Relational place-making: the networked politics of place

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Place-making – the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live – is an important but oft-neglected part of political theory. Place-making is an inherently networked process, constituted by the socio-spatial relationships that link individuals together through a common place-frame. While place-oriented scholars have long acknowledged the importance of interaction and communication in place-making, the mutual integration of network concepts, political theorisations and place conceptualisations has been relatively weak. We use case studies in Bolivia's forests and Athens, USA to explore how integrating these concepts can guide empirical research. This article argues that a more robust and explicit notion of 'relational place-making' – the networked, political processes of place-framing – positions the concept of place in a way that offers new analytical utility for political and urban geographic scholars.

key words place politics networks place-framing relationality place-making

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Introduction

Geographers and others in recent years have used theories about both networks and place-making as they have attempted to understand contemporary political processes and social movements (Jones 2009; Leitner *et al.* 2008; Leitner and Sheppard 2002; Martin 2003a). At the same time, Massey (2004 2005) and others have sought to understand relational processes and place-making as co-constitutive. These various efforts have been complementary, but not always explicitly recognised as such. We see evidence of a halting, decade-long movement towards an understanding of the inter-relationships between networking, place-making and politics, particularly in urban and political geography. Yet some of the most explicit efforts along these lines have come from scholars rooted in other subdisciplines (see Castree 2004; Escobar 2001).

This paper contributes to the literatures on place, networks and politics by identifying theoretical gaps within recent work on the conjuncture of these three concepts. Specifically, we argue that the extant literature inadequately integrates place-making, networking and politics, and only partially captures the interrelationships between the three. While several scholars have made attempts to reconcile and integrate these terms, we find that there is a systematic tendency to downplay or marginalise one of the three concepts analytically, thus privileging the remaining two. We heuristically cluster these previous efforts into three categories, which we label *the politics of place*, *networked politics* and *networked place*. While many of the efforts we examine offer important insights regarding the relationships they describe, they collectively fail to provide a more comprehensive engagement with, or operationalisation of, the ways in which networked processes of place-making constitute politics. Examining networking, place-making and politics together offers a framework for political geographers that both theorises socio-spatial political processes more clearly and also suggests a path toward new theoretically motivated empirical research.

In what follows, we begin by explicating recent contributions to, and developments regarding, theories of place, networks and political contestation in human geography, taking note of the complementarities and elisions of authors who have attempted to use the three concepts together. We then define our concept of *relational place-making*, and situate it within the broader conversation about place and politics. Using two case studies intentionally constructed at different scales – one focusing on conflicts over forest resources in Bolivia, and the other on a health centre's expansion in Athens, Georgia, USA – we explore how understanding place as relational, and politics as both networked and placed, helps open up analytical terrain that has been obscured in conventional uses of both place and network discourses regarding political contestation. In conclusion, we argue for the utility of relational place across a broad swathe of research and theorisations in human geography, and call for empirical research that widens our understanding of how these networks of place-making operate.

Recent theorisations of place, politics and networks

Place, politics and networks are central concepts in contemporary human geography, informing diverse theoretical projects and empirical topics. Convergences between the three are common. However, we find that the scholarship that links them tends to de-emphasise one of the three terms in favour of a heightened synergy between the remaining two. In what follows, we explain this scholarship using three heuristics: *the politics of place*, *networked politics* and *networked place*. We assess the strengths of each cluster while also highlighting where we see potential for advancement through a more complete conceptual integration of place, politics and networks. As such, the objective is not only to highlight the limitations of each approach, but to draw insights from each perspective that contribute to the development of a more holistic conceptualisation of a networked politics of place.

The politics of place
The notion of place has been a core theoretical idea in geography at least since the 1970s. Place has often been described as local, particular and unique, while remaining importantly contextualised within broader physical and social landscapes

(Agnew 1987; Entrikin 1990; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Agnew (1987) analytically distils the multiple facets of place into *locale*, *location* and *sense of place*.[1] More recently, scholars have highlighted how the affective experience of *locatedness* – of being *here* – is iteratively created and recreated through social and political processes, which work to define and make specific places (Martin 2003a; Merrifield 1993). Working to integrate the idea of place-making into the literatures on social movements and politics, place-oriented scholars have in the past decade argued that the politics of place-making are key to understanding how communities conceptualise and then motivate their reactions to (among other things) the socio-spatial re-ordering of the urban environment (i.e. development or gentrification) (Bradford 2004; Martin 2003a 2004; Paasi 2003). Scholars focusing on the place-making processes of politics tend to highlight the local particularities of places that inform or motivate activism (Elwood 2006; Martin 2003a).

Martin (2003a) has previously described the shared place understandings that emerge from and iteratively shape political contestations as 'place-frames'. Drawing on the concept of collective-action frames – shared understandings of a situation that can motivate and enable a collective response (Snow and Benford 1992) – from the social movements literature, she argues that place-frames are discursive, political understandings of the process of place production (Martin 2003a). While individuals may experience particular place-frames prior to political engagement, these frames are best understood as *latent*. As competing discourses about places are contested (and, in their contestation, shaped and adopted by others), they become constitutive of new, shared place identities.

For Martin and others concerned with the place/politics conjuncture, empirical research is focused on the moment of negotiation and/or contestation over places or place identity – that is, on the moment when latent conflicts become active and political (Bradford 2004; Elwood 2006; Low and Laurence-Zuniga 2003; Martin 2003b). Politics, as theorised in geography, are the processes of negotiation over the terms that govern the use of space and place (Harvey 1996; Martin *et al.* 2003). These politics can include contestation over discursive representation, scalar conceptualisation or the terms of participation (Martin *et al.* 2003; Purcell 2008). Within urban geography in particular, research on gentrification and class- or identity-driven conflicts

has productively engaged place as a particular type of political claim on urban space (Davidson 2008; Harvey 1996; Wyly and Hammel 2005; Zukin 1987). This scholarship does not always explicitly use the term place; at times these and other scholars characterise the contestations they examine as being about urban space, or simply local conflicts (Purcell 2006; Staeheli 2008). Nonetheless, we argue that studies such as these are fundamentally about a nexus of place-making, identity and conflict.

