

2.3 Categories of place

In this section you will learn that:

- we humans divide the world up into different categories of place
- our understanding of distant places is socially constructed and affects how we relate to people who live there
- our understanding of (and the meaning we attach to) experienced places and media places is different

Far places and near places

Congratulations!
 Today is your day.
 You're off to Great Places!
 You're off and away!
 ('Oh, the Places You'll Go!' by Dr Seuss)

Exploration, difference and distance

If home is a place we know well and feel secure in, a prop for our identity, it can also be a tie. Travel and exploration is something we crave even if it can be a little scary.

'Place is security, space is freedom.' (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1977)

Anthropologists, who travel to the far-flung corners of the Earth, investigate the customs and cultures of human communities. They have found that everyone, wherever they live, recognises the division between 'us' and 'them' (Figure 1). 'We are from here' and 'they are from there' is universal.

National identity, difference and xenophobia

Students of politics argue that some feeling of belonging to a place is necessary for a society's solidarity to grow. This sense of place is established or reinforced not only by looking inward to the group, but also by looking outward. People actively compare themselves with others who live in **distant places**, specifically those who they feel are different, alien or exotic.

'They do things differently there'

Try to make a list of terms or phrases in English that include the word 'French', for example, French windows. For more ideas, see Figure 2. Do all of these things really originate from France?

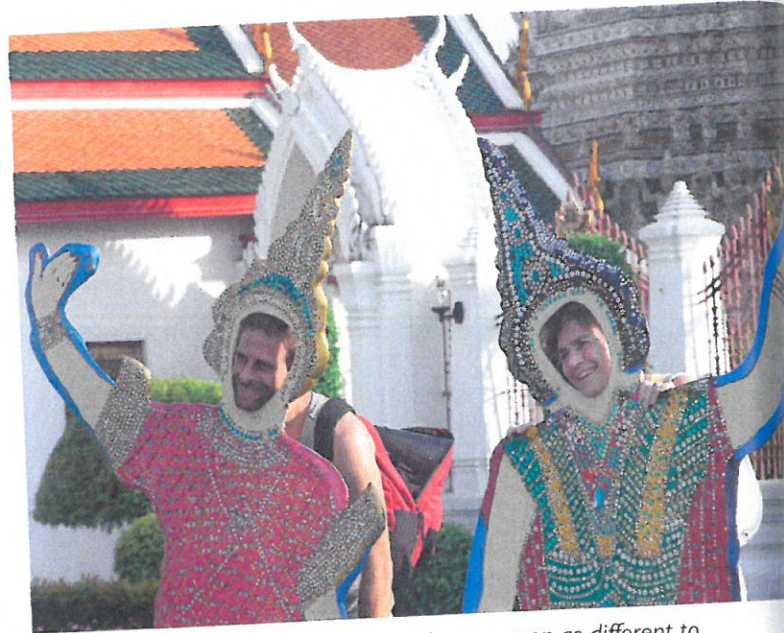


Figure 1 In Thailand, Western tourists are seen as different to the local population. Farang is the Thai word for white people or Westerners. It is not generally used as a term of disrespect and derives from the Thai word for the French, farangset.

English terms or phrases that reference the French	French terms or phrases that reference the English
... if you'll excuse my French (please excuse me for swearing)	[foodstuff] à l'anglaise (something cooked in the English manner, simply without a sauce)
French cricket (a simplified version of cricket in which the batsman's legs are the stumps)	Filer a l'anglaise (to go AWOL/leave without permission or without saying goodbye)
French plait (variation on a hair plait, known in France as a tresse africaine)	Un coup de Trafalgar (underhand trick or a nasty surprise)

Figure 2 Despite being neighbours in Europe, both the English and French alike see themselves as distant and different from each other

Racism, conflict and colonial power

The phenomenon of perceived distance between 'us' and 'them' and between places that are **near** and **far**, prompts a wide range of different human behaviour—from the use of mildly mocking terms, like 'whinging Poms' (the Australian name for the English), at one end of the spectrum to racially motivated hate crime at the other. On the international stage, racist ideologies have been used to justify atrocities committed in wars and by colonial powers, including the British.

A different approach to the 'other'

In contrast, the inspiration for the international Fairtrade movement has been to reduce inequalities between 'us' and 'them', approaching all growers and producers, wherever they are located, with greater respect. Our co-existence with the 'other' throws up challenging questions (Figure 3) about how places and people should relate to each other today.

'If History is about time, Geography is about **space**... Space [unlike time] is the dimension of the simultaneous... this means that space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other. Space presents us with the question of "How are we going to live together?"' (Doreen Massey, 2013)

Experienced places and media places

Topophilia: '[the] human love of place ... diffuse as a concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience.' (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974)

How do we acquire a sense of place?

