

Memory and place-based Identity of the elderly in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*

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Abstract: The social alienation of the elderly leads to restricted personal geographies, diminished self-worth, and loss of functional roles. The elderly reaffirm their identity through the use of spatially based memories, linking their lives to the cultural value of 'place.' Through a unique approach to the existing field of the geography of literature, we examine the constructs of the 'essence of place,' 'insideness and outsideness,' 'the geographic self' and the spatial characteristics of the elderly to identify a 'geography of personal identity' as expressed, specifically in a literary context, through the spatial memories of the female protagonists in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*.

A prevailing and negative societal perception among Western cultures towards the elderly has served to alienate this social group leading to a loss of functional roles, a restricted personal geography, and a diminishing sense of self-worth (Stone, 2003; Biggs, 1993; Moody, 1986). The elderly reaffirm their identity and importance of role through the use of spatially based memories, intrinsically linking their lives to the identity and cultural value of 'place.' For Canadian writers Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, 'place' has been a consistent undercurrent in the development of their female characters¹. Rao (1994), Thomas (1975; 1990), McCombs (1994), Greene (1994/5), and especially Weir (1983) have noted how 'place' has played an important role in each author's works, but their treatment of 'place' is not defined within the geographic context of place-theory². In an effort to clarify the 'place' concept from these earlier works, this paper employs a cross-disciplinary approach, uniting both geographic and

literary traditions (Mallory & Simpson-Housley 1987; Finch & Williams, 1989; Quantic, 1995). In this paper, we build upon the constructs of the ‘essence of place,’ ‘insiderness and outsiderness,’ ‘the geographical self’ and the spatial characteristics of the elderly as they are expressed, specifically in a literary context, through the spatial memories of the female protagonists in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*.

The Essence of Place

Places are those constructs of both human and natural orders that are the centres of our existence. Place is not concerned with the geographic location of activity (a grassy field, a city, a fictional landscape – these are the purview of ‘space’), but rather place is intent on the experience and the emotional significance of a particular setting. Place has as its basic constructs the objects of space as they are experienced, imbued with meaning, and rooted in activities centred about those experiences and meanings. Places are “sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties” (Relph 1976, 141; Tuan 1974; Seamon, 1980; Sack, 1992; Casey, 2001; Creswell, 2004).

Those deep emotional and psychological ties instil place with the memories of the meaningful events, experiences, and ongoing actions of our existence. Without ‘place’, our lives are devoid of meaning (social, cultural, or economic) in the world: “A deep relationship with place is as necessary, and perhaps as unavoidable, as close relationships with people; without such relationships human existence, while possible, is bereft of much of its significance” (Relph 1976, 41). This significance is the broader understanding of our identity—our awareness and consciousness of place is a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of understanding from which we orient ourselves in the world. Casey (2001) holds that we orient ourselves in the world through “the geographical self” – the personal nexus between our experiences in the landscape and our contextualization of those experiences through time – but more on this later.

One of the strongest ‘places’ for identity is the concept of ‘home’ (Tuan, 1974; Tuan 1996). Home is that place that is most familiar, most intimate. The old adage never rang more true: “There is no place like home.” This simple statement sums up the essence of place. Place is that memory laden centre of life where one develops a sense of being and

understanding of the unfolding of life events, grounded against the meanings such events hold for one's life, contextualized by the memories (events, experiences, and their emotional attachments) developed from one's place in the world (for a spectrum of coverage of the concept of 'home' and its importance to the 'self' (see Heidegger 1962; for foundations, and Tuan 1996; and Sack 1997; for current applications).

Insiderness and Outsiderness

One of the phenomenological constructs used to understand and develop the notion of place is insiderness. Insiderness, or being inside, is fundamental to place: "To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it" (Relph 1976, 49). Such identification is paramount to place, for identification with a place is more than just the site and situation of a setting, but more importantly it is the entirety of the experience at that setting that gives it meaning, and such meaning becomes part of our memory to identify like places. Akin to Ingarden's (1973) '*parathaltung*' and Bourdieu's '*habitus*' (1977) insiderness allows the individual to experience the location at the moment, become part of the scene as an active participant, and then make that event part of their being such that the *memory* of the experience/location along with its impact on the individual (Bourdieu's nexus between self and place, or Soja's (1996) 'thirdspace') helps the individual develop self-identity and 'persistence of place in the body' (Casey, 2001). Insiderness, therefore, is that deep level of understanding about a place that can only be developed through experiences at that place. The more profoundly inside one is the stronger one's identity with the place.

Insiderness is developed through the collection of life experiences, where those experiences are contextualized at the individual level. One's insiderness increases throughout the drive to maturity as experiential space, one's life-space, unfolds and becomes geographically larger (see Figure 1). Insiderness provides one the ability to place the significance of events in life into the context of time and place (*parathaltung*). Very much a form of tacit knowledge, insiderness is that degree of understanding about a place that can only be realized through direct experiential contact and embeddedness of a person in that place (see Lefebvre, 1991 and Entrikin, 1991).

Outsiderness is the opposite side in this dual expression of place and personal identity with place. If one is not inside, by definition, one must be outside. Insiderness is an intimate knowledge of place based on the

existential phenomena associated with the place; while outsidership is a passivity of experiential connectedness to place. Outsidership to places (therefore, locations or spaces) is as if one is looking at a setting without feeling, meaning, or the ability to understand the context of the activities occurring at that location. Disconnectedness with the events of the location, and a lack of experiences (memories) in order to contextualize and ‘place’ those events, contribute to being ‘outside.’ Insidership versus outsidership is akin to being an active participant versus being a passive spectator.

The Geographical Self

Grounded in phenomenology, the ‘self’, especially as it relates to the topic of the next section – personal identity – has a long standing tradition extending as far back as Locke’s 17th century essay on human understanding (Nidditch 1975). According to both Sack (1997) and Casey (2001), based on the work of Locke we identify our “self” as “a function of the consciousness of its own past through memory” (Casey 2001, 693). The self is corporeal; memory the purview of the ephemeral, but created from situating the body of the self in place and time. Bridging the gulf that separates the self from the body and place need not be a span separating two solitudes, but rather as Sack states the two are mutually reinforcing, helping to define one another. In other words, as Casey notes “there is no place without self and no self without place” (Casey 2001, 684).