The scholars we identify in this 'politics of place' cluster have sometimes fallen back on structuralist logics with broad explanatory power, but that underplay the complex, multivalent connectivities at work in place-making. For example, some time ago Logan and Molotch explicated the theory of urban growth coalitions and the resultant growth-oriented politics of American cities (Logan and Molotch 1987; Molotch 1976). Scholars continue to refine this analytic (see Lauria 1997; Jonas and Wilson 1999; Hankins and Martin 2006; Gibbs and Jonas 2000), but it is too often deployed as shorthand to explain the structural and external forces that shape a place, without a full exploration of the multi-locational and agentic relations that help produce, maintain and enable the elites that form urban growth coalitions (Boyle 1999; Hackworth 2000; Purcell 1997; Short 1999).[2] We do not deny the powerful structural forces of urban capital, but argue that scholars must also examine the connections through which these forces are applied if they are to empirically expose the mechanics of urban place politics. The foundational concepts of place as location, locale and sense of place that inform scholarship on the politics of place are essential to any integration of place and networks, as we show below in our discussion of relationality.

Scholarship focused on the place/politics nexus acknowledges the importance of connections and relationships in negotiations over place (particularly via a variety of identity-based perspectives), but the conceptualisation and application of network ideas is often somewhat thin. Case studies sometimes offer details about important relationships or connectivities, but these do not constitute a systematic evaluation of how interrelations among people within and without the area shape place contestation. For example, Martin (2003b) argues that neighbourhoods are places partly constituted through cooperation and conflict, but fails to demonstrate *which* place-making connectivities

(e.g. cooperative and conflictual ties) must be explicated in order to adequately interpret the making of a neighbourhood. This and other work tends to focus on places as specific localities, which *a priori* draws attention to people and events within the place, thus obscuring the role of outside connections or activities as forces shaping conditions within a locale.

Networked politics

The network concept has carved out an increasingly significant position in the social sciences where it serves as an analytical approach and descriptor of cultural, socioeconomic and political relationships. In contrast to markets (where organisation occurs 'spontaneously' through exchange), or hierarchies (where organisation is achieved through top-down or topographical power relationships), networks are somewhere in-between these extremes, shaped by power structures and individual choices, but stabilised by the reciprocity, mutuality, preferentiality and/or interdependencies of or between the actors involved (Jessop 1998; Leitner and Sheppard 2002; Powell 1990; Thompson 2003). Network structures can be observed at three levels – the interpersonal, the interorganisational and the intersystemic – and they supplement 'market exchange and government hierarchy with institutionalised negotiations to mobilise consensus and build mutual understanding' (Jessop 1998, 35).

Sociologists have long viewed networks as important influences on recruitment, participation and collective action in/through social movements (Gould 1993; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Shemtov 2003; Snow *et al*. 1980). In this view, networks are microstructural forms that socialise and connect activists, facilitate information flows, help to create solidarity and shared identities, influence decisionmaking processes, and that, importantly, can limit membership if they fail to create brokerage opportunities to (potentially) new participants (Heaney and Rojas 2008; Kitts 2000; Passy 2003). Studies typically focus on the nature, density and extent of relationships within social movements and/or how an actor's centrality within a network, or positionality in relation to third parties, influences the possibilities for mobilisation or coalition formation (Diani 2000; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Kitts 2000; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Knoke 1990).

Most scholars recognise networks as an important dimension of political processes and a

substantive discussion has emerged regarding the ways that politics play out through network connectivities (Amin 2002; Bosco 2001; Hadjimachalis and Hudson 2006; Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner and Sheppard 2002; Leitner *et al.* 2008; Nicholls 2009). Despite this recognition, the challenge remains to empower and deepen network concepts through a more meaningful account of the inequalities, exclusionary practices, agencies and multiple rationalities that help constitute their time-space configurations (Ettlinger 2003; Forrest and Kearns 2001; Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002; Leitner *et al.* 2008). Bosco (2001), for example, notes that the international, inter-scalar linkages of local protesters and organisers undermines the micro/macro binary that has been used by privileged actors to maintain their positions of power. In this case, the 'Madres' social movement in Argentina drew on activism and connections among people located in different national territories to achieve greater political power, highlighting the silent disappearance of many Argentineans at the hands of their government. These actors shared not a specific location, but a politics – one that was indeed directed to a particular national territory, but not confined in or to it.

Networked politics play out within and between places and regions through negotiations that occur in different kinds social arenas. First, there are formal arenas (e.g. legislatures, parliaments, city councils) – what Amin and Thrift (2006) call 'big-P politics'. Second, there are the informal interactions of all kinds that emerge in support of competing ideas and ideals. These 'small-p' or 'new' politics are often the key realm for contentious politics where power struggles are not specifically territorial or locally fixed (Flint 2003; Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner *et al.* 2008; Nicholls 2009; Staeheli 2008). Rather, politics are always connected, exercised via networks of actors, institutions and processes.

While a number of the recent efforts to describe a networked or relational politics include the term 'place' in their analyses (Amin and Graham 1997; Castree 2004; Jones 2009; Nicholls 2008), the use of the word is most often limited to Agnew's (1987) notion of 'locale', or site: place is concrete, local and territorialised (see Bosco 2001; Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner *et al.* 2008). Leitner *et al.*, for example, argue that places are 'sites where people live, work and move … yet … they have a distinct materiality … that materially regulates and mediates social

relations'. In this construction, places are primarily local sites, 'imbued with meaning' (2008, 161). Nicholls (2009) notes that strong ties, solidarity and trust can develop through spatial proximity, and create 'relational assets' that help to mobilise social movements in location-specific political struggles. Similarly, Bosco (2001) regards place as a locale or site for political action (in this case the Plaza), albeit one with a framing strongly shared by activists across national boundaries. For these scholars, places are local arenas that provide context for the strong relationships that are necessary for firm- and coalition-building (Nicholls 2009; Routledge 2003).