Today people travel a lot. We have access to faster modes of transport and more leisure time than earlier generations.

You may feel a deeper emotional attachment to a place that you have visited in person and felt you understood than somewhere you have heard about on the news. We cannot go everywhere, although as geographers we might like to! We depend on media representations of some places to help us make sense of the world, but do we really *know* these places? If we go on a virtual field trip, using the World Wide Web, is the sense of place (place-meaning) we gain less valid than if we had got our boots muddy?

'You had to be there': The role of direct experience

Experiencing a place – actually visiting it or living there – stimulates all of our senses. We taste the food and smell the drains! We hear the hum of the insects or the drone of the motorway. We sweat in the heat or wish we had packed more clothes. These environmental stimuli are rich. As a result, we acquire a deeper understanding of a place and, perhaps, perceive its true nature.

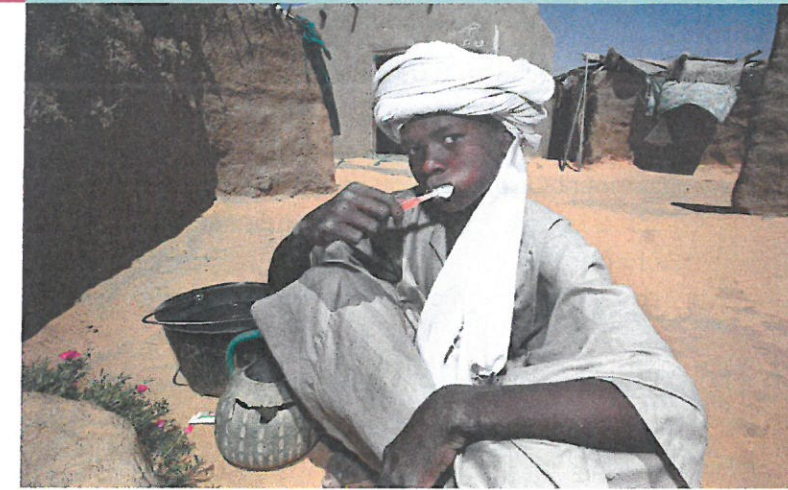


Figure 3 Other people live in faraway places. But just how different are they?

Think about

Our understanding of what is *near* and what is *far* depends on how we travel and also how distance is measured (time or miles/km). If we use a fast method of travel, or if we use the internet to maintain contact with people in distant places, perhaps this division of the world begins to break down (Figure 4).

With the forces of globalisation, some geographers propose that space is reducing in importance and that 'the near is often an expanding domain' (Levy, 2014). What do you think?

Figure 4 The internet makes the world a smaller place



Genius loci: the true spirit of a place or not?

In their profession, town planners aim to evoke a sense of place. Ancient civilisations believed that places such as Mount Olympus were inhabited and protected by spirits or gods. The term **genius loci** (literally 'spirit of a place') is often used in planning to describe the key characteristics of a place with which new developments must concur (see 2.5).

However, the idea that every place has a *true nature* is a matter of some debate. Human geographers like Doreen Massey, Peter Jackson and others have written about the way in which all place-meanings are socially constructed. Furthermore, they assert that the most widely held meanings benefit, and are reproduced by, the most powerful groups in society. Different people notice different things about the same place (see 2.1) and react differently to it. A single place may create *topophilia* (a strong attachment to it) in some people and *topophobia* (a dread or adverse reaction to it) in others. For example, the landscape of a National Park (see 2.2).

So, for the researcher, perhaps having a direct experience of a place is not as important as you might have first thought?

Sense of place in fiction

Novelists find themselves with a similar dilemma to geographers. They can spend time and money visiting a place in order to correctly set a scene in their book (Figures 5 & 6). But with a few clicks of a computer mouse, they can reach the same location and take a virtual walk up and down the same streets. Will the reader really notice the difference?

Media representations inform our everyday life

'We live in an age in which photography rains down on us like sewage from above. Endless Instasnap on your phone, everywhere.' (Artist Grayson Perry, BBC Reith Lectures, 2013)

In the so-called 'information age', we are bombarded with images and other forms of representation of the world. We benefit from this wealth of data but have to sift through it to try to make sense of it all (Figure 7).

The representations of places that feature in the media often give contrasting images to those presented by official cartography, such as Ordnance Survey maps, or statistics, for example, census data. This is because their purpose and target audiences differ, as discussed in 2.6 and 2.7.



