and watch rugby there?

Yes, yes, yeah. Um it was quite traumatic that, but we're not too enamoured with it to be honest with you. Because we don't like Asda we go to Tesco.

(John's post-diary interview)

John's language indicates a sense of unease, a loss of belonging. In describing the event as "traumatic" he echoes Walkerdine's (2010) analysis of the impact on a community of the loss of the main employer in the town. Trauma results from a sudden and devastating loss. Although the Tesco store has been there for about ten years, and Central Park for less than one hundred years before that, the change was sudden and therefore "traumatic" (Walkerdine, 2010). From being a particular place where local people could perform their identity as

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Wiganers through supporting a successful sports team it has transformed into a place without a specific Wigan identity. The loss of Central Park entailed, in effect, the destruction of an “inalienable gift” (Fowler, 2004) and hence destroyed or damaged the relationships through time which it embodied. Rugby itself is an inalienable gift passed on through the generations in Wigan, but one that is still present, now played in the new out-of-town stadium shared with Wigan Athletic, the football team. Sport is still a key site of performing belonging for many people as evidenced by the “thousands of Wigan Warriors fans who turned out to salute their Grand Final heroes” (Wigan Today, 2010 p. 1).

Central Park was an active constituent in the social network of rugby in Wigan (O'Neill & Whatmore, 2000, p. 131). This has now gone and its replacement, the DW Stadium, does not, in the view of these respondents, have the “numinous or magical quality” that Jones (2010, p. 200) argues is “linked to the networks of inalienable relationships [objects] have been involved in throughout their social lives”. The demolition of Central Park destroyed the inalienable relationships associated with it. It also disrupted the “spatial imaginary” (O'Neill & Whatmore, 2000, p. 126) of rugby in Wigan. Whilst the gift of rugby continues through the reformation of the performative network at the new DW stadium, the gift of Central Park and the myriad tangible relationships it embodied, has gone. Inalienable gifts are not always passed on but sometimes come to the end of their natural life (Fowler, 2004, p. 33).

What this example highlights is the essential stability over time of the web of relationships connecting people, places and activities to form the “taskscape” (Ingold, 2000, p. 196) of rugby league in Wigan. Central Park, whilst being a key part of Wigan rugby for almost one hundred years is not, in fact, essential to the team, the supporters or the success of the club. Other changes have also happened affecting this particular taskscape, notably changing the

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

time of matches from Saturday to Sunday afternoons and moving the season to fit in with the demands of television. Despite these disruptions the essential “assemblage” (O'Neill & Whatmore, 2000) of team, a ground and supporters remains intact. The identity of Wigan Warriors continues with the new, improved (in terms of facilities) stadium (Clope & Jones, 2001, p. 658). Tearing down Central Park may have torn the heart out of rugby at the time, but communities such as this community of rugby in Wigan are generally resilient.

This place, as a site of memory is still relevant; it is more than a supermarket for the “we” group (Schutz, 1962) who remember it as Central Park. The place has been reassigned from gift economy, part of the enduring Wigan-ness of Wigan, to a commodity, part of the economic space of Wigan. Connections are still made and remade here - John mentioned bumping into a former colleague and a chat with the checkout girl – but these are not durable relationships recorded in the fabric of the building, at least for John, (the checkout girl will probably have a more definitive relationship with the place where she works) (Fowler, 2004, p. 34; Godelier, 1999, pp. 104 - 5).

The town centre has also experienced disruptions to buildings and the reconfiguring of networks of relationships which feature in the experiences of John and others, as described next.

### **Wigan town centre: the making of ‘us’**

The town centre of Wigan has seen many changes over the last twenty years. These have largely been intended to improve the shopping facilities, but not everyone is in agreement

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place  
over this improvement. Different respondents appropriate the town centre in different ways, each creating his or her own version of Wigan in the process and aligning this with his or her own place identity, or way of belonging here. Although place is experienced as a "sensuous, embodied and emotional geography" (May, 2013, p. 138) it is usually an unconsidered background to life. Through the photographs the respondents took they were able to talk about their places as both an insider and an observer of the photograph.