Despite the preference for 'local' understandings of place in such scholarship, however, place identity and the social processes of place-framing have been understood by some scholars as explicitly multi-scalar for some time. Scholarship in the 'networked politics' heuristic have typically conceptualised non-local political connectivities as the 'stringing together' of places (Nicholls 2009, 85) in networks that 'expand across space' (Bosco 2001, 309), thus encapsulating processes of place-making within specific locales (Leitner *et al.* 2008). For other scholars (Amin 2002; Escobar 2001; Murdoch 1998), however, Massey's (1991 1994) 'global sense of place' signifies that place identities range from the local of a neighbourhood to national territories to an awareness of an interlinked, global environment. In these treatments, place identity is centrally about the combinations of people and institutions that agree upon or recognise themselves as part of a shared community (e.g. Anderson 1991 [1983]). These networked communities engage in struggles, then, over (place) definitions at a variety of scales. Bourdieu notes:

> Struggles over … regional identity … are a particular case of different struggles over classifications, struggles over the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world. (1991, 221; quoted in Paasi 2003, 479)

Theorising these 'regions', which we understand as variously scaled places, offers scholars a way of articulating how political struggles organise the experienced, material world into overlapping, understandable entities – not discrete physical territories but as an interlocking *bricolage* of (always partially) shared place understandings. In order to better understand how networks and places might be conceptualised as co-constituted at a variety of

scales, we turn to their specific conjuncture in recent geographic literature.

Networked place

A rich, multi-scalar sense of place offers politically oriented network scholars a compatible theoretical tool, one that extends networks by always grounding them in multiple, interconnected, multi-scalar and overlapping places. Relationality, in this view, is always grounded, fixed and territorially embedded (Darling 2010; Jones 2009; Malpass *et al.* 2007). Massey (2004 2005) describes these grounded territories – 'places' – as 'bundles' of space-time trajectories drawn together by individuals through cognitive and emotional processes (2005, 119). These bundles are a manifestation of the condition of 'throwntogetherness', a haphazard social and physical propinquity (2005, 140).

Individuals bundle – that is, make places – by referencing and (re)configuring the many simultaneous places that they participate in; these place-bundles are socially negotiated, constantly changing and contingent. Harvey's notion of place-making as the carving out of 'temporary permanences' from spaces (1996, 241) is an analogue here. He describes place-making as an iterative, evolutionary process of defining not just boundaries or territories, but the rules and norms against which socio-spatial practices are understood. But where Harvey emphasises the experienced durability of places, Massey emphasises the ephemerality and changes that place-making communities experience. She uses the related phrase 'temporary constellations' (2005, 141), evoking an idea of places as selected from a space-field of trajectories into configurations that have purpose and meaning, but whose members may be reclaimed and repurposed into other configurations when viewed from other perspectives. Both of these conceptualisations resonate; places *seem* durable to the people who recognise and experience them, but they are nonetheless constantly being recreated and subtly changing. For example, the seeming durability of place may be wiped away in a political discourse or contestation that redefines the scalar unit, as when the 'Mega City' of Toronto erased pre-existing independent municipalities that were amalgamated to form a new political entity (Boudreau 1999). The urban political units ceased to exist, even if the places were materially and experientially (albeit not politically) still there.

The objects whose trajectories we are analytically tracing (or, to use Massey's metaphor, the points in a given place-constellation) can be read as actor-networks of many types and scales (i.e. individuals, coalitions, physical features, cities or nations) (see Murdoch 1998 2006). Individuals collect the trajectories of many different objects into bundles, and the specific trajectories within them are representations of particular space-time histories (Massey 2005). These bundles are places, and the multilateral network relationships among the trajectories that constitute them help to motivate socio-spatial action.

Individuals may privilege the motivating power of relationships *within* their particular place-bundles, but Massey emphasises that relationships beyond the limits of particular places shape them as well: tectonic activity deep in the Pacific, for example, may interact with dredging projects and the policies of regulatory agencies in the San Francisco Bay area to hasten or delay seismic activity within one individual's place-conceptualisation of Oakland. Massey's perspective on bundling as place-making enlarges on her earlier (1994) work to theorise more explicitly how individual experiences of place-making contribute to the construction of a global sense of place. Amin captures the complexity of these relationships nicely:

> [Cities and regions] are recast as nodes that gather flow and juxtapose diversity, as places of overlapping – but not necessarily locally connected – relational networks, as perforated entities … [that] come with no automatic promise of territorial or systemic integrity. (2004, 34)

Massey's substantial theoretical intervention in *For space* (2005) is more philosophical than methodological. Her project is primarily epistemological, focusing on spatial thinking, despite its simultaneous ontological contributions to theorising place; she does not always offer a great deal of guidance for translating her stimulating metaphorical vocabulary into an operational, empirical research methodology. In particular, questions regarding how the relational networks which enable and constrain perforated places are formed, what mechanisms regulate such networks, and how to examine them empirically are much less thoroughly explored than her theoretical constructs of space and place.

Massey (2005) certainly insists that places are the product of, and thus require, negotiation.[3] Her case study of the political negotiations of London, emphasising the antagonisms expressed between advocates of affordable housing (and better wages) and those who celebrate (and wish to continue) the

global dominance and centrality of London's financial district, demonstrates the interconnected dynamics of global capital, local government planners and high- and low-wage workers, all with particular trajectories and place productions. It explicitly invokes politics as negotiation, and it insists on the necessity of contestation in place-making.

Yet even her later, book length intervention (2007) about London's social and political economic reproduction does not fully integrate her theoretical heavy lifting with the empirical case of the city's politics or how they work through particular institutions, networks, actors and place-frames. While the London she describes is certainly a node in the global network of cities – and is also very much produced as a place, with several corresponding place-frames – the politics she describes are in most cases scaled to match the urban-regional, national and global formal-political and economic systems that have prevailed in London's remaking as a 'world city' over the past 20 years. There is less engagement with meso- and microsocial, informal and community politics: the place-frames that receive the most attention are those that are the most hegemonic. For scholars to fully put together networks, place and politics, we need to fully interrogate a rich and variegated set of place-frames and unpack the particulars of their intersections simultaneously at scales ranging from individual place experiences through the urban and supraurban.

To summarise, each of the heuristic clusters outlined above offers important theoretical insights. Scholars in the 'politics of place' cluster explore the processes through which places are negotiated; those in the 'networked politics' cluster explore how contestation plays out through relational connectivities; and others (Massey in particular) examine networks and place by incorporating both networking *processes* and a relational conceptualisation of *actors* in theorisations of place. What remains missing in the conjunction of these three clusters, despite these scholars' important efforts, is the explicit, systematic and simultaneous interlinkage of place, networks and politics. Integrating these three terms conceptually into a 'networked politics of place' provokes a number of important questions, many of them methodological, that we believe point toward new research agendas for political (and more generally, human) geography. In the next section, we explicate our concept of

relational place-making, and explore what it means to operationalise it empirically.

