Acknowledging Responsibility *For Space*

An essay review of Doreen Massey, *For Space,* London: Sage, 2005.

To read the shorter and revised published version of this paper see
Matthew Sparke, "Commentary 2: Acknowledging responsibility For space," *Prog Hum Geogr,* 2007; 31; 395

Matthew Sparke,
Department of Geography, Box 353550,
University of Washington, Seattle,
WA 98195, USA

What is a responsible geography? From where do its responsibilities spring? And to what does it respond? These have always been critical questions for geographers to ask, but they are now all the more urgent given the ways 'responsibility' is being redefined by global elites to promote everything from pre-emptive social auditing to pre-emptive war. "[W]e now have to be responsible for things we could never have imagined would be our responsibility," notes a typical CEO from Shell Oil (quoted in Skair, 2001: 149). And meanwhile the US *National Security Strategy* that spoke about bringing "the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world," explained the presidential prerogative for using pre-emptive war to do this by claiming that: "The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission" (Bush, 2002). To be sure, such evangelizing invocations of responsibility are shaped by geographical imaginations aplenty. Globalist visions of flat space, of a smooth, utterly deterritorialized global level playing field thereby frequently do service as the unexamined imaginative geography on which the player-managers of the free market seek to build their putatively non-hierarchical version of a 'free world' (see Sparke, 2005, chapters 3 and 5). And if this building work needs bull-dozing with bombs before management through bonds, then the bombing too can be coded as just another act of responsible global leadership: "systems administration" as one budding military manager has called it (Barnett, 2004; see Roberts *et al,* 2003, for a critique). Yet while such elite

'responsibility ' is underpinned *ad nauseam* by flat world geographical conceits (*e.g.* Friedman, 2005), ontological assertions about flattened or borderless or smooth global space hardly comprise a model of responsible geography. For this we need other ideas and arguments that do justice to the uneven 'power-geometries' and 'coexisting heterogeneity' that produce the 'throwntogetherness' of space. Using these signature key-words and many others that she has fashioned over a long career of responsible geographical theory building, this is just what Doreen Massey sets out to provide in her new book, *For Space*.

For Space is a wonderfully creative and provocatively experimental attempt to argue for a re-imagination and revaluation of space. Massey's argumentative experiments often involve the combined use of personal anecdotes alongside abstract ruminations on political philosophy, and while such personalized forays by geographers into philosophy can elsewhere occasionally appear abstruse and irresponsible, Massey's non-pretentious writing re-works the point that the personal is political to create accessible arguments that repeatedly remind readers of the real relations running through and thereby constituting space. It is in these relational ties that she locates multiple geographies of responsibility (see also Massey, 2004), and it is through identifying these geographies that she fashions in turn a model of responsible geography, a geography that challenges people both inside and outside of the discipline to acknowledge the "geographies of our social responsibility" (10). For Massey such acknowledgement must necessarily be open-ended because it is routed through an open-ended politics of space. "What is needed," she therefore argues, "is to uproot 'space' from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly so often been embedded (stasis; closure; representation), and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness … liveliness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape" (13). Thus against the God's eye view of space as dead, static, closed, and representationally fixed, Massey champions three clear counter-propositions.

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.
Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity.

Third, that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations that are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed (9).

Starting out from the three propositions, Massey is well-positioned to critique the occlusions and omissions of flat world globalization narratives, narratives which she argues allow a complicitous mix of aspatial historicism and superficial spatialism to obscure the ongoing and uneven production of geo-historically layered power-geometries (82 - 103). She seeks in this way to turn post-colonial problematizations of a singular global History - especially arguments about colonial thought coding the colonized as infants on a life-path to Euro-American adulthood - into a problematization of the provinciality and denial of coevalness implicit in any flattened vision of global geography. Beneath such flat surface imaginings, therefore, she excavates all sorts of politically uneven and interconnected strata, and, rather than seek to convey their complex shades and shapes with the textual metaphor of the palimpsest - a metaphor that she finds "too archeological"(110) - Massey prefers to rework geological concept-metaphors of layering. She is clearly aware that these too can be used archeologically to turn contemporaneous geo-historical processes into stratified core-samples of Historical time. But drawing on a more dynamic and practical engagement with geology, and reworking too perhaps the particular conjunction that brought location theory, philosophy and physical geography together in her undergraduate studies at the University of Oxford (see Freytag and Hoyler, 1999), Massey seeks to underline the underlayering of today's global social and economic processes by inherently *unfinished* geological and ecological power-geometries too. There is even a diagram of the geological layering of the english Lake District included in the book (136), and while the source text for the diagram (a book by Oxford professor Andrew Goudie) is not included in the bibliography, Massey's engagement with the geological questions is by no means flip or fleeting. Geology is not just a metaphorical device to allow her to jump between meta-philosophical meditations on the production of space and personal anecdotes like the one about appreciating Skiddaw while staying with her sister in Keswick (131). She seems instead genuinely engaged in thinking space as in constant motion and unfinished production at every imaginable geographical level.