This circular definition can blur the articulation of place and self, and thus requires a mediating term to serve as the bridge, or glue, that binds these concepts together. Such a term is the ‘*habitus*’ borrowed from Bourdieu (1977) and applied by Casey (2001). The *habitus* is the contextual agent between our lived places and our geographical self. The *habitus* serves as the intermediary between our current physical location and what “one has experienced in particular places” (Casey 2001, 686) – our memories – that give meaning (both personal and situational) to our current circumstances. The *habitus*, as the agent between place and self, is interpreted well by Casey:

“When I inhabit a place – whether by moving through it or staying in it – I have it in my actional purview. I also hold it by virtue of being in its ambiance: first in my body as it holds onto the place by various sensory and kinaesthetic means, then by my memory as I ‘hold it in my mind.’ This is how the durability of *habitus* is expressed: by my tenacious

holding onto of place so as to prolong the experience beyond the present moment.” (687)

It is in this manner that place and self coalesce.

Implicit in this construct from Casey is the presence of time. Time cannot be ignored as it permits for the contextualization of place on the self beyond the present – thus the durability described by Casey. However, time also has the effect of changing and restructuring the meaning of the memory of those places as they influence the self. The effect of time on *spatial memory* has two potential outcomes. The memory may resurface with *parathaltung* – rich with meaning derived from past place-based experiences, but potentially (and likely) ‘enhanced’ with current contexts and rooted in nostalgia. Or, as Sack notes, the spatial memory may become ‘thinned out’ weakening the link between place and self. The consequence is a desiccation of both place and self, such that if new places are not sought to build the self, then a loss of place results in a loss of self – and through self, personal identity.

Here we argue that the implications for place and self are not a double loss, but that there is a third element: the increase in the use of spatial memory to counter the loss of place and self over time and as one ages. Spatial memory is a parallel to Casey’s ‘incoming subjection’ where “we are still, even many years later, *in the places we are subject* because *they are in us*” (Casey 2001, 688, emphasis original). Place-based, or spatial, memory serves to recall places and times through insideness, the persistence of place and *parathaltung* to help ground and re-situate the ‘self’ by re-affirming the ‘self’ (and therefore one’s personal identity) in a context of familiarity - even when the spatial context may be completely foreign.

The geographical self is created and re-created by identification with place(s), contextualized into the consciousness through insideness and bound to one another through the agent of memory. It is a self-reinforcing reciprocal arrangement that (re)creates both place and self in each new situational/locational event. When time affects the binding agent (memory), instead of a loss of place/self cohesion, spatially-based memories fill the void to re-create and reaffirm the ‘self’ – and therefore one’s personal identity.

The Geography of Personal Identity³

Throughout one’s existence, one’s personal geographies (life-spaces) change. As infants, the world is focused in a locally (home)-centered,

parentally oriented, highly 'place' bound life. As one ages, life-space extends to its spatial maximum during adulthood where one becomes spatially unbounded, has a high degree of mobility, and is capable of identifying and associating with 'places' as one has identified them in youth and continues to create like places in adult years (see also Tuan 1996). Beyond adulthood, when old age diminishes one's spatial extent, life-space contracts to the point where it, too, is home centered and place takes on additional meaning (Pastalan 1971).

The cumulative effects of insideness (one's experiential connectedness with a setting in combination with insideness – incoming tenacity according to Casey) develops a heightened sense of place, and self, and the role memory serves to contextualize and reaffirm the nature of place, results in what we term a 'geography of personal identity'.

The geography of personal identity is intrinsically tied to place, self and one's insideness with that location. In the inexorable march from infancy to old age, personal identity evolves. As a child, the world is the world of one's parents – a home, a street, a park, and the like. The world, one's place, is small in scope and scale, yet one identifies with it intimately (Tuan 1996; Sack 1997). As one's cognitive abilities improve in maturation past infancy, one's world expands. As one begins to explore the world beyond the immediate home, and develop the first connections with one's proximate setting, one begins to develop a sense of 'place' and 'self'. As young children and early adults, one's mind-space – that spatial construct of the imagination based on childhood stories, fictional works, and the fantasy of youth (early spatially based memories/imagination) – is extensive and large, extending the spatial reach of the world beyond the confines of immediate existence. One draws on memories and imagination to extend the spatial boundaries of what is still a spatially restricted space.

As adults, one's life-space is filled with the banalities of daily life, reducing the need for imagined landscapes (mindsapes); however, those daily experiences have a far-reaching spatial extent. As one ages, and life events begin to fill one's time, there is less reliance on mind-space as spatial imagination is replaced with spatial experience. One's spatial reach expands, the existential connectedness with place continues to grow (our sense of self increases), and one develops a profound insideness (understanding and emotional connection) to place (see Sack 1997 and Soja 1996).

After this relatively stable period of spatially unbounded behaviour, there is a dramatic reduction in life-role, with concomitant reductions in physiological capacity. As one enters old age and the functional social role (job or career) that one previously held that allowed for a continual expansion of life-space, is ripped from one's future experiences, one's

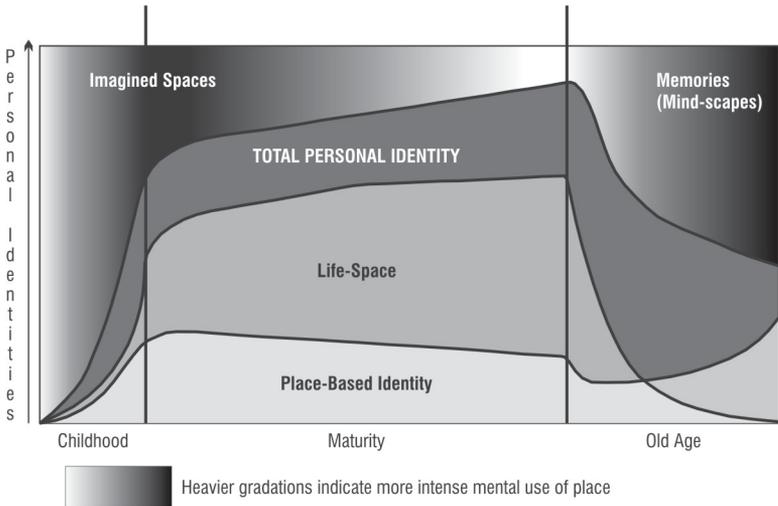


Figure 1: Space, place and personal identity.

personal geography is diminished and his/her identity (self) is forever altered (see Angus *et al.* 2005 for a summary and application of Bourdieu’s work within this context). An ever-increasing reliance on place-based memories grounds and reasserts the self and, therefore, personal identity in the face of substantive personal and societal change. The personal identity life space is shown in Figure 1.