Wigan town centre is, for many of the participants in this research, a place of memories, through which their life histories can be traced. In contrast with the seemingly unchanging nature of the park, the town centre has seen many changes in recent years. Built in 1877 the old Market Hall was replaced in 1991, along with the Galleries shopping centre. In 2007 the Grand Arcade was opened on the site of the Empress Ballroom (later Wigan Casino) and the Ritz cinema. The new Market Hall, whilst still retaining traditional market stalls and a small outdoor market, has been built over the market square.

Respondents varied considerably in their views of the new developments. John (61) is a fan of the newest shopping centre and visited during the week of his diary, taking a photo which we looked at during his post-diary interview:

Right so that's the Grand Arcade. We like it. I like it anyway. It's been a good addition to the shopping facilities ... It's only like 3 years old that, it is quite recent.

(John's post-diary interview)

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

The narratives surrounding the Grand Arcade tell us that it was built to help bring Wigan into the twenty-first century and to divorce it from the industrial past, which was all part of recreating the image of Wigan as a commodity. Despite these changes to the place John continues to belong here through the active process of appropriating the newly created spaces (May, 2013, p. 90).

John met his children and grandchildren in Wigan during the week of his diary:

Shopping day!! We arranged to meet [younger daughter] and her friend and also [eldest daughter] and the children in town. First stop Barclays Bank and on to Marks and Spencer's. Meet the girls in the coffee shop. Our friend is playing the keyboard to raise money for our charity. He has known [my wife] since their childhood days.

(John's diary)

Many of the places of significance in John's life in Wigan have gone (the Ritz cinema, the Empress Ballroom, Central Park) so the axis of his personal attachments is now the café in Marks and Spencer's where his family gathers. The gifts that John has to pass on to his children and grandchildren are the café and the Grand Arcade, places that can be seen as carrying Wigan into the future, rather than embedding it in its past. History flows from the past of the Ritz and the 'Emp', and through John's wife's childhood friend performing in the café, into the future of his grandchildren who are creating their own versions of Wigan, their own lines of connection to people and place (Ingold, 2008), their own ways of belonging.

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Ron (62), along with Linda (61) prefers the older parts of the town centre, with the Makinson Arcade being a particular favourite of Linda's. Discussing her photo of the arcade during her post-diary interview Linda said:

I've spent a lot of time in Wigan you know, and a lot of me youth in Wigan and going through there ... There's three arcades in Wigan, that's the main one. I think they've spoiled it because they've pulled the old arcade down, Legs of Man arcade. There used to be a pub called the Legs of Man in it and I can remember going, I used to get me nylons, at the top, there used to be a massive stocking and nylons store at the top. It was brilliant, when you were, you know, fifteen and there used to be a man at the bottom, or half way down with the old scales that you used to go and weigh yourself on, you know, the ones that you sat on, I can just see him now.

(Linda's post-diary interview).

As with Joan's relationship to the park, the affection Linda feels for this place is based on a connection over a long period of time and on walking through it, a way of "appropriating" a place (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 97 - 102; Leach, 2002, p. 132). This particular arcade gathers within it the memories of the other arcades, recreating them in Linda's memory and bringing them into the present (Jones, 2010). Although the connection to the hosiery shop is via a different arcade it is through the inalienable nature of Linda's relationship with the arcade that her past self is still present (Jones, 2010, p. 197). This is a nostalgic presentation of Wigan but memories and nostalgia tend to go hand in hand (Bonnett and Alexander, 2012, p. 2). Linda was in Wigan with her daughter when she took the photo and she makes clear the

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

sense of loss she feels through the changes that have taken place in the town centre over her lifetime:

I said oh I think they've ruined the shops they've made it the same as, you could be anywhere, every town's the same isn't it, where Wigan used to have quite a character, when I was growing up anyway.

(Linda's family interview)

Rather than appropriating the new shopping spaces, as John has done, Linda mourns the loss of older places that she will be unable to pass on to her daughter and grandchildren (Back, 2009). The gift of Wigan as a distinctive place is no longer available to her, which perhaps makes Linda seem disappointed, even a little angry ("they've ruined the shops"). As a moral custodian of the gift of Wigan to the next generation (Fowler, 2004, p. 33) perhaps Linda feels unable to pass on much more than memories. The theme of Wigan being the same as everywhere else, so "you could be anywhere" ran through Ron's (62) interview as well.