Massey's investment in the whole sweep of geography from the most physical to the most affective raises in turn the question of her argument's relationship to the discipline of Geography. *For Space* is not a book that cites a huge number of geographers. Except for some more extensive engagements with the work of feminist geographers (*e.g.* with Katz, Hanson and Pratt on 173), most of the references to geographical debates seem ephemeral and the more common gesture of the book is to point in the non-specific and untraceable direction of "recent anglophone geographical literature" (9) in general. No doubt this reflects Massey's distaste for overly in-house academic commentary and conversation (Freytag and Hoyler, 1999). Oxymoronic representations of the latest thing in non-representational theory are thus refreshingly absent here. But while her working-class roots and her idiosyncratic career from Oxford to public policy research to the Open University lend Massey's writing a distinctively independent voice, *For Space* nevertheless remains a disciplinary text that speaks as much *for geography* as a field of critical enquiry as *for space* itself. It is a work, in other words, that communicates a passion for a particular approach to and awareness of things spatial. 'For Space', after all, sounds like a dedication, an acknowledgement, albeit at a very general level, of work that has come before. Like Althusser's *For Marx* - from which Massey's arguments against a synchronous cross-section view of space draw some of their inspiration - there is a combined sense of appreciation and advocacy that comes with the simple soundbite *For Space*. Althusser himself sought "to trace … a 'line of demarcation' between Marxist theory on the one hand, and ideological tendencies foreign to Marxism on the other" (Althusser, 1969: 12). Massey's project, by comparison, is to trace and indeed map the tensions between responsible geographical imaginations that are processual and irresponsible ones that are fixed. Thus whereas Althusser turned the proper name 'Marx' into politico-theoretical football, Massey does the same for 'space'. Indeed, while the book's title is much more than a slogan or chant, readers who know of Massey's fondness for Liverpool F.C. might even discern a certain soccer fan sensibility in evidence in the oral simplicity of the title. In any event, the contrast-cum-similarity with *For Marx* is instructive because *For Space* also embodies a form of definitional conundrum that replicates in broad outline what became a parallel 'problematic' for Althusser as he sought to distinguish bad readings of 'Marx' from good ones. Massey

prefers the extra syllable in the term 'problematical' herself (perhaps itself a sign of moving on from Althusser and his presumptively precise vocabulary), and her project is not about defining and defending "the true theoretical bases of the Marxist science of history" (Althusser, 1969: 13). However, she does nonetheless end up having to argue that certain sorts of imaginations of space (like the flat and superficial ones subtending dominant discourses of globalization) are in some deep definitional sense fundamentally aspatial. In other words, aspatial 'space' becomes for Massey what the pre-theoretical, pre-Marxist 'Marx' was for Althusser. This then leads to some rather strained language such as the following point about Ernesto Laclau's limited conception of space. "Since, as we have seen, 'space' does not refer to *space* this might seem inconsequential as a formulation - except of course that it tends connotatively to perpetuate that view of *space in general* as the realm where nothing happens" (44).