Relational place-making

As we suggest above, relational place-making draws on scholarship and insights about place, politics and networks by explicitly recognising the flexible, multi-scalar and always developing meanings of place: meanings that are produced via socially, politically and economically interconnected interactions among people, institutions and systems. In the argument that follows, we clarify how relational place-making conceptually integrates place, politics and networks. We trace Massey's (2005) notion of places as bundles, connecting it to ideas of politics as productive of socio-spatial contestations and competing place-frames. We then illustrate our own conceptualisation of relational place-making with two case studies, highlighting its dynamic, multi-scalar and flexible character.

Following Massey, we view places as bundles of space-time trajectories, or 'temporary constellations' (2005, 141). Bundling has affinities and connections with, for example, a Lefebvrian conceptualisation of space, except that it is explicitly oriented to place: to how representations of space, representational space and spatial practice are situated and settled (however temporarily; see Merrifield 1993). Massey's language is dense, but the bundling metaphor we adopt contains a number of critical threads. First, places are composed of very heterogeneous parts or raw materials: the points of these constellations (that is, the objects which have space-time trajectories) consist of elements like physical features, individuals, coalitions, corporations and groups as well as myriad parts of the built environment. Second, bundling proceeds through individual people's (conscious and unconscious) acts of selecting or choosing raw materials, or elements, which comprise places in their experiences (akin to identifying constellations among the stars of the night sky). This selecting is always informed by social process (i.e. it is already networked). Third, while individuals' production of their place/bundles is important, it is through the subsequent process of positioning these various bundles toward social and political ends (that is, through place-*framing*) that rough consensus among groups can emerge about which bundles have shared importance. This third point is crucial; the overall 'bundling' conceptualisation might seem

very individualistic, but it is not. What we see or select derives very much from our contexts and relationships; from what we learn to see, the built environment we are in, the discourses about place and connectivity already built up, or sedimented, in social relations and structures. Bundling is simultaneously structural and agentic; common places develop from pervasive structural forces that produce particular built environments and values. Fourth and finally, the bundles that constitute places change over time as the elements that make a more or less coherent whole in the eyes of the people who construct them also change.

The bundling process draws on elements at multiple scales; the connectivities and contingencies that shape a place are not at all limited to the scale of that place. In addition, places are not inherently local nor are they fixed at any particular scale. People experience places at many different scales simultaneously. Nations, regional states, neighbourhoods and 'safe' or 'unsafe' areas of a city are all produced through place-making processes. For example, Brenner (2004) demonstrates the ways that national and supra-national state economic policies in Europe are primarily enacted in and constructed via city-regions.

People experience the concrete, material dimensions of place affectively and cognitively (Entrikin 2003),[4] but these understandings of place are also constructed, and especially communicated, through social negotiation, including conflict and difference. Like Martin (2003a), we use the term 'place-framing' to capture this process, and emphasise in its use that place contestation is inherently political (though not always formally or institutionally so). Place/bundles may be individually conceptualised and experienced, but place-framing articulates the iterative co-bundling process through which social and political negotiations result in a strategic sharing of place. Place-frames represent only a fraction of any place, the socially negotiated and agreed place/bundle that is rhetorical and politically strategic – not fully a place but a place-frame. This is an agonistic process (Amin 2004; Purcell 2008; following Laclau and Mouffe 1985): there is no moment of resolution when place-frames are produced in any final, settled sense.[5] Rather, place-contestation is always ongoing, as particular place-frames are tactically deployed toward strategic (though perhaps not always conscious) political aims.

We conceptualise a networked politics of place as *relational place-making*. The political process of

place-making is an inherently networked one; *all* places are relational places. The empirical implications of this statement, which has been implicitly or explicitly echoed for at least a decade (Amin 2004; Bosco 2001; Castree 2004; Escobar 2001; Jones 2009; Nicholls 2009), have not yet been sufficiently worked out in the literature.[6] Our principal contribution is to integrate and operationalise ideas from the work of others who have made efforts to link the three concepts of place, networks and politics (Jessop *et al.* 2008; Jones 2009; Leitner *et al.* 2008), and in particular of those who have tried to propose or define something like 'relational place' (Amin 2004; Amin and Roberts 2008; Castree 2004; Massey 2005). We do so by drawing on a series of scholarly insights as we have described above. First, that politics are clearly relational; they incorporate social relations, connections and positionalities. Second, that places are relational, structured individual human–environment experiences. Third and fourth, that places are produced through bundling and that place-framing draws on these bundles and expresses elements of them for collective strategic and rhetorical goals.

In what follows, we operationalise these ideas to argue that a relational place-making approach should focus analytical attention on the place/bundles drawn on by actors in the place-framing process in order to identify points of contention and commonality in the elements of the place/bundles experienced by actors on opposing sides of a conflict. Individuals (and institutions) may have strong relational ties to multiple communities that allow them to strongly experience and potentially shape competing place-frames simultaneously. The exploitation of this political power – e.g. a privileged positionality (Leitner and Sheppard 2002; Sheppard 2002) – is critical to the success or failure of place-framing coalitions as it shapes a community's shared place discourse and (thus) enables or disables particular socio-spatial outcomes.

Operationalising relational place-making
Examining places as networked, perforated and the result of agonistic processes is challenging, particularly with respect to research design and methodology. We do not offer an authoritative new analytical strand, but rather develop an approach with methodological 'hooks' for what might seem to be a theoretically dense or difficult-to-apply conceptual framework. As Amin notes, 'the analytical challenge posed is to make something of the

tracings of varying lengths and duration of material, virtual and immanent relationships' (2004, 34). We agree, and detail below how our relational place-making framework can be applied in research practice. We propose four steps at the core of the empirical investigation of relational place-making:

1   identify and parameterise a conflict for examination
2   identify and explore key place-frames that partially manifest the bundles that shape perspectives on that conflict
3   identify key actors and institutions who help to construct the competing place-frames, including those who stand between, or may shift among, frames within the conflict and
4   unpack and interrogate the place/bundles informing the positionalities of actors and institutions in the conflict.