The effect of the “physiological and psychological changes [that result] in the restriction of the individual’s physical mobility (life-space) are accentuated by crippling loss of role” (Rowles 1978, 23). This loss of role, often the result of traumatic changes such as retirement and physiological decline, manifests itself through societal “disengagement” (Cumming 1961), more commonly referred to as withdrawal, “accompanied by progressive constriction of the individual’s geographical life-space, and associated intensification of attachment to the proximate environmental context [place]” (Rowles 1978, 22). “Advancing age is also attended by selective changes in psychological capabilities: there is a rise in sensory thresholds; it becomes more difficult to absorb, organize, and evaluate environmental stimuli...especially new stimuli. These changes often engender feelings of incompetence and insecurity resulting from both actual and perceived loss of capability” (Rowles 1978, 23). In order to mitigate such limitations of their psychological facility, the elderly venture less into situations with heightened levels of new stimuli; and with ever

progressing age, increasingly flood their thoughts with the memories of their past – a time when they were more mobile, more physically capable, more psychologically discriminating, and more geographically unbounded.

Rowles states “the elderly gradually become prisoners of space” (Rowles 1978, 22). With a more spatially bound existence, with a more temporally flexible lifestyle, and with less connection to a world in which one was “inside,” the elderly are cast into “outsideness” with their environment in much the same way as children (the other end of the ‘dependent’ spectrum) are more outside than inside. The focus becomes more home-based, and the elderly, now with more experiential context and a greater repertoire of memories upon which to draw than do children, begin to fulfill their need for a continued personal identity and sense of self through the use of memories. Very much a personal dialectic for the elderly, the geography of their personal identity is a battle between a need for continued insideness, and, therefore, sense of self-worth, amidst their new found position of societal outsideness and disconnectedness with the setting that has been ‘their place’ for many years (for a complete treatment of this complex relationship between aging, space and identity, see Biggs 1993).

The insecurity and diminished sense of self-worth perceived by the elderly leads to a dichotomous relationship between physical and mental spaces. As the physical space contracts, home becomes more important and more comforting as a grounding force in the increasingly unfamiliar environment of the “outside” world. To counter the limitation of spatially constrained life-space, the mind-space increases drawing on important dates and locations, especially amidst the local surroundings, as a reaffirmation that this life, while now less vibrant, was at one time important to the meaning of ‘this place.’

For the elderly, the memories of place, especially those places that helped form their former identities (economic, social, or cultural) and therefore their ‘self’ are brought to the fore with increasing regularity in later years in a reaffirmation and reassertion that their lives, while now on the ‘outside,’ helped to define the very essence of the setting now perceived by those ‘inside,’ as ‘*their* place’. Memory, in this context, provides a broader base for the continuity of ‘place’ as it evolves, and the shared memories that define the essence of place are transferred from one group’s memories and social identity to another group’s position of insideness within ‘place’. By acknowledging the role of memory within this holistic interpretation and application to place, “we can detect a rationale behind the observed propensity of older people to muse on environments of their past, and to surround themselves with cues” (Rowles 1978, 208) linking them with the importance of events in their formerly more active lives.

Literary Application

Examining these concepts in a literary context, specifically in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, we are able to trace the development of the elderly protagonists' personal identities through their relationship to the essence of place, and their sense of insiderness and outsiderness that shape their personal geographies. Atwood and Laurence create compelling and credible fictional characters that find their physical life-spaces have diminished with age and disease. Both Iris in *The Blind Assassin* and Hagar in *The Stone Angel* invoke place-based memories to re-examine their lives from childhood to death, memories that serve to expand their life-spaces, provide a renewed sense of self-worth, and allow the characters a sense of acceptance of their own identity. Atwood and Laurence develop their protagonists' attachment to place through the examination of ancestral roots, childhood, marriage, escapism, aging and disease, and finally, death. Through this chronological series of life-events, grounded and contextualized through associations to place, these characters reaffirm their identities.

While numerous authors have written on the subject of Hagar's life and her sense of identity in the novel (see Beckman-Long 1997; Salick 1992; and Taylor 1996), and similarly for Atwood's character Iris (see Bouson 2003; Dvorak 2002; and Staels 2004), none have yet characterized their lives through a deep connection to *place* utilizing its correct geographical interpretation. This paper serves to fill that void.

In *The Blind Assassin* (BA), Atwood develops the character of Iris Chase, an octogenarian who is increasingly housebound due to limited physical mobility. Iris is intensely aware of her diminished personal geography, how she has become a prisoner of her own aging and diseased body, and the limitations it has imposed upon her relationship with her setting. One such example of her reduced capacity to interact with place in an independent manner is that she must rely on others for transportation, admitting that "Once I drove, but no longer: my eyes are too bad for that" (BA 57). Another example occurs while Iris is walking en route to a planned destination, but when she is intercepted by a younger friend offering her a lift, she confesses, "I'm ashamed to say I accepted it: I was out of breath, I'd already realized it was too far" (BA 212). The admission of failing health and her consequentially shrinking life space leaves Iris feeling objectified and stripped of identity, a passive spectator or outsider in her own hometown of Port Ticonderoga, evident in her reaction to the event: "More and more I feel like a letter—deposited here, collected there. But a letter addressed to no one" (BA 213). Her sense of outsiderness and lessened self-worth stems from her decreasing ability to form new attachments to

place (a weakened *habitus*), rendering her spatially-based memories of past experiences the essential link to reaffirming her own personal identity while regaining a level of previous insideness through minute references to *parathaltung*.

Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (SA), published almost four decades before Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, offers the convincing construction of another elderly female protagonist, Hagar Shipley. Due to her failing health and ailing body, Hagar is portrayed as struggling to contend with her increasingly limited experiential connectedness with places that were once a part of her life, her 'self', inciting a sense of outsideness and reduced validity in society. Hagar has reached a stage in her life where she is regarded much like a dependent child, whose lifespace is controlled by outside forces, resulting in a smaller physical realm of personal geography. As a consequence of Hagar's diminished physical abilities to care for herself, her son Marvin and his wife Doris hire a young girl to remain with her in their absence, resulting in Hagar's horrified response: "You think I need a sitter, like a child?" (SA 67). Linking the elderly and the very young together in their lack of independence Hagar muses that: "Privacy is a privilege not granted to the aged or the young. Sometimes very young children can look at the old, and a look passes between them, conspiratorial, sly and knowing. It's because neither are human to the middling ones, those in their prime" (SA 6). Hagar anticipates that dependency will weaken her sense of identity as a strong, fiercely independent and headstrong woman, and will decrease the "permitted" size of her lifespace. Donna Palmateer Pennee comments that Hagar in "her old age...can no longer escape the body that she has systematically repressed" (Pennee 2000, 5), other than through place-based memories.

Allowing the elderly and dying Hagar the opportunity and dignity of reaffirming her self-worth as a human being, Laurence employs a narrative technique that enables Hagar to escape her restricted physical geography, and expand her lifespace through very powerful spatially-based memories, triggered at intervals throughout the novel often by the sight of objects around her or by the mention of a word (a quintessential condition of *parathaltung*). Atwood, in *The Blind Assassin*, employs a narrative technique similar to Laurence's in *The Stone Angel*, as both authors create protagonists that relive their lives in chronological order through place-based memories. In contrast to Hagar's silent and unrecorded memories of her life, Iris writes her memoir in book format, in an effort to grant her granddaughter Sabrina a more truthful sense of her own ancestry.

Intensely aware of the dichotomy of her declining physical space and increasing mental space, Iris catches actual glimpses of her former youthful self in the mirror, emphasizing the close proximity of her remembered past:

“When I look in the mirror I see an old woman...But sometimes I see instead the young girl’s face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems...so loose and transparent I could almost peel it off like a stocking” (BA 54-55). Through written memoirs, Iris resuscitates her former self, breathing life into a character, that through a sense of forbidden exposure of her true attachment to place and events, performed her public life as one on the outside, relegated to the margins of social insideness, never fully participating.

Similarly, the memory of Hagar’s youth in *The Stone Angel* lurks below the surface of her time-worn face when she looks at herself in the mirror: “I am past ninety, and this figure seems somehow arbitrary and impossible, for when I look into my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself” (SA 38); and through memory Hagar still perceives herself as a young girl, full of vitality and life, fully integrated into society: “now I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise, I would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring, the young ladies’ academy in Toronto” (SA 42). Referring to Laurence’s use of mirrors in *The Stone Angel*, Sally Chivers in her book *From Old Woman to Older Woman*, remarks that the “trope of mirror gazing pervades negative fiction of aging because characters struggle with a new self-identification in connection with a changed physical form” (Chivers 2003, xlv). Hagar will “not internalize her unreliable appearance. Doing so would be to accept the social pity she has so long disdained and to incorporate a representational framework that limits her body to decrepitude” (Chivers 2003, 25). Laurence’s use of the mirror functions also as a doorway to another time and place, further demonstrating Hagar’s attachment to her younger, more spatially-mobile self. M.F. Salat comments that Hagar’s “inability to come to terms with her past that is chiefly responsible for her inability to come to terms with the present and hence a re-view of and reconciliation with the past enables Hagar eventually to discover who she really is” (Salat 1993, 46). Alice Bell, in examining narrative structure in *The Stone Angel*, states that “Laurence portrays Hagar at the most vulnerable time in her life—when she is dying—when she can no longer control her body, or repress her fears and emotions or maintain a façade of dignity and autonomy. Under these circumstances, we see her weaknesses and her strengths, her self-knowledge and her self-deception, and her regret for might-have-beens” (Bell 1996, 59-60). These dichotomous literary constructs of Laurence are precisely the tenets and contexts employed by Bourdieu in his description of ‘*habitus*’ as a mediating agent for personal

identity and self. Laurence's technique of linking Hagar's past to specific places permits her elderly protagonist the ability to (re) discover her self-identity as a young woman in an old woman's diseased and dying body. Hagar re-experiences significant moments in her life during which she felt a deep sense of attachment to place (whether positive or negative), allowing her to escape her present situation that has rendered her an outsider in society.

Atwood constructs Iris's initial sense of self through her attachment to Avilion, a place that is replete with reminders of its previous inhabitants, especially Adelia, Iris's grandmother. As a young girl living in Avilion, Iris experienced a very strong sense of insideness, akin to what Relph describes as "vicarious insideness" or the ability "to experience places in a secondhand or vicarious way, that is, without actually visiting them, yet for this experience to be one of deeply felt involvement" (Relph 1976, 52). While Iris lived in the same house as did her grandmother Adelia, the sense of place had been altered by time (see Sack's (1997) 'thinned out spaces'), and Adelia's death, allowing a teenage Iris to reinvent her grandmother's life and interaction with space: "I used to romanticize Adelia. I would gaze out of my window at night, over the lawns...and see her trailing wistfully through the grounds....Soon I added a lover. She would meet this lover outside the conservatory, which by this time was neglected...but I restored it in my mind" (BA 76). Here Atwood aptly creates a character whose sense of self is developed positively through a very intense and memory-based relationship to a place that she recreates in her imagination, and in remembering this connection to place, the elderly Iris reaffirms her sense of belonging and connection to her own hometown that has changed so drastically without her, and re-establishes her connection with her ancestral roots.