To point to the definitional conundrum she faces with aspatial spaces is not to quibble with Massey's critique. As globalist accounts of flat world space make clear, geographical imaginations that obscure uneven power-geometries are obviously ideologically interested. Moreover Massey herself is at pains to underline how such tendentious spatial visions produce new spaces in their own image. Yet in countering such closed and dead-end imaginings with her three general propositions about the relational, heterogeneous and processual nature of space, Massey effectively seeks to advance a truer account of space. Here, though, the parallel with Althusser breaks off. This may be an epistemological break of sorts, but it owes little to Althusser (or even his pupil Foucault) and much more to Massey's combined commitments to politically engaged research and philosophical ideas about deconstructive responsibility. As a result, she does not presume to have got space right once and for all. "Quite the contrary," to cite an argument from near the end of the book. Her point rather is "to stress just how genuinely difficult it is not to resort to an apriori politics of topographies" (172). While this might at first blush seem to be at odds with the apparent apriori quality of her three propositions, Massey's actual approach instead involves invoking the propositions more as repeated reminders to think about the place-transcending spatial relations implicated in but excluded by particular geographies (including even the critical topographies to which we cannot not resort). "The argument about openness/closure," she

thus concludes. "should not be posed in terms of abstract spatial forms but in terms of the social relations through which the spaces, and that openness and closure, are constructed; the ever mobile power geometries of space-time" (166). It is this argument articulated at the end of the book that spirals back to the main claims about responsibility and relational geographies made at the start, continuing therefore to ask rather than ever completely answer "questions of the politics of those geographies and of our relationship to and responsibility for them" (10).

The sort of responsibility that Massey is interested in is clearly not a religious responsibility based on the rites and wrongs of morality and guilt. Far from invoking invented gods and goddesses to prescribe fixed responsibilities from above, Massey points to the limits of a hierarchical model of responsibility which "arrogates unto the 'responsible' figure the superiority of a position of power" (194). This distinction from pre-modern power hierarchies noted, Massey appears equally wary of modern liberal visions of political responsibility rooted in territorialized notions of national duty and secular accountability to the state and its laws. Nor yet is the kind of responsibility she invokes the same as the deterritorialized hyper-individualist responsibility associated with the buyer-beware regimes of neoliberal "prudentialism" (see O'Malley, 1996). It is both a political and a personal responsibility, certainly, but it is also predicated on a profound and persistent questioning of the spatial relations through which the personal and the political are woven together. It must be noted that Massey is also attuned to how responsibility gets staged historically too. She draws in this regard on a critical reading of 'Spinozistic responsibility' by two Australian feminists who are concerned with how colonial violence against aboriginal societies remains a responsibility of the descendents of white settlers in the Australian present (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999). At the same time though, or rather, more precisely, in the space opened up by such critiques of historical timing ('that was then, this is now'), Massey is also deeply critical of what she calls the "political miserabilism" (58) associated with taming space through timing. The spirit of political responsibility she avers is therefore to some extent a response to the denials of responsibility that are orchestrated through the manipulation of space-time ('that is over there where they are still catching up to us over here and therefore their poverty is not our fault'). As a result, one of her main targets of critique is "the persistent tendency to

exonerate the local" (102). Whether this takes the form of globalist arguments that the West is the 'future' - arguments which exonerate western capitalism from its central role in the present in denying future prosperity to the global South - or whether it is the subset of anti-globalist arguments focused only on national protectionism - arguments that dodge responsibility for advancing protections for people and ecosystems globally - this critical sensibility to what and who is let off the hook through the manipulation of space and time seems a vital geographical response (although it needs noting that anti-globalists are increasingly doing exactly what Massey suggests by debating "the *form* of globalization" (103) at venues such as the World Social Forum [see Sparke *et al*, forthcoming]).

Massey's main inspiration in developing her broader argument about responsibility is a version of what she has elsewhere called “political poststructuralism," where deconstruction is taken as meaning "that we have to be more political rather than less" (Freytag and Hoyler, 1999: 88). She is not alone in making such arguments in geography. Clive Barnett's (1999) responsible reading of 'context' in Derrida makes some similar points, and Bruce Braun (2004) has more recently unpacked the human-non-human binary through the theme of deconstructive responsibility developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994). Following Spivak's anti-colonial, Marxist feminism in a more political geographical direction, my own book explores the responsibilities implicated in interpreting geographies as always overdetermined and heterogeneous 'graphings of the geo' (Sparke, 2005). However, while I highlight how such responsibilities disclose the limits of certain postfoundational accounts of the nation-state, and while Barnett and Braun query classic texts of poststructuralism and posthumanism, Massey's deconstructive responsibility leads her to reflect on some classic geographies of regional and so-called world city development. Cities such as Hamburg, and, most notably, London, thereby become the subjects of extremely compelling invitations to rethink the worlding of 'world cities'. Whether it is the continuities between extra-local geology and extra-local immigration geographies that together contribute to the cosmopolitics of Hamburg (149-151); or whether it is the complicity between calls for 'London Weighting' and the concentration of capital in the City (156-7), Massey's sense of geographic responsibility leads her to ask critical questions about how