I always go into Wigan to buy clothes or other items other than food.

If I go to Wigan I always use the market, I buy some fish and meat and vegetables at the market... I'm a bit of a traditionalist ... I'm not keen on the big massive shopping mall whatever it's called, in fact I used to use Debenhams a bit but I can't be bothered going down there now. It's not my cup or tea, you could be anywhere in the country.

(Ron's interview)

### Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Bemoaning the homogeneity of places is an attitude Ron shared with other respondents in this research and in other research such as Bonnett and Alexander's (2012) look at ex-residents feelings about Newcastle. In insisting that he shops in Wigan, Ron is emphasising his commitment to Wigan as a town and thus his own identity as a Wiganer. He has chosen to remain in Wigan and "never thought of" moving anywhere else. Ron's family had a grocery business in Wigan and the surrounding area for about a hundred years. His focus on local shops may be a continuation of a family loyalty, part of what "we" do, bringing his own history to bear on the way in which he constructs what he considers to be an authentic Wigan (Jones, 2010). Ron's Wigan incorporates market traders, the hairdresser and the dentist. Although unnamed, these people (Schutzian "types") are incorporated into Ron's taskscape of Wigan, his world of actual reach (Schutz, 1962). He cares for these places by spending his money there but through the practice of not going in there Ron creates the Grand Arcade as a place apart. It is, in effect, not a part of the Wigan Ron inhabits. The particular network of inalienable places that Ron considers to be Wigan (the market, the Galleries arcade), where he belongs through a lifetime of everyday connections, are what he, as current custodian, would pass on to future generations.

Here I have unravelled some of the material connections these respondents have to the locale that represents Wigan for them. These different buildings hold different memories, histories and relationships. Each respondent has their own unique location in those histories, the relationships stretch back to past childhoods and forward towards the next generation, thus forming the essence of an ontological belonging. Makinson's Arcade is an inalienable part of Linda's (61) childhood, a gift which keeps her past forever present. Ron (62) rather more explicitly creates his own version of Wigan, avoiding the aspects which don't fit with his idea of the authentic Wigan. He is then able to create himself as a moral purveyor of the gift of

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

Wigan to the next generation. John (61) makes a similar move but without particularly creating an idea of Wigan as somewhere distinctive. For him this incarnation of the chain store found on most high streets in Britain is enough: Marks and Spencer's is his wife's "second home" (John's interview) and as such a suitable gift for his daughters and grandchildren. These largely personal stories also, inevitably, include other people, the world of common reach, the shopkeepers, waitresses and market stall holders who are a part of the background material presence of these Wigans.

But not everyone sees the gift of Wigan as valuable enough to pass on. Ian (61) sees Wigan as unworthy of being passed on: "[t]he rest of the town's a dump [other than the new shopping centre]. All Market Place and Standishgate, tatty shops with tatty things ...". Ian's attitude to Wigan overall is somewhat ambivalent but he is pleased that his children have moved away. He does not seem to see Wigan or an identity as a Wiganer as a gift he wants to pass on to his grandchildren and does not position himself as responsible for the state of the town centre, as its moral custodian. All such curatorial relationships involve a choice; in this case Ian does not seem to want to pass on Wigan to his descendents, but his children could also have independently chosen not to accept the gift (Hurdley, 2007).

The examples here have taken the park, Central Park and the hub of Wigan itself, the town centre, to show how places feature in people's belonging. Each of the places here has been passed down: Joan's (61) parents bequeathed her the park; Linda's childhood self has left her the arcades.