Not unlike Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, whose self-identity was partially formed from an attachment to spatially based memories of her ancestors, Hagar in *The Stone Angel* also experienced vicarious insideness, and a strong sense of personal identity as she learned of her grandfather's ties to Scotland (SA 14-15). Hagar longed for her ancestral landscape: the castles, the refinement, Scotland itself, stating "'How bitterly I regretted that he'd left and had sired us here, the bald-headed prairie stretching out west of us...and the town where no more than half a dozen decent brick houses stood'" (SA 15). Commenting on this same quotation, Karin E. Beeler states that the "imperial centre that she [Hagar] creates out of the land of her Scottish ancestors causes her to value this world of experience over Canada in a typically colonial fashion" (Beeler 1998, 26). Through memory, Hagar experiences first as a child, and re-experiences later as an elderly woman, a much deeper sense of insideness to a place explored

through second-hand knowledge, than to her own post-colonial hometown. Laurence's portrayal of Hagar's emotional attachment to borrowed memories of a location-based era provides foundational support for the development of Hagar's superior sense of self and blind pride.

As a very young child Iris experienced, for a short time only, the innate sense of "existential insideness," defined by Relph as the "most fundamental form of insideness in which a place is experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection yet is full with significances. It is the insideness that most people experience when they are at home and in their own town or region" and it "characterizes belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place that is the very foundation of the place concept" (Relph 1976, 55). Atwood idealizes, then immediately subverts this sense of insideness and the adage of "home sweet home" with her description of domestic bliss in *The Blind Assassin*: a quiet intimate atmosphere centered around a glowing fire, where a four-year-old Iris pretends to read to her father, while her mother sits sewing (BA 101-2). The elderly Iris, remembering what at the time was probably a deep attachment to place and a feeling of security (*parathaltung*), views it now in hindsight and realizes that it was not so idyllic, that her father was haunted by demons from the war that claimed his leg and eye, that he and her mother were not happy together (BA 100-3). Atwood's sub-narrative allows the elderly Iris the opportunity to realize that she was not to blame for her parents' failed marriage, and that in retrospect, she exhibited comparable attitudes towards her own marriage as did her parents towards theirs.

Laurence's similar examination of Hagar's early childhood through placed-based memories presents the scene of a six-year-old Hagar and her two older brothers sitting "around the dining-room table," as they did every evening, finishing homework under the watchful eye of their father (SA 13). Initially this memory appears to demonstrate Hagar's close attachment to her home and her family, yet the scene is not idyllic either; instead, it is one in which Hagar remembers the children being frequently admonished by their gruff and overbearing father. Motherless, Hagar's connection to her home was shaped by her relationship with her abusive brothers who whipped her with maple switches (SA 8), her emotionally detached father who chose propriety and financial gain over his children (SA 9), and her father's housekeeper, Aunt Dollie who served as a form of surrogate mother, although was regarded mainly as just the "hired help" (SA 6). What the elderly Hagar gains from reliving this stage of her life is an affirmation of self: that she was, and still is, stoic and unyielding in the face of adversity (SA 10). The fact that her early home life was something she eventually chose to escape, renders her attachment to her own home as an adult all the more significant and poignant. Laurence depicts her

protagonist equating her home with her identity, in a relationship that is inversely proportional: as Hagar's own personal geography decreases, her emotional connection to her home and the invoked place-based memories, increases.

The thought of Marvin and Doris selling her home (the home that now legally belongs to Marvin) and moving into an apartment, threatens Hagar's sense of identity and existential insideness: "the house is mine. I bought it with the money I worked for, in this city which has served as a kind of home ever since I left the prairies. Perhaps it is not home, as only the first of all can be truly that, but it is mine and familiar" (SA 36). Her lifespace has so greatly diminished with old age that she is unable and unwillingly to relinquish her only remaining (physical) source of place-based identity: her home. W.H. New posits that "Hagar takes Manawaka into her son Marvin's suburban home and then into the multicultural hospital in Vancouver" (New 2001, 66), and Constance Rooke in *Fear of the Open Heart* writes that the "house is then developed as an image of the self, the societal construct and the body" (Rooke 1989, 78), while in contrast Ann Barnard states that "Hagar spends her life seeking a place, only to find it in herself, never in 'the Shipley place' or even the Vancouver house that passes to her son Marvin and his wife" (Barnard 1994, 25), but Hagar's self-identity is so intrinsically linked to place, to her hometown of Manawaka, to the houses in which she lives, and to her own body that she identifies more with her place-based memories and her possessions than with any of the other characters in the novel.

Laurence captures the essence of Hagar's self-identity as Hagar worries about having to store her belongings, her "shreds and remnants of years," as she states: "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all" (SA 36). While Helen M. Buss comments that Hagar is "a woman who in her childhood has learned to value things above people" (Buss 1985, 27), by extension, Hagar continues throughout her life, to value things and places above any relationships with people, to the extent that she derives her self-identity from her surroundings rather than from the other characters in the novel. Understandably then, Hagar associates leaving her home with the notion that she would no longer exist, that her relationship to any other place would be one of complete outsidership, or similarly, death.

In contrast to Hagar's fierce attachment to her home as an affirmation of her existence, Iris in *The Blind Assassin* experiences such little attachment to her house that she feels as if she does not belong in it at all: "I've had it before, the sense that even in the course of my most legitimate and daily actions - peeling a banana, brushing my teeth - I am trespassing" and "At

night the house was more than ever like a stranger's....My various possessions were floating in their own pools of shadow, detached from me, denying my ownership of them" (BA 72). Unlike Laurence's Hagar who is terrified of dying and rebels against leaving behind her possessions and her home, Atwood's Iris has already resigned herself to the fact that she is going to die shortly and has severed her emotional attachment to her present place: "All of it will have to be gone through, disposed of by someone other, when I die" (BA 72). Her need to remain alive is based on wanting to remember her life and record it in written form in order to alter a false history, while Hagar's need to stay alive is out of a sense of fear of the unknown, and a need to remain constantly in control.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood explores the emotional mindscape of Iris's proposed marriage to Richard by equating it to an actual physical landscape: in the "vast bed of the hotel. My feet were icy, my knees drawn up...in front of me the arctic waste of starched white bed sheet stretched out to infinity. I knew I could never traverse it, regain the track, get back to where it was warm; I knew I was directionless; I knew I was lost" (BA 87). Significantly, this imagined "place-based" memory, still imbued with an acute sense of lost identity, is one that the elderly Iris invokes. Such feelings of extreme outsidership are defined by Relph as "existential outsidership," a sense of disconnectedness that "involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation from people, and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging" (Relph 1976, 51). Atwood foreshadows that Iris's marriage will cast her in the role of an outsider and passive observer, exiled from the insidership of her own home, acted upon, rather than being active. Hilde Staels comments that "Iris would not see the danger of consenting to marry Richard, a man she did not love. Not questioning the 'normal' course of her life resulted in the assassination or sacrifice of her inner self" (Staels 2004, 156).