Figure 5 'My inclination is to go if I can, because research is as much about reassuring the author as persuading the reader.' (David Nicholls, author)

Figure 6 A statue of Juliet stands below that famous balcony in Verona, Italy

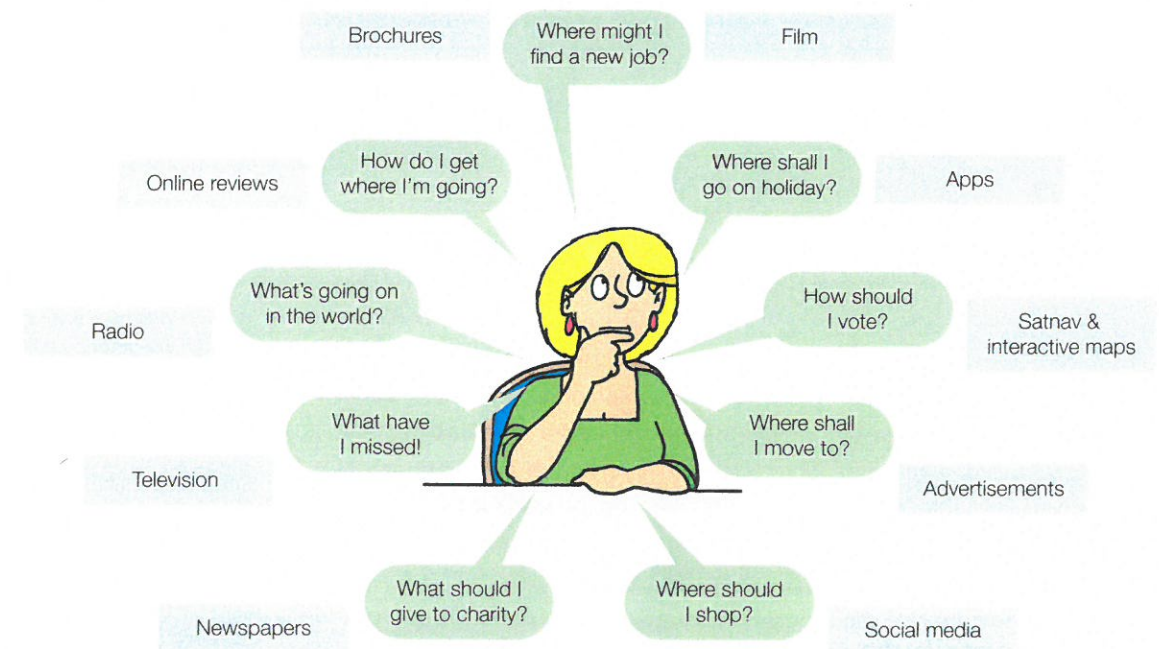


Figure 7 Media representations of places are part of our everyday lives

Passage 1: Bologna

'Almost too soon we were in Bologna, one of those cities where the airport is disconcertingly close to the centre, so that you might comfortably walk there with your shopping. But I had learnt my lesson in Florence and took a taxi. My guidebook sang the city's praises, but the taxi skirted the old town on the northern ring road and what I saw was squat, modern and pleasant, with a fragment of an ancient wall in the centre of a roundabout then the dull warehouses of the airport.'

Passage 2: Verona

'Marching along a marble-paved shopping street, I followed the crowd through an alleyway into a packed, cacophonous courtyard beneath a stone balcony – Juliet's balcony, supposedly. It looked as if it had been glued to the wall, and sure enough my guidebook informed me with a sniff that it was only built in 1935, though given Juliet was a fictional character, this seemed to be missing the point. 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo!' shouted wags from around the globe.'

(Extracts from *Us*, David Nicholls, 2015)

ACTIVITIES

- 1 What is meant by the term the 'other' in the section entitled 'Far places and near places'?
- 2 Can you think of examples of groups or organisations working to break down social, cultural or economic barriers that separate places and people into 'us' and 'them'?
- 3 Find a partner who has visited a place you have also been to.
 - a Compare your experiences of this place in terms of your different senses: what you saw, heard, smelt, touched and tasted.
 - b How do your memories differ?
- 4 Read the two passages above from the novel *Us*.
 - a The author only actually visited one of these places. Which do you think it is? Explain your answer.
 - b Why is the place-meaning we attach to a place we have visited in person different to somewhere we have only 'visited' online?
- 5 Make a list of different media images of places that you have been exposed to today.

STRETCH YOURSELF

Find out about a theory called **Orientalism** proposed by Edward Said. Why and how did Europeans define themselves as different to 'the East'? The Orient has long been viewed as being exotic, decadent and corrupt. What actions has this view been used to justify in regions like North Africa and Asia?