these places are produced by long distance spatial relations and how, at the same time, they are also responsible for affecting other places themselves. At a very practical political level this enables her to make critical points about planning priorities: about how in London, for example, "a decision has to be made between reducing poverty and promoting the City" (157) - although in this case it would have been interesting to read Massey's reflections on communities of poverty *outside* of the UK that are also the responsibility of London's financiers. But at the same time, the implications of Massey's implicative account of geographical responsibility (see 194 on "implication") also run in a useful theoretical direction by leading her to offer a radically processual re-reading of place.

The theoretical utility of Massey's account is that it enables us to reimagine place as a venue in which space-relating and space-making processes come together in conjunctural events. "This," she says, "is the event of place in part in the simple sense of the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing. This is place as open and as internally multiple. Not capturable as a slice through time in the sense of an essential section" (141). Yet while place gets reimagined in this way as a "coming together of trajectories," it remains just as much for Massey, "a uniqueness, and a locus of the generation of new trajectories and new configurations" (141). The latter point is especially important to note in light of Noel Castree's sympathetic critique of what he sees as an overemphasis on translocal relational readings of place in the work of radical geographers such as Massey (Castree, 2004). This critique probably appeared long after Massey had finished *For Space*, but there is a way in which she nonetheless anticipates the sort of argument Castree makes. Her "alternative positive understanding," she underlines, is not "hostile to place or working only for its dissolution into a wider space" (140). "Quite to the contrary," her point is that "what is special about place is not some romance or pre-given collective identity or the eternity of the hills. Rather what is special about place is … the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here and now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place with and between both human and nonhuman" (140). It seems to me that this position is really not so different from the one that Castree himself ends up articulating in his examination of aboriginal sovereignty

negotiations. These sorts of negotiations often involve enabling translocal ties (as Castree ultimately has to acknowledge) and yet the ties come together (just as Massey's account would suggest) in the "unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here and now" - a here and now which in native land claims often also draws "on a history and a geography of thens and theres." In other words, Massey's account seems well- attuned to the possibilities of post-colonial place-making. In fact the deliberately *dis*orienting opening argument of *For Space* begins with a provocation to rethink the *space* of colonial geographic imaginations in terms of the specific *place* of Aztec agency. This provocation is brief and Massey does not develop the kind of detailed contrapuntal critique of colonial and counter-colonial cartography that such affirmations of place-making agency make possible (*e.g*. Moore, 2005; Sparke, 1995 and 1998). However, by reproducing Aztec and Spanish depictions of Tenochtitlán opposite one another (2-3), and by thereby challenging colonial assumptions about 'new' lands being empty and uninscribed spaces, she does nonetheless develop a much wider argument against ever making assumptions about 'open space'.

As well as being linked to her post-colonial arguments and her critique of globalism, Massey's warning about assuming 'open space' is also directed at debates over public space. Here once more the argument points up the value of her insistence on examining multiple processes that are coeval in place. Discussing London again and, specifically, the place of the pigeons in Trafalgar square, she emphasises the need to question unquestioning appeals for unregulated place. "All spaces are socially regulated in some way," she counters, "if not by explicit rules (no ball games, no loitering) then by the potentially more competitive (more market-like?) regulation which exists in the absence of explicit (collective? Public? Democratic? Autocratic?) controls . 'Open space'," she therefore underlines, "is a dubious concept" (152). Moreover, building on this point, Massey makes the further argument that "as well as objecting to the new privatisations and exclusions, we might address the question of the social relations which could construct any new and better, notion of public space." This might seem a simple enough point, but it has far reaching implications for the work of many other critical geographers. For example, Don Mitchell (2005) has recently written a useful critique of the ways in which contemporary US court decisions have developed an imaginative

geography of 'buffer zones' and 'bubble spaces' in conjunction with advancing class-based inclusions and exclusions from the so-called public space. His critical point about the privatization of public space is well-taken, but one of the key cases he uses to point to the pattern - a lawsuit from 2000 known as 'Hill vs. Colorado' where the US supreme court supported the legality of buffer zones to protect women approaching abortion clinics - also illustrates the importance of Massey's argument against assumptions of 'open space'. The implication here is a simple one. Open space is not open for women who are harassed on their way into clinics. While Mitchell does not really address this issue, the kind of caution Massey makes about 'open space' supports a more nuanced account of how feminist demands for open access for women to spaces that give them reproductive choice may to some degree involve the creation of private space too. The non-feminist members of the court may still have gone along with the buffer zone idea because of a class-based investment in privatizing public space, but as critics we would clearly be wrong to assume that the opposite of the buffers is some sort of pure public that is fully open to all. "For instituting democratic public spaces," as Massey makes clear, "necessitates operating with a concept of spatiality which keeps always under scrutiny the play of the social relations which construct them" (153).

As valuable as they are for nuancing our accounts of political space, Massey's points about place are at times awkwardly argued. Searching for a vocabulary and a way of speaking that will not fix place once and for all, her sentences frequently invoke it with a verb-less mix of similes, metaphors and german-sounding-innovations in english that are challenging to read. "Places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events" (130). "Places as heterogeneous associations" (137). "Layers as accretions of meetings" (139). "A politics of outwardllookingness", from place beyond place" (192). "Not spatial fetishism" (165). "Single-minded spaces" (178). "Not intrinsically coherent" (141). "London again" (190). "And so on" (143) "And so forth" (180)! Perhaps the lack of verbs in these sentences is meant to make us think about the ways place gets pre-fixed by our pre-conceived concepts of particular socio-economic processes. Or perhaps the sentences are more an overdetermined outcome themselves of a particular place in England - "London again"? - with its own strange mix of verbless New Labor soundbites and irreverent 'Estuary English' innovations of

received language. However, Massey suggests herself that her own idiom owes more to starting life as a "northerner" from the rather differently worlded city of Wythenshawe (see Massey, 2001), a working class suburb of Manchester characterized by "constant cheery back-chat" (123). And so perhaps another way of reading these verbless assertions about place is more as back-chat to established disciplinary axioms that divide formal and abstract space from informal and personalized place. As such they certainly connect up to a cheery personal picture Massey provides of herself and of her own experience of place throughout the book. Thus as well as putting a holiday photo she took on a trip to Svalbard on the front cover, Massey also tells us about how she used to love maps and her globe as a child; about her sheer joy in fell-walking; about her dis-*placing* disappointment when her mum didn't make a stodgy-style chocolate cake; and, as clear testimony to her own class mobility out of the council-estate kitchen, her taste today for foreign travel: "You arrive in Paris," she says. "Flop exhausted into a café" (169). Sometimes there might not be quite as much reflexivity in these personal anecdotes as Massey's general call to responsibility recommends. My working class undergraduates in Seattle, for example, will probably not find it so easy to see themselves included in the "you" of Massey's Parisian street scene. And yet, her more general style with its informal asides and stories remains nonetheless appealing in its risk-taking and anti-elitist experimentalism. Not all the risks pan out, and there are some strange ellipses and jangly sentences. But at least some of these, like the book's instrumental use of an image from the cover on the top of every page, its duplication of a poster from Hamburg, and its peculiar partitioning into a confusing maze of Parts and Chapters may well have more to do with the publishers (Sage) and the particular approach they took to styling *For Space*. In any event, these stylings may actually appeal to other readers. Indeed, for those who herald from the humanities - including fields ranging from communications to comparative literature - Massey's aphorisms about place and power may well prove as usefully allusive as they are elusive (*e.g*. Rodgers, 2004). Meanwhile, for those of us in geography the book clearly lays down an ethical-*cum*-disciplinary challenge that is much more important than the readerly challenge of the odd eccentric sentence. "The chance of space must be responded to" (111), Massey says. Putting the preposition at the end allows her to dodge the question of who precisely should be responding here, but nevertheless

her basic arguments about acknowledging responsibility for space clearly indicate that geographers should play a critical role.

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