Iris's life-space continues in her marriage to be similar to what she experienced as a child: limited, confined: "Not for the first time, I felt like a child excluded by its parents. Genial, brutal parents, up to their necks in collusion, determined on their rightness of their choices, in everything" (BA 387). This lack of independence is significant in Iris's development of her sense of self, and her sense of place, as she is rendered an outsider. As all decisions were made for her, without her agreement or knowledge, Iris was marginalized in her new home, and relegated to playing the role of dutiful wife, educated during her honeymoon in England according to Richard's instructions: "He hired a car and driver for me, and I was taken out to see what in his view ought to be seen. Most of the things I inspected were buildings, others were parks....He did not encourage the visiting of museums....it had become evident that this is what all of these visits were

aimed at—my education” (BA 380-1). At this point in her life, Iris’s relationship with place was as emotionally detached as she was from her husband; both relationships were void of deep meaning and connectedness. The elderly Iris, reconnecting with her former repressed self, openly acknowledges this portion of her life, accepting it as a factor in the shaping of her personal identity, while revealing her own hidden personal landscapes in her memoir written expressly for her granddaughter.

Laurence’s exploration of Hagar’s memories in *The Stone Angel* includes a section of the novel in which Hagar marries Bram Shipley, resulting in Hagar’s emotional and physical detachment from her own family, her former home, and the town of Manawaka itself. Hagar mistakenly believed that Bram’s own outsidership from society was something she could change, one day allowing them access into the most coveted places of the social elite. Instead, Hagar became more and more reclusive, as Bram’s unrefined language, lack of manners, and general disregard for other people’s attitudes towards him made her too embarrassed to accompany him to town on shopping errands: “After the first year of our marriage, I let Bram go to town alone, and I stayed home” (SA 71). Eventually, even attending church became too embarrassing, and Hagar states: “I never went to church after that. I preferred possible damnation in some comfortably distant future, to any ordeal then of peeking or pitying eyes” (SA 89-90). Marriage for Hagar represents a very diminished sense of attachment to place, creating a reduced sphere of living space, that of her new home.

Hagar’s memories of her new home, though, depict it significantly as a poorly kept house, one that was “square and frame, two-storied, the furniture shoddy and second-hand, the kitchen reeking and stale” (SA 50), that remained “an unpainted house” (SA 84), full of promise, that was never fulfilled, reflecting and symbolizing Hagar and Bram’s relationship that too was colourless, unfinished, and raw. In terms of Hagar’s relationship to the surrounding farmland, George Woodcock comments that “Earth in the sense of land is also important to her, and it is as much to live on his farm as to be ploughed sexually by him that she marries the socially impossible Bram Shipley; she resents the fact that Bram wastes his land on grazing horses, instead of tilling it and making it productive” (Woodcock 1980, 57). Hagar had opportunities to change her relationship with Bram, making it more emotionally and sexually intimate, but chose instead to keep “her trembling...all inner” (SA 81), eroding their relationship and marriage. She tolerated him because he fulfilled her hidden sexual desires, but in exchange, she suppressed her self-identity, allowing herself to become marginalized in society, while essentially imprisoning herself in a very confined and limited place. The elderly Hagar, reflecting on the

suppressed intimacy of her marriage, remarks that “Now there is no one to speak to. . . . My bed is cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow. . . . The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard, and freeze” (SA 81). Like Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, Hagar equates emotional outsidership and detachment with the imagined landscape of a frozen wasteland.

Atwood and Laurence present the effects of their protagonists’ marriages as negative, and symbolize the lack of emotional connection in the relationships with the diminished physical life-spaces of their characters. Both authors do, however, provide a form of escape for their main characters allowing Iris and Hagar to expand their personal geographies and form emotional attachments to new places. Atwood’s Iris escapes into two separate but interconnected spheres: an extra-marital affair with a writer, and the landscape of her own created work of fiction based on the affair, while Laurence’s protagonist moves from Manitoba to British Columbia in order to create physical distance between her and her husband.

The newlywed Iris in *The Blind Assassin* was free to explore Toronto during the day: “In theory I could go wherever I liked” (BA 405), signifying the freedom of a young adult, physically healthy, mobile, and capable of interaction with places that might be inaccessible to the elderly, and it was during that time that Iris connected with Alex and they initiated their affair. In contrast to Iris feeling a sense of outsidership with Richard and disconnection with place, her bond with Alex was so emotionally connected with place that she was unable to separate her thoughts of him from the various rendezvous points, and their own intimate, fictionalized creations of place. Her relationship with him, the elderly Iris eventually reveals, is one that she recorded, years ago, as the sub-narrative of her life, published under the title “The Blind Assassin,” falsely attributed to her deceased sister, Laura. Patricia Paillot comments that the “embedded narratives of the Russian-doll construction follow an overall architecture of inversions, paradoxes which evolve into interplays: the apparently two solid separate narrative blocks turn into an increasingly fluid system and *The Blind Assassin* becomes a metaphor of the decline and the deep change of the Canadian society portrayed in *The Blind Assassin*,” (Paillot 2002, 123), but the embedded novel within the main novel is also a metaphor for Iris’s inner life, the personal landscape that she and Alex explore secretly together.