The gift of the place has put an obligation on these people to nurture it and pass it on into the future (Godelier, 1999). In nurturing, inalienable traces of the carer are sedimented into

Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place places. Nurturing, in this sense, is not explicit but a part of everyday life. Rather than a dislocation between past and present, even where changes have been made (the demise of Central Park, the building of the Grand Arcade), webs of connections remain, tying the people and the place together (Jones, 2010, p. 194). For these life-time residents of Wigan the place is a palimpsest of memories, stretching backwards in time to known and unknown others and former selves, placing an obligation on them to pass these connections on into the future. It could be argued that, due to the focus on familial groups here, the gift of belonging has only been shown to be passed on through kinship lines. However, instances of passing on through, for example, Joan's voluntary work as a Friend of the park and Ron's support of local businesses, seem to show that these gifts of places have a wider audience than their own children and grandchildren. Only by looking towards the future, through passing the gift of place to the next generation, can there be an ongoing sense of community leading to an ontological belonging.

## **Conclusion**

These stories of people's relationships to their places have shown how place can act as an inalienable gift. Past and future selves, ancestors and descendants, are an inalienable presence in particular places. These may be nurtured, in the way Joan helps to conserve the park and Ron makes a point of using the market, in order to be passed on. The three cornerstones of belonging Miller (2002) describes – history, people and place - are displayed here. Belonging is inherent in the daily actions undertaken by people who have inalienable connections to the places they inhabit. These buildings, material places, focus attempts to identify with Wigan, as Wiganers. But the places do not stand alone: they are implicated in networks of relationships between people, places, activities through time. Change over time does not have

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

to preclude sameness where relationships are inalienable: history is not then past but is pulled into the present by these ongoing relationships. Looking back does not have to be seen as nostalgia but can confirm identities and belonging in the present, something Linda does when she sees her childhood self in the picture of the arcade (Bonnett and Alexander, 2012). These relationships to the past are held in the places, but brought to life through intersubjective relationships made possible through the medium of the place (Duranti, 2010).

History made present through inalienable objects and places bestows knowledge of who one is for these people, who can connect with past selves recognised in familiar places (Leach, 2002). This is always a negotiable and possibly exclusionary process (Blokland, 2001; Jones, 2010, p. 199); what counts as an inalienable relationship may not be straightforward.

Inalienable relationships are formed through repetitive activity over time (Gray, 1999; Leach, 2002) so that belonging as a way of being-in-the-world is part of the mundane nature of everyday life. The presence of the past in daily life is often overlooked, sometimes made visible only through, for example, talking about the photographs taken as part of this research process (Kuhn, 2000, p. 183). Whilst highlighting the benefit of this method of researching and the added dimensions it can bring to people's narratives, this effect also indicates the difficulties inherent in calling on the intangible (albeit embodied within the material) to support theories of identity and belonging.

As stated earlier the different places discussed here can be viewed in terms of 'the common' as a way of organising mutual interest (Wright & Davies, 2010), but not all of those who use these places will have the same understanding of them. Where there is an historical connection, where the place has been received as an inalienable gift embedded in social or ancestral ties, there is likely to be a stronger sense of ownership (Jones, 2010, p. 199). The

## Gifted Places: the inalienable nature of belonging in place

narratives associated with and encountered in the place will be accessible to those who have a personal investment in the place. Only some of the people using the place will have these connections. This is therefore “ultimately an exclusionary process associated with the production of power and identity” (Jones, 2010, p. 199). Whilst this does not preclude others from using the space, enjoying the swings in the park or shopping in the market or the arcades, only those with some of these deeper historical connections will be ascribed an identity as a ‘Wiganer’ and belong ontologically.

The gift of the place to be passed on is not like a single object which may age but changes slowly, it is more like the gift of the plant which is nurtured and grows and from which the fruits are the reciprocal gift (Fowler, 2004, p. 33). History moves through the lives of people and places, it is not stuck in the past but is constantly being brought into the present, inherent in the flow of life of people and things, material objects and places (Ingold, 2008). The life of the place, as of the people living there, is in constant flux. The belonging displayed here is an (probably unconscious) understanding of this process, which can also be seen as being in “correct relation” to the place (Miller, 2002, p. 218). To belong ontologically is to be implicated in a set of mutual obligations to care for the past and future of places and those who inhabit them. It would be beneficial for further work to look at the material connections to places and their relationship to belonging of other groups of people who are less obviously embedded in their place.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Restoration work to the café, statue and park keeper’s lodge has been carried out since our visit.

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