Doing so offers the potential to identify points of agreement or deeper disagreements within conflicts that the place-frames – as strategic and political representations – may obscure. We explore these four steps below.

Research on relational place-making should begin with a particular conflict over competing place-frames, rather than an *a priori* site or scale. Analytically, relational place becomes 'exposed' for investigation and scholarship *as it is made and remade*, or via contestations. While in some sense nearly all conflicts are place conflicts – that is, all social interaction occurs in places[7] – the relational place-making framework is particularly relevant to conflicts that centre on change in and of places. Redevelopment conflicts, issues of demographic transformation in nations or neighbourhoods, debates over urban identity, etc., are ripe for examination along these lines. In examining these conflicts, competing place-frames can be identified.

Although certain place-frames (the city or city-region; the neighbourhood) have a history of frame reinforcement of which scholars should take note, focusing on moments of contestation resists tendencies toward the scalar reification of well-rehearsed frames, making visible the ways in which differently scaled frames can be deployed simultaneously in these place conflicts (as when residents near Yucca Mountain resisted framing of the Mountain as a national resource; Slovic *et al.* 1991). We need to consider the myriad and always inter-

connected elements that make up these frames by temporarily untangling them into strands that we can analytically consider and juxtapose. Through this process of discovering and analysing the various, competing conceptualisations of place, researchers can begin to understand what issues are being politicised and depoliticised in particular frames. Differing frames motivate varying actions and outcomes among those who share them (Martin 2003a; Snow and Benford 1988); in the political contestation over place-making, a critical question is: what are the stakes?

Examining the network relationships of the stakeholders in a relational place-making framework leads to a particular focus on two types of actors: those who successfully *produce and reproduce* specific place-frames, and those whose positionality gives them particular power to *choose or blend* the frames on offer. The producers of specific frames are those positioned most clearly on one side or another: advocates for particular place/bundles. Those with power to blend, as the networks literature suggests, may be situated as mediators: political officials, people with ties (social, professional, etc.) across the lines of conflicts. These may or may not be the most vocal or visible participants, or those who have significant influence within any one place-framing coalition; furthermore, their decision-making ability may well be highly constrained (for example, by the seemingly intractable power of capital). Regardless of the degree to which the actions of these pivotal participants are understood as structurally constrained or agentic, a focus on their roles in the networked processes of place-frame contestation provides a methodological point of access for grappling with the empirics of conflicts over place-making.

Some actors' positionality gives them (sometimes unexpected) power to move between various available place-frames in the midst of ongoing political negotiation. Empirically, fluidity may be apparent in the discourse or actions of an actor, while at other times it is place-frames that contain common elements despite articulating different – even conflicting – goals, solutions and place-frames. Fluid positionalities may draw on latent elements embedded within and across different place-frames, but the frames themselves may obscure these commonalities despite the fact that actors share common elements in their places/bundles and networks. These common elements contribute to and inform a complex, nested set of relations and places. That is,

they are obscured in conflicting place-frames but might be enabled by the underlying place/bundling processes of actors.

As the heuristic case studies below demonstrate, a relational place-making approach can offer key insights about political struggles. We begin each case with a conflict, superficially over land or land use. Investigating further, we identify competing place-frames regarding the use of that land. In Bolivia, the conflict is over forest access; the US case involves disagreements about appropriate land use in an urban community. Further examination highlights the place-frames that stake out the positions, values and political strategies mobilised by the actors involved in the conflicts. We then identify the actors and institutions defining each conflict or contributing to the place-frames that characterise the points of conflict. We conclude each case study with a description of the place/bundles informing the actors and institutions constructing and mobilising place-frames. Doing so identifies important common elements of place/bundles that are obscured by these frames, commonalities that can offer alternative place-frames able to challenge the status quo and enable conflict resolution.

Case studies of relational place-making

The two cases we discuss below reflect disagreements about place-frames in political conflicts. In each, the initial research question was not about relational place; it is upon analytical reflection that we realised how they demonstrate the complex relations between place and network: relational place. In the Bolivia case, the research focus was on the impact of changes in forest access regulations and land-use reforms on the development of that country's forest products sector. In the US case on Athens, Georgia, the analytical lens was on the degree of openness and forms of contestation in a municipality faced with place-based political organising. In reflecting anew on these two cases, we draw on in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders in each conflict, and documentary evidence about the conflicts. The evidence presented below offers an illustration of the potential for a relational place-making approach, rather than providing definitive conclusions about the conflicts or their possible resolutions. An explicitly relational place-making analysis would, at the outset, be constructed methodologically around the four steps detailed above.

Bolivia's forest regions and the politics of place-making

Since 2005, Bolivia has experienced a political-economic transformation as the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement for Socialism or MAS) party gained control of the government. Led by Evo Morales, the party has pursued a pluri-nationalistic platform aimed at redistributing power to historically marginalised indigenous communities, particularly from the western *altiplano* and central *chapare* and highland regions of the country (Eaton 2007; Larson *et al.* 2008; Schroeder 2007). Morales' government is aggressively promoting interregional welfare redistribution through populist tactics and indigenous social movements. Natural resources have been at the centre of these struggles as the state has nationalised petroleum and mineral reserves. In response, private-sector elites, primarily from the eastern departments or provinces, have organised for regional autonomy. A core objective of the elite-driven social movement is to enable private enterprises and eastern regions to retain greater control over the profits of natural resource extraction. Forest resources have also been contested as the migration of Andean and highland people, coupled with rapid growth in the wood products industry, have created tensions over forest access and control.

Bolivia's 53 million hectares of forests consist of a patchwork of occupied and unoccupied territories controlled through differing forms of ownership (i.e. community control or control by private enterprises). They provide a compelling example of how regional places are framed and contested through multi-scalar networks constituted by a diverse range of actors and political-economic processes. Two competing place-frames are clashing in the struggle over Bolivia's forests, each supported through networks of actors situated at multiple scales.

The first, which we label the *productive-sustainable* frame, portrays Bolivia's forests as an economically and environmentally vital place whose potential can best be realised through a modern, sustainable and entrepreneurial wood products industry. Four actors are central promoters of this place-frame. First, there are the large forest products firms and private landowners who frame Bolivia's forests as a vital yet sustainable resource essential for the country's economic development. Such a framing is critical for creating a

more positive public and international image in a political climate where private-sector elites have become increasingly marginal to the state's socialist and pluri-national agenda. Second, there are actors in industrial and export promotion agencies such as the Chamber of Forests (*Cámara Forestal*), the Chamber of Exporters (CADEX), and the Chamber of Industries for the Santa Cruz department (CAINCO). These actors, often owners of large businesses, help to strengthen private enterprises vis-à-vis the state and international markets through trade fairs, information provision and logistical support. Third, there are multilateral aid agencies (e.g. UNDP) and bilateral donors such as USAID who provide material and marketing support for Bolivia's forest industry and who view the growth of wood exports as the best means through which forest places can realise their potential. The fourth set of actors is composed of international NGOs (INGOs) such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the World Wildlife Fund and the Rainforest Alliance. These actors help large forest enterprises market themselves as environmentally sustainable and socially just businesses that are playing an important role in biodiversity conservation and the fight against global climate change.

All told, the *productive-sustainable* frame describes Bolivia's forests as modern, natural, sustainable and economically vibrant places. This frame is constructed and reproduced through networks primarily situated in global or international contexts, and by actors who essentialise the local as consisting of pristine forests, romanticised and viable communities, and forward-thinking businesspeople concerned with long-term social, economic and environmental well-being.[8] Bundled together in this relational place-frame are feelings, identities, materials and experiences that support the notion that forest places are natural, progressive, hopeful and modern. Importantly missing from this frame, however, are the identities, feelings and experiences of the residents of the communities where foresting occurs. The particular place/bundles constructed by community members are rhetorically important to productive-sustainable discourses, but in practice those residents' conceptualisations of their forests remain superficially accounted for since community actors' participation in these networks is highly restricted. In other words, residents, not unlike the trees, are reduced to objects to be protected, conserved and supposedly empowered, while they themselves play, at best, a distant role in the place-framing process.

A second, competing frame, which we label the *community-empowerment* frame, has become increasingly important with the rise of Evo Morales and the MAS government. In this frame, forests are places for welfare redistribution, cultural expression, traditional livelihoods and the empowerment of indigenous peoples. Four key groups of actors sustain the networks promoting this frame. First there are leaders from indigenous communities (*Tierras Communitarias de Origen* – TCOs), community associations (*Agrupaciones Sociales del Lugar* – ASLs), and social movements such as *Movimiento Sin Tierra* (Landless People's Movement – MST) who strive to gain access to land and to empower themselves both economically and politically. Second, there are Bolivian-based NGOs such as AFIN (*Asociación Forestal Indígena Nacional* – the National Association of Indigenous Forests), APCOB (*Apoyo Para el Campesino-Indígena del Oriente Boliviano* – Support for the Rural-Indigenous People of Eastern Bolivia) and *Fundación TIERRA* (The Land Foundation), whose collective goal is to empower indigenous and rural communities through development projects and political activism focused on land rights, infrastructure provision and, increasingly, the development of fairer trade relationships with international markets. Third, there are state actors, particularly in the National Forest and Land Authority, who have begun to serve a more important role in promoting this place-frame as the MAS government has centralised control over land and forest resources. Fourth, and finally, these networks are constituted in part through ties to INGOs such as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the International Land Coalition, organisations interested in sustainable rural development, indigenous land rights and community forestry issues.

In contrast to the first place-frame, where residents are objectified as natural parts of the forest landscape, the *community-empowerment* frame positions rural and indigenous people as central actors in forest places, while private enterprises and international markets are distant and ominous 'others'. Trees remain objectified in this framing, but here they are a resource to be used or mobilised as communities see fit in their quests to become empowered against centuries of repression at the hands of racist elites, colonising powers and, more recently, neoliberal capitalism. Bundled together are feelings

about justice and empowerment that come with greater control over forest lands, cultural identities manifest in traditional livelihoods and collective forms of community organisation, and the shared experiences of indigenous and rural peoples. In framing forest places in this manner, community-empowerment perspectives seek to mobilise poor people into social movements organised around redistribution and social justice. Moreover, they also hope to enrol non-local actors (e.g. INGOs) who support the fight for social justice, cultural survival, environmental conservation and/or welfare redistribution.

Despite their significant differences, there are critical points of overlap and (implicit) engagement between these place-frames because actors on each side of the conflict share common elements of their place/bundles. Two types of actors are particularly well positioned with respect to these commonalities – INGOs and forest residents or community members. Some INGOs have become familiar with the seemingly divergent place/bundles linked to the *productive-sustainable* and *community-empowerment* frames through their efforts to broker business agreements between buyers/manufacturers of tropical hardwood products and forest communities.[9] Through these relationships, INGO actors have had to navigate between productive-sustainable and community-empowerment place-frames. This fluidity has not been easy to achieve, or particularly successful at this stage, but it has encouraged INGO actors to engage more deeply with the place/bundles experienced by actors on both sides of the conflict and to seek common points of agreement with respect to their constitutive elements. Specifically, for some of these conflicting actors, there are important overlaps with respect to elements such as the experience of living and working in tropical forests, the diverse animals and tree species, and the economic value of forest products, particularly as it relates to the livelihoods of community members.

Forest residents or community members too are well positioned to shift between place-frames as their place/bundles contain elements that can be mobilised on either side of the conflict. However, their ability to mobilise these elements through alternative forms of political engagement has been limited by more powerful actors who control the place-framing processes and who often use community members as objects to construct place-frames. In the *productive-sustainable* frame, community members are framed by capitalists and donors as economic actors whose successful development depends on their willingness and ability to engage in the wood extraction and forest conservation that can make the industry globally competitive and environmentally sustainable. In the *community-empowerment* frame, community members are framed by (some) leaders and NGOs as victims of racism and the exploitative practices of capitalism. In this case, the forest as place is a site for redistribution and social justice, one that is protected from the forces of global capitalism. Importantly, both frames partially and strategically draw on diverse place/bundles actually experienced by residents, which contain common elements (trees, families, cultural identities and shared histories, etc.). As such, more creative and viable solutions to conflicts over forest access and use might be developed through a more participatory and careful process of unpacking the place/bundles of forest residents.

As this case demonstrates, the place/bundles and networks that support or promote particular place-frames often overlap when actors on different sides of a conflict share common elements of their place experiences or when multi-positioned actors (e.g. INGOs, forest residents) attempt to manage conflicts and discontinuities between competing frames. These actors are not always explicitly or implicitly successful, but their attempts at bridging discursive, relational and structural divides yield important insights into the politics of place-making. By focusing on the place/bundles, actors and networks through which place-frames are developed, articulated and put forth into the realm of contested politics, one gets a better understanding of the dynamic and multi-scalar processes of place-making. Moreover, a relational approach to place-making provides insights into how to analytically unpack competing place-frames in order to identify key points of discontinuity, contestation and fluidity. We demonstrate this unpacking further in our second case study, an examination of place-making in the USA.

Land use planning and hospital expansion in Athens, Georgia, USA

As part of a county-wide land use planning initiative, in the spring of 1999 the Athens Regional Medical Center (ARMC) hospital of Athens-Clarke County, Georgia, USA, unveiled a 20-year plan for growth and expansion (Martin 2004). Its plans were met with unexpected opposition from residents of

its immediate and nearby neighbourhoods, who formed a grassroots organisation to oppose the hospital's plan called Citizens for Healthy Neighbourhoods (CHN). This case has been the subject of analysis elsewhere (Martin 2003b 2004), but here we draw on it because it provides a classically 'local' business-versus-residents conflict from which to consider relational place-making politics.

The neighbourhood group CHN mobilised a vocal and visible campaign during the spring and summer of 1999 to oppose the hospital's plan.[10] The hospital asserted its right to grow. It intended to use its quasi-public status (stemming from the 1950s) as the County Hospital Authority to acquire land via the state's power to take through eminent domain, issuing municipal bonds through the City-County Commission (Athens-Clarke County, or ACC) to fund construction. For months, CHN and the ARMC board waged a public war of words via ACC commission meetings, local newspaper articles and op-ed pieces. Eventually, they agreed to meet formally and negotiate a compromise.

Fundamentally, the contestation in Athens in the summer of 1999 was over the fact and design of the proposed physical expansion of the hospital. The expansion required that the ARMC site grow, necessitating demolition of over 50 single-family homes in adjacent areas of the Normaltown neighbourhood. The hospital's place-framing focused on Athens as *an economic centre*, with the hospital as a key job/growth engine serving a multi-county area. As such, land use planning was oriented toward attracting patients and attending efficiently to their needs. Details about the site expansion highlighted a 'campus'-like landscape with a suburban feel (rather than exploring denser options). The site's aesthetic look was important, as was car accessibility, and the presence of a landscape of grass and trees and flowers, with lots of open space between and around buildings, and a large parking structure. The hospital's framing was neither fully 'local' nor 'regional': it was affectively and materially both, reflecting the bundling process of constituting the hospital's place. This institutional place/bundle developed through actors charged with maintaining the hospital as a successful regional business: the CEO, the head of the physical planning committee, and various board members. Few of these actors experienced the neighbourhood except as hospital representatives; they may have visited other businesses there, but none lived there and only a few worked at the hospital daily. They also shared place-frames with local government officials, who imagined the hospital as the key economic player in the neighbourhood, highlighting its physical site as the essential place element in the area.

The neighbourhood residents' framings, by contrast, emphasised a *neighbourhood focused on single-family homes* (owner and renter occupied), sidewalks, and friendly encounters between neighbours while walking with pets, children or to a local store. The hospital was framed as just one site among many within the area. Framings against the hospital's plans highlighted the more than 50 individual houses that would need to be removed in order for the hospital to expand. Residents of the surrounding areas, and those organised into CHN, objected to arguments that their neighbourhood was primarily a site for commercial expansion, without consideration for the neighbourhood character and existing residents who enjoyed its urban amenities and simultaneously small-town community feel (Martin 2003b).

These competing *economic* and *neighbourhood* place-frames offer a partial understanding of the conflict, its resolution and of the place/bundles experienced by the actors involved. Moreover, these place-frames are relationally constituted, coalesced and bundled for individuals who are in a variety of overlapping and intersecting social relationships. On the *economic* side of the conflict, some of the hospital administrators, doctors, other staff and patients also live in Normaltown where the hospital is located and which was the site of such conflicting frames. They have friends there, they shop at stores or eat at restaurants there, and they drive or walk to and from the hospital on the same streets and sidewalks that local residents use. On the *neighbourhood* side, Normaltown residents, too, have complicated and intersecting relations with the institution of the hospital (as a place where a child was born, a broken bone set, or cancer treatment provided) and with its employees.

The intersections are detailed and complex: when the hospital first presented its 20-year plan, for example, the event was reported in the newspaper ahead of time, but it was from friendships among people in the neighbourhood who also worked at the hospital that residents became aware of the scope of the plan and the large number of houses that might be bought and demolished. Some of the members of the hospital board were

also ACC commissioners, emphasising the regional/economic perspective of both the ACC government and ARMC. This regional and governance perspective is tempered, however, by the very local identifications of some commissioners, such as the long-standing County Commissioner who also owned a neighbourhood fixture, a hardware store. Despite his open identification with a regional, hospital-oriented place-frame, this hospital Board Authority member and ACC commissioner was familiar with (and experienced) the local neighbourhood of small businesses and single-family homes (although some residents questioned the 'local' identity of his store, which drew business from across the region). While the hospital had close ties to government and business leaders, CHN had powerful networks as well; some residents were long-term friends and business colleagues of members of the rock band REM (founded in Athens), and their connections facilitated legal counsel for the neighbourhood organisation. The mediation process between CHN and the hospital's physical planning committee was developed over a breakfast between some of the members, after one picked up the phone to call the other.

Through these overlapping and intersecting networks, elements of the place/bundle experiences of actors on both sides of the conflict converged, despite the seeming intractability of the place-frames in opposition to one another. The *economic* frame and the *neighbourhood* frame in fact depend upon each other; the hospital emphasising its smaller-town setting in part by designing a growth plan that had plenty of parking and open green space. The residents enjoy positive property and aesthetic values prompted in part by the flow of workers and visitors to the hospital, the latter's neat, attractive site, and the surrounding restaurants and services, which draw on customers living in the neighbourhood but also on hospital staff and visitors.

These multi-layered relationships between hospital staff and neighbourhood residents, government officials (elected and appointed) and hospital leaders and board members, neighbourhood residents and celebrity residents, lawyers and elected officials, all helped to shape the course of the conflict. The close personal and embedded relationships across both sides of the conflict made it possible for one side to call another and suggest hammering out a truce (not without power struggles and

threats; hospital administrators had threatened to hold the leadership of CHN responsible for costs incurred by the hospital for financing delays). The truce entailed the creation of a joint planning committee, with neighbourhood leadership-input on future hospital site changes (a consultative structure that persists today).

The common elements of place in Normaltown that enabled the two sides to see shared interests nonetheless reflect only some perspectives, bundles and actors. Hospital workers who are not represented on the board or planning committee undoubtedly have other place/bundles which were not reflected in either the *economic* or *neighbourhood* frames, bundles that might point to concerns about safety, difficulty finding parking, or traffic to and from work. Neighbourhood residents not part of the network of actors who formed CHN were similarly silent/ced, including perhaps those homeowners seeking a reliable price for their homes from a hospital purchasing property to expand. For scholars seeking to understand the unfolding of relational place-making, we need to attend especially to the ways that individuals or groups of actors simultaneously participate in networks that overlap but may also be contradictory, as well as those actors who remain invisible in power-laden disputes. We also must give scholarly attention to the ways that such actors negotiate or straddle conflicting memberships in different place-framing coalitions. Such nested, interconnected, and at key times conflicting place identities offer a window onto the place-making process.

Conclusion: relational place-making and human geography

The two cases of Bolivia's forests and a hospital expansion in Athens, USA, illustrate different degrees of resolution between conflicting place-frames. Yet both also demonstrate the always ongoing character of relational place-making. The Bolivia case shows that relational place-making exhibits multiple, constantly competing places/bundles and frames that can remain in active conflict as actors in different, yet overlapping networks promote distinct place-frames. The Athens case, in contrast, represents a series of individual and institutional place/bundles and collective frames that seemed to, by the end of the conflict, mostly align or come into a frame of mutual compatibility between those frames focusing on the hospital and

those of neighbourhood residents. In both cases, we identify common elements within competing place-frames and actors simultaneously positioned in multiple networks. In Bolivia, international NGOs and forest residents participate in both productive-sustainable and community-empowerment networks; in Athens, hospital administrators, doctors, staff and government officials live in and/or have close ties to the neighbourhood affected by the expansion project. These intersections provide key points of engagement and dialogue between frames that may, as in the case of Athens, or may not, as in the case of Bolivia, foster compromise and lead to (temporary) resolutions of conflicts.

In empirically explicating this conceptualisation of relational place-making, we are not arguing for the recognition of a new kind of place-making, or a special subset of places that deserve new attention because they are constructed through relational processes. Instead, we suggest – or rather, affirm – that *all* places are relational, and are always produced through networked politics. Our intervention aims to help geographers by providing an analytical approach that helps us do more explicitly what we are already doing implicitly: to consider the interconnections and co-constituencies among place, networks and politics by identifying specific conflicts and the places they produce, the dimensions of place-framing evident, and the multiply-positioned actors and places/bundles inherent in and underlying the conflicts. In doing so, we can more effectively unpack the multi-scalar, multifaceted place-frames enacted in contestations over competing place/bundles through research that focuses on the relationalities between diverse people, institutions, materials and processes that are inscribed in, and engaged through, socio-spatial conflicts.

Our two case studies, intentionally constructed at very different scales of inquiry, emphasise that a relational place-making approach offers utility to researchers exploring a wide array of topics often conceptualised as being beyond the scope of place theory. In offering this theorisation, we call for (and hope to motivate) further research that explores the networked politics of place. In particular, we emphasise that empirical work that is conceptualised from the outset in terms of the conjunction of networks, place and politics may reveal new insights about the socio-spatial processes through which contestation occurs. As we have attempted to show, many of the underlying

theoretical unions between place, politics and networks that we highlight have either been described or implied by previous scholarship. However, by explicitly and simultaneously integrating them, we highlight the need to examine the relational processes driving and sustaining political conflicts over place. This, then, is intended as an integrative intervention. We hope that a focus on relational place-making will reveal further opportunities for cross-fertilisation of subdisciplines within (and beyond) geography that have relied on various theorisations of place, networks and politics.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Some geographers might prefer the alternative, but fundamentally parallel terms of *site*, *situation* and *affect*.

2 Although Lauria (1997) seeks to provide a regulation theory explanation for the emergence and power of 'local' growth coalitions.

3 Massey (2005, 181) highlights this comment from Deutsche (1996, 278): 'Conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space. Urban space is the product of conflict.' That is to say, conflicts over urban spaces or places do not play out in predefined arenas, but rather are the process of defining particular arenas of experience and practice.

4 Despite his attention to individuals (Entrikin 2003), in some earlier work Entrikin (1990 1991) seems to write about places as the locations or territories themselves rather than the experience of them or the constructed understanding of them. In our view, places have a materiality that is individually experienced, but also are social; they are understood and produced via interactions and connections.

5 The same contingency applies to places as well; they are never settled, although they may seem fixed.

6 Sack (1992) refers to places as relational, but his use of the word is better read as part of an older ontological/epistemological conversation, and not a part of the contemporary literature discussed here.

7 We make this comment notwithstanding the ongoing exploration of 'virtual spaces' and the ontological debate about the status of interaction over electronic

networks (Adams 2005). Even these interactions are anchored in physical bodies and physical network facilities.

8   For example, the Bolivian firm La Chonta has a page on its website devoted to the sustainability of its forest management activities (http://www.lachonta.com/, last accessed on 12 September 2010), the World Wildlife Fund touts Bolivia's success with FSC certified wood products (http://www.panda.org/who_we_are/wwf_offices/bolivia/our_work/forest_program/, last accessed on 12 September 2010), and USAID frames Bolivia's forests as economically vital and environmentally sustainable places (http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACA610.pdf, last accessed on 12 September 2010).

9   These INGOs have also been active as intermediaries in initiatives aimed at certifying communities as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) approved sources for hardwoods. See Stringer (2006) for general information on FSC activities globally.

10 For more details about the plan and ensuing conflict, see Martin (2004).

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