By reclaiming authorship of her novel, and thus her life, Atwood’s elderly Iris re-experiences through memory, a time when she was most connected to place, and ultimately to herself. Places that are now essentially inaccessible to her as an elderly woman are revisited in her mindscape, detail by detail, to recreate a time and sense of self when she was young,

desirable, and in love. This return to specific places, made emotionally important because of Iris's relationship with Alex, is a tactic that she employed throughout her life, especially while living with Richard, and longing for Alex, as Iris wrote in "The Blind Assassin" that "In the afternoons she takes refuge in memory" (BA 441). Atwood's use of *mise en abyme*⁴, nestling narratives within narratives, further establishes her protagonist's deep connection to place. Recalling place-based memories of her encounters with Alex, Iris recorded every detail she could remember to re-create the many locations of her characters' rendezvous within her own novel: the rented or borrowed rooms in which they met (some examples found on pages 137, 154, 313, 334, 346, 429, 442, 457); the picnic under the apple tree (BA 12); the meeting on the park bench (BA 22); the stone bench in another park (BA 26), and under the bridge (BA 32) to suggest a few places.

In *The Stone Angel*, despite her self-imposed segregation from her hometown, Hagar's sense of being bound to place kept her rooted in her eroding marriage and shared house with Bram for almost a quarter of a century: "Twenty-four years, in all, were scoured away like sandbanks under the spate of our wrangle and bicker" (116), until her sudden departure to Vancouver, where Laurence creates a new sense of identity for her character, keeping house for Mr. Oatley, an elderly man. Here Hagar was able to regain a deeper sense of connection to place, similar to her feelings towards her childhood house: "Life was orderly, and conducted in a proper house filled with good furniture, solid mahogany and rosewood, and Chinese carpets of deep blue" (SA 158). At this time in her life, in her late forties, Hagar was still healthy and mobile, for her lifespace was still at its fullest possibility. This expansion in Hagar's personal geography promoted an increased sense of self-identity, allowing her the opportunity to disregard unwanted events and settings, evident in her dismissal of her years with Bram when she informed her employer that she "came from a good family" and that her "husband was dead" (SA 158). This place-based memory empowers the elderly Hagar, lending her a false sense of independence at a time when her aged body has removed these feelings from her identity. Henry C. Phelps views Hagar's attachment to place and home as transitory: "her residence is always invested with an air of transience, waiting, and uneasy expectation – 'marking time' ([SA] 160), as she acutely characterizes it" (Phelps 2000, 68), but the possibility of mobility also suggests a sense of freedom that the elderly Hagar still desires.

Ironically, the memory of this escape from Bram and their farm coincides with and triggers the elderly Hagar's escape from her own home in Vancouver, in an attempt to evade entry into a nursing home: "I've taken matters into my own hands before, and can again" (SA 139). She realizes

that she would “never get out. The only escape from those places is feet first in a wooden box” (SA 185). Her view of the Home is completely antithetical to the meaning of the word “home,” as a secure place, where one’s identity is grounded: “Those places have nothing to do with nursing or homes—the name’s all wrong” (SA 221); instead, her perception of the Home is that of a prison, in which she would be a prisoner on death row, living only to die. With Hagar’s escape to Shadow Point where she mistakenly believes she can live independently and free, Laurence demonstrates that the elderly Hagar’s sense of her independent and viable self is intrinsically linked with the need to claim a place of her own. It is here that Hagar continues to expand her diminished personal lifespan by recalling significant place-based memories of her life.

In sharp contrast with Hagar’s need to remember her life in rebellion against shrinking physical lifespan, aging and death, Iris, in *The Blind Assassin*, experiences an urgency to finish her memoir in order to provide her granddaughter with her own true lineage and ancestral memories. Iris links death to an actual place, similar to the locations of her rendezvous with Alex, where she will experience true insideness: “I have to hurry now. I can see the end, glimmering far up ahead of me, as if it’s a roadside motel” (BA 623). Iris welcomes death, seeing it as the end in a long journey through meaningful places, sensing a deep sense of insideness attached to this final realm: “*The end*, a warm safe haven. A place to rest. But I haven’t reached it yet, and I’m old and tired, and on foot, and limping” (BA 623). Iris has accepted that her world is physically shrinking, but throughout the span of a year she is able to record and reclaim her self-identity through place-based memories. Iris’s sense of her own finite life is extended through the act of remembering her life and recording it as a memoir. As Earl Ingersoll writes “the end of Iris’s narrating eerily coincides with the end of her life. Iris concludes her living and her narrating in a moment of confidence and resignation: ‘But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that—if anywhere—is the only place I will be’ ([BA] 521)” (Ingersoll 2003, np). Transcending death and continuing to live in a new “place” – that of the text of *The Blind Assassin* – the character Iris makes a conscious decision to increase her chances of “immortality.”

In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar is eventually hospitalized, her body too weak and sick to survive on its own in an isolated and hostile environment. Here she comments several times how her lifespan continues to diminish, bringing her closer and closer to death: “how the world has shrunk. Now it’s only one enormous room, full of high white iron cots, each narrow, and in each one a female body of some sort;” and referring to her space again, she calls it “the shrunken world,” that becomes even more restrictive

when she moves to a semi-private room, “The world is even smaller now. It’s shrinking so quickly. The next room will be the smallest of all. . . . Just enough space for me” (SA 254, 264). Ironically, the narrative structure of Laurence’s novel provides flashbacks that illustrate Hagar’s attachment to places in lieu of people, yet as Hagar’s physical lifespace shrinks drastically, Laurence permits her elderly protagonist several opportunities to understand the value of human relationships and in essence, redeem herself, before her death.

Many critics, including Beeler (1998), Buss (1985), Chivers (2003), Stevens (1993/4), and Osachoff (1979), have commented on the relevance of the hospital scene in which Hagar aids and comforts Sandra Wong, at the expense of her own bodily discomfort, pride, and self-imposed aversion to humanity in general. While laughing with the young woman over a shared joke, Hagar experiences a connection with another human being that had previously been missing from her life. This selfless act enables Hagar to alter the negative emotional legacy she would have left for her son Marvin, as she tells him “You’ve been good to me, always. A better son than John” (SA 304). After reliving a lifetime of memories in which she alienated people around her and repressed her own emotions, memories in which she demonstrated her deep connection to place, Hagar, her life-space reduced to a “cocoon” in which she is “woven around with threads, held tightly,” (SA 306), comments that “I lie here and try to recall something truly free that I’ve done in ninety years. I can think of only two acts that might be so, both recent. One was a joke. . . . The other was a lie—yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love” (SA 307). After this sudden and life-altering realization of Hagar’s long-denied ability to connect with humanity, Laurence shrinks Hagar’s lifespace to the size of a pin-prick, as, heavily dependent on pain-killers, Hagar remarks “The world is a needle” (SA 307). Even at this moment, though, Laurence presents Hagar as believing that she can reverse her diminishing life-space, slip back into a larger place: “I must get back, back to my sleek cocoon, where I’m almost comfortable. . . . I can collect my thoughts there. That’s what I need to do, collect my thoughts” (SA 308). Again emphasizing the relationship between memory and identity, Laurence presents the notion that Hagar believes she could continue living in an expanded life-space through her place-based memories for as long as her body stays alive, leaving the reader with the thought that if Hagar’s character were to continue her literary life past page 308 of *The Stone Angel*, she might emerge from her “cocoon” with a greater connection to the characters around her.

Concluding Thoughts

Place is that memory laden centre of our lives where we develop our sense of being and understanding of the unfolding of life events. It is grounded against the meanings such events hold for our lives, contextualized by the memories developed from our place in the world. Through the examination of place and the role place has in developing the protagonists' evolving forms of self identity, insideness and outsideness with their changing environments throughout their lives, we can identify a geography of personal identity for these characters. Their personal identities are shaped by their life-space, be that space charged with positive or negative connotations, and the life-spaces are contextualized through groundings in place-based images and memories from events throughout their lives and their geographic selves. Those events set the tone for the protagonists' degree of insideness with their setting, affording them an intimate understanding of the personally value/memory laden nature of 'their place'—both figuratively and literally.

Both Atwood and Laurence succeed in creating two extraordinary characters in Iris and Hagar respectively, characters that faced with the self-realization of their impending mortality, re-examine their lives through narrative flashbacks of intense place-based memories, enabling both characters to reclaim, reaffirm, and reconstruct their personal identities just prior to their 'final place'.

Notes:

1. *The Blind Assassin* still being a relatively new work of fiction, there are few secondary sources available, and of those sources, none offer a treatment of the work within a geographical framework.
2. Academics have examined self-alienation, memory, and place in *The Stone Angel* and in the earlier works of Margaret Atwood, in a variety of combinations and manners over the years, but none of these critical works have been grounded in geographical place theory. Rosalie Murphy Baum analyses Hagar's self-alienation in *The Stone Angel*, based on a psychological perspective (Baum 1996, 153 & 157-8) without specific place-centred influences on the development of Hagar's character. Robert Thacker states that Laurence is "asserting a personal connection to [her] particular place, one that amounts to a conscious

autobiographical creation of [her] geographical home in the writing. [She] captures the sights, sounds, feelings, and people who make the place unique” (Thacker 1997, 135), yet Thacker does not examine how this treatment of place works within the structure of the novel itself and how it influences how Laurence shapes Hagar’s character. K. Chellappan, in an article entitled “Time and Place in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* and T.S. Eliot’s *East Coker*: A Comparison,” does not define place within the context of geographical terminology and theory, but does offer an analysis of the novel in which “time is given a spatial pattern” explained as “time is both moving and still and space is both still and moving” (Chellappan 1992/3,10) a narrative technique in which “The movement backward is also a movement forward” (Chellappan 1992/3,11). Chellappan partially concludes that “Hagar creates a unified self in relation to time and place” (Chellappan 1992/3,11). Offering another treatment of the role of time and place in *The Stone Angel*, Dolores Collellmir analyses the importance of water “places” in the development of Hagar’s character (Collellmir 1999, 1-4) in a non-geographical context, differing from the treatment that we explore in this paper. Alexandra Pett states “Hagar’s problem is that she cannot accept the fact that she is old...no one wants to hear her speak or believes that she has anything meaningful to contribute” (Pett 1998, 23), which in turn offers a very viable reason for Hagar to evoke strong memories of her life. Pett focuses on the stages in Hagar’s life, rather than the influence of place. Sara Maitland posits that the “flashbacks are not the meat of the novel, they are the incidentals, illuminating, crucial even to its understanding, but they are not allowed to take over from what is really important, only to serve the principal thrust of the whole book—the primacy of the need to claim autonomy and determine the manner of one’s own dying” (Maitland 1987, 45) and J.M Kertzer writes that what Hagar “seeks, finally, is self-justification in the face of death” (Kertzer 1974, 499). Arguably, the flashbacks, or place-based memories, are just as essential to the novel as are present-tense events. M. F. Salat in *The Canadian Novel: A Search for Identity*, comments that “The change in Hagar, however limited, emblemizes the possibility of such an altered perspective and thus establishes the validity of Laurence’s proposition in regard to the need to relate the past with the present for adequate self-perception” (Salat 1993, 46). *Through* memory, not *in spite of* it, Laurence’s Hagar reaffirms her identity and determines how she will face death: by continuing in her belief that she is still a viable person, capable of being any age she wishes, connected deeply to place, and free to escape the confines of her diseased body, all through the mental lifespace of memory.

3. Within the parameters of the work being examined, the society represented herein is but one microcosm of society writ large, and as such reflects the inherent biases presented within place-theory due to its era of authorship. The voluminous literature on urban, social, and cultural differences with respect to notions of 'home', typical socio-economic trajectories, and the various notions of child-parent relations developed since the 1980s are appreciated by the authors, however, they are not included in this paper due to space limitations.
4. In literary criticism, "mise en abyme" is a literary device that uses microcosmic narratives as emblematic representations of the larger structure that contains them. The purpose of the structure is to allude to and explicate the plot of the larger structure within which it is staged. Source: The Literary Encyclopedia, 2007 <<http://litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=729>>

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