

## **Place and student subjectivities in Higher Education ‘cold spots’**

### **Abstract**

This article uses an analytical framework informed by social geographies to explore the complex relationships between Higher Education Institution, undergraduate student and place. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study exploring the experiences of college-based Higher Education students studying degree courses in Further Education Colleges in England, the article sees student subjectivities as structured through inequalities of institutional positioning in a stratified system as well as through layered local histories of industrial loss. Taken as an instance of undergraduate education in a massified and geographically unequal national context, the findings in this article offer an insight into the contradictory role played by Higher Education in its local area, particularly where a local area is defined by both a lack of and a need for increased educational opportunity.

### **Keywords:**

Higher Education; place; social geography; narrative; Further Education

### **Introduction**

In seeming contradiction to the global trend towards massified Higher Education (HE) systems (Marginson, 2016) in which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) compete globally for reputation, research funding and student numbers, there is also increased attention to localised inequalities of access to Higher Education (see, for example, Alloway and Dalley-Trim, 2009; Macintyre and Macdonald, 2011). This discursive

contradiction between global and local is easily reconcilable according to the logic of massification; as access to HE has become expected for more students, it has also become expected from and in more places. A growing interdisciplinary literature in geographies of education (Gulson and Symes, 2017) addresses a multitude of spatial concerns about equity in HE, ranging from international student mobility (Brooks, 2018), student housing and accommodation (Holton, 2016), and remote and rural disparities in HE options and provision (Steel and Fahy, 2011). This article contributes to that literature through a focus on the relationships between HEI, geographical location and undergraduate student subjectivities in the context of the English HE system. The article's focus on post-industrial, rather than rural or remote, contexts highlights how inequalities in the geographical distribution of HE have resulted in areas without a visible or traditional history of HE provision, which now have complex and contested associations between locality and HE. . The uneasy relationship between place and HE in these contexts serves to question the possibilities of education as a stand-alone tool for area regeneration and increased local social cohesion. Through exploring these relationships, the article provides both an analytical framework and a significant argument for the salience of attention to the local, despite and because of the increasing discursive power of the global in HE.

The perspective offered in this article comes from the 'margins' (Scott, 2009) of HE in England; the article presents findings from a project exploring the experiences of students studying undergraduate degrees in Further Education (FE) Colleges (hereafter referred to as college-based HE, or CBHE). FE Colleges do not have university status, and their educational provision ranges from secondary education qualifications to community and adult education. Strongly associated in both policy

and research literature with both technical education and widening access to education (Hodgson and Spours, 2015a), this HE provision occupies a position below university HE in the stratified national system (Bathmaker, 2018). CBHE provision is also hugely varied across the national context (Parry, Callendar and Temple, 2012), with some colleges offering a wide range of both technical and academic undergraduate and even postgraduate courses, and others a much more limited set of options.

One way of understanding this variety is to see FE colleges as responsive to the geographies of the HE marketplace; where there are multiple university options within a locality, the HE offer in the FE college is smaller. On the other hand, in places without a concentration of university options, the FE college provides a wider range of degree-level options. The study on which this article is based looked at colleges in large towns that have never had university provision. Therefore, as well as exploring experiences of HE from outside the university, the study explored experiences of HE in places that are geographically outside of the distribution of universities, or HE ‘cold spots’ (HEFCE, 2015). This complex context prompts important questions that can be asked across multiple international local contexts about how, and how much, HE alters collective narratives of locality and place. These questions are particularly pertinent in localities where the future-oriented understandings of HE (Henderson, 2018), as well as its discursive positioning as an agent of social mobility (Avis and Orr, 2016), conflict with shared and inherited histories of industrial loss and lack of opportunity (Taylor, 2012). As processes of massification in HE continue, and the possibilities and promises of HE intersect with more, and more different, places internationally, these questions become all the more pressing.

In the following sections, the article first explores research literature on the relationship between place and HE, before setting out an analytical framework for thinking about place, HE and student subjectivities. This framework is intended to be applicable to other contexts, and therefore forms a crucial part of the contribution of the article in developing educational geographies research and its capacity to address placed inequalities in HE. The methodology for the study is then explained, before findings from the study are presented in three sections.

## **Place and place-making in Higher Education**

### ***Place and the Higher Education Institution***

While the geographical logic of the catchment area in England means that schools (Reay and Lucey, 2000) and Further Education Colleges (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998) in England have close ties to place, often serving student populations from the immediate geographical area, the relationship between a Higher Education Institution and its locality is more complex. Universities are understood as operating within a global marketplace (Marginson, 2006), as well as being positioned within a national geography and occupying a material place in particular localities. Chatterton (2000) argues that the drive towards internationalisation has meant both that universities should be seen as place-less, and that English universities rely upon a national, and therefore place-specific, reputation. However, as Bathmaker *et al.* (2016) note in their discussion of two universities which are in the city of Bristol, universities cannot be seen as a homogenous category of institution. In fact, the hierarchies of HE have

particularly placed relationships. Members of the elite Russell Group of universities are never located in the same city, and tend to compete nationally and internationally with other elite institutions for their student intake. On the other hand post-1992 institutions in the same city as Russell Group institutions are likely to draw far more students from their immediate or regional locality (See Stich (2014) for a similar analysis of locality and institutional reputation in the US context). An HE institution's engagement with local students and employers is therefore both a result of, and constitutive of, its reputation and standing in national and international hierarchies of HE.

Any HEI is also subject to different historical relationships between HE provision and the local area. As Brown et al. (2008) highlight, policy discourses at national and European level have for many years reinforced the associations between undergraduate study, social mobility and social cohesion. At the same time, policy initiatives such as those of the Northern Way, Northern Powerhouse and City Region (Etherington and Jones, 2009; 2018) have identified particular areas of England as requiring increased attention and investment, including increasing skill levels and education opportunities. Seen together, the combined logic of these policy developments suggests that improving access to further and higher education in areas associated with post-industrial decline is key to the regeneration of those areas. Just as the HEI has a relationship to its local area, then, a local area is also seen as either meeting or lacking the required levels of educational opportunity that are linked to economic growth; as a consequence, the expansion or new provision of FE and HE can come to be cast as a regenerative or even a redemptive measure. However, Hodgson and Spours' (2015b) analysis of educational progression and opportunity in

local areas in England paints a more complex picture; using the concept of the ‘local learning ecology’, their research highlights the multiple layers of factors involved at micro, meso and macro levels in the creation of meaningful educational opportunities in any locality; crucially, the majority of these factors are external to educational provision, and in fact involve the local, national and international industrial landscape and changes to working conditions in all their entirety (see also Lloyd and Payne, 2003).

This paper positions CBHE providers within these structures, arguing that these dual-sector institutions (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2008; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009) have a particularly complex institutional relationship to place. On one hand, the institutions are subject to a traditional discourse that firmly establishes the English FE College within its locality and as a driver for the meeting of local skills shortages (see, for example, Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas, 2015). On the other hand, within the stratified system of UK HE, the CBHE provider is ‘local’ *rather than global* in reputation (Stich, 2014) and in its student intake (ETF, 2016). The particular colleges in this study represent a further geographical complexity, in that they are located in ‘cold spot’ areas of the country. As the data analysis goes on to highlight, this location brings with it a local history from which HE is absent, and within which the expansion of HE opportunities risks being tasked with the regeneration of the area as a whole.

### ***Place-making practices in undergraduate education***

In countries where undergraduate education has a longstanding connection with mobility, there is a growing research literature on the place-making practices of these

mobile undergraduates. These practices are termed ‘studentification’ (see, for example, Garmendia *et al.*, 2012), a neologism with deliberate similarity to gentrification, which highlights some of the same local processes and effects. Much of this research is based on understandings of the traditional undergraduate student, whose occupation of the city in which they are studying is transient, seasonal, and privileged in having access to disposable income and flexible schedule. These characteristics lead to particular practices of place-making, in which the generic social practices of the student override the possibility of specifically local engagements with the place and population (Smith and Hubbard, 2014). As highlighted by Bathmaker *et al.* (2016) the stratification of a system like England’s means that there are divisions within this perceived homogeneity, as student areas of the city are divided along lines of social class, age, and mode of study.

A further development in this literature has emerged as a response to increased numbers of undergraduates remaining in place, or ‘local’, for their undergraduate education, often understood as a response to rising costs of university accommodation and living costs (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Holdsworth, 2009b). As Holton (2015) demonstrates, this mode of attending Higher Education entails a different engagement with the place of the institution. In contrast to the practices of studentification, through which the (seemingly) mobile student is often limited to a specific geographical ‘student’ area of a town or city, the ‘local’ student is more deeply embedded in place. Finn (2017) and Finn and Holton (2018) point out that the complexity of placed commitments for local students, which often encompass employment, study, childcare and family, requires considerable local mobility and flexibility. Holdsworth (2006; 2009a) shows how these contrasting engagements with

place are often the defining features of the local student's university experience, either from the perspective of the student themselves or as seen by traditionally mobile students.

While this emerging literature importantly acknowledges the presence of a 'local' student population despite the English societal narrative of undergraduate mobility, thus far its focus has been exclusively on universities. As such, there is little discussion or understanding of the experiences of 'local' students studying at undergraduate level in non-university provision. Given the complexities of place and HEI highlighted in the above section, these experiences offer an insight into the ways in which the inequalities of stratification and geographical distribution of Higher Education come together in the formation of student subjectivities.

### **Narrative subjectivity and place**

The conceptual framework used in this article sees both place and subjectivity as inherently narrative. Massey defines place as 'woven together of ongoing stories' (2005, p. 131), highlighting the multiple layered, shared narratives that are brought together in any single attempt to capture place. This definition of place is useful in thinking through the shared, collected, and often inherited nature of narratives of place, particularly in relation to national and international historical trends in industrialisation and its aftermath. For example, Taylor's (2012) project focuses on classed and gendered experiences in the post-mining places of the north-east of England. Taylor finds that working class experiences of the loss of the mining industry became inherited family narratives. For many of her younger participants, the

narratives are a part of their relationship to place, and an important part of their reactions to policies of ‘regeneration’, despite their never having lived through the loss of the mining industry themselves. Though focusing on a different national context, Cahill’s (2007) study of working class African Americans on the Lower-East Side of Manhattan highlights similar inherited and shared narratives.

An important aspect of Cahill’s study is that she conceptualises her participants in terms of the subject positions they take up in relation to the conflicting narratives of the Lower-East Side; participants narrate themselves as ambitious in moving away, or as loyal in choosing to stay (see also Bright, 2011 for an analysis of loyalty to place in post-mining communities in England). The relationship between place and subjectivity is theorised more explicitly by de Certeau (1984, pp. 109-110), who sees subjectivity as narrative, and narratives of subjectivity as located in place. De Certeau draws upon the Lacanian moment of the splitting that forms the subject, in which the subject’s recognition of the self is also their recognition of themselves as other. De Certeau suggests that this moment is implicitly a recognition of the self as occupying space, and as existing in a distinct place. In the moment in which the subject is first able to narrate themselves as a subject, then, their narrative is of a subject in a place. To see this in terms of Massey’s definition of place, the subject narrates their position in relation to and amongst the multiple shared narratives of their locality. As demonstrated in, for example Benson and Jackson’s (2013) research on middle class narratives of place, when a subject narratively describes a place, they also narrate their subjectivity in relation to these placed narratives. In doing so, the subject re-enacts the moment of self-recognition, constructing for themselves both a narrative of subjectivity and a narrative of self-location in place.

This paper draws on and expands upon the existing literature connecting narratives of place to subjectivity. In studies such as those of Leyshon and Bull (2011) and Eriksson (2017), young people position themselves in relation to the place they have grown up in, narrating their intention to leave or stay as part of their subject position as a particular kind of person. As Cahill's research shows, these subject positions are sometimes contradictory because narratives of place are themselves contradictory. In the study focused on in this article, however, participants' subject positions are even more complex because of the particular placed narratives of HE in their locations, as discussed above. These narratives offer an important insight, therefore, into the nuances of HE experiences where CBHE does important work in improving access to undergraduate education (Avis and Orr, 2016; Leahy, 2012), but where improving access is not the end of the (placed) story.

As evidenced by the scholarship cited in this section, narratives of place and subjectivity are inevitably narratives of inequalities such as those of social class, and social class is particularly pertinent to discussions of both inequality in access to HE and post-industrial contexts. Following Pahl's (2008) analysis of distinct middle class subjectivities in neighbouring commuter villages, this article explores inequalities through the specificities of place, arguing against a single definition or discourse either of place or of social and educational inequality.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on data from a multi-sited case study of the HE provision in two FE Colleges, each in a post-industrial town without a university, and each with large

and varied undergraduate provision. The colleges, and the towns for which they are named, are anonymised in this article using the pseudonyms Tobston and Sebford. The colleges can be seen as ‘outlier’ (Thomas, 2011) cases in the context of both Further and Higher Education in England; the breadth of courses and number of students in their HE provision makes them unusual in the CBHE sector, while CBHE itself already occupies a ‘marginal’ (Scott, 2009) place within the HE sector. As ‘outlier’ cases, these colleges exaggerate conditions of HE that are often naturalised or taken for granted. In particular, these cases highlight the unequal geographies of a massified and stratified sector, showing how institutions are always embedded in a local area at the same time as they are operating within a national and international HE geography. As such the perspective offered by these cases can be generalised both within and beyond the English national context.

The case study research design of this project involved documentary data analysis of institutional marketing materials, as well as observational and interview data collection in each site. Semi-structured narrative interviews (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013) were carried out with students and staff on two degree courses in each case college, as well as with the HE director in each college. A total of two HE directors, six course tutors, and twenty-one students participated in the study. Student participants were interviewed twice, at the beginning and the end of their final year of degree level study. Although the interview prompts varied due to the interview method, which used participants’ own words to formulate follow-up questions (ibid.), the first student interview focused broadly upon participants’ previous educational trajectory and their decision to study for a degree at the college. The second interview explored the students’ plans for their future beyond graduation. Interviews with staff

similarly asked what had drawn them to CBHE, as well as their perceptions of how CBHE contributed to their local area.

The data presented in the following findings sections emerged in responses to interview questions about how participants felt about the local area. In staff interviews, this question often led to a discussion of the relationship between HE and the history of the area, in particular the loss of industry in the town in the twentieth century. In student interviews, the responses also touched upon this relationship, but were often more personal accounts of conflicted loyalty to and resentment towards the area. All of the data represent points of sudden and illuminating learning for me as the researcher working on the project. When designing the research instruments for the study, I had imagined that asking about relationships to place might be a simple question, particularly for students who had stayed in place for their undergraduate study and therefore in many cases had a lifelong commitment to their locality. In fact, these questions were often the most difficult part of the interviews; some participants did not know what I meant when I asked how they felt about where they lived and studied. Others were confused about whether I was referring to the street or small village in which they lived, or the large town in which the college was located. I draw attention to these moments of difficulty because they highlight the surprising, important but easily forgotten lessons to be learned from asking about place where place is especially significant. Firstly, where large-scale geographical mobility has not happened, relationships to place can become so naturalised as to seem irrelevant. These naturalised relationships should, I would argue, be positioned alongside discussions of HE with the more familiar discussions of student accommodation (Holton, 2016) and studentification (Smith and Hubbard, 2014), representing as they

do an often overlooked mode of placed engagement with HE. Secondly, the confusion in these interviews about what was meant by terms such as ‘local area’ or ‘where you live’ acted as a reminder of the subjective scales on which distance and locality are understood.

In analysing the data, I used the approach taken in Leyshon and Bull’s (2011) and Benson and Jackson’s (2013) analyses of subjects’ self-positioning within and alongside narratives of place. From points in the interview data where the town or local area was mentioned, I worked outwards to establish the narratives used to represent place, and then to construct a subject position within or against these narratives.

### **‘This area has had its problems’: Staff perceptions of place and the role of HE**

In interviews with the HE directors and tutors at the case study colleges, I asked how they felt about Tobston and Sebford as places. For Lisa, an HE tutor at the college, there were specific challenges associated with teaching in Tobston:

There’s no getting away from the fact that Tobston, well, this area, has had its problems. In [recent year] it had the worst adult literacy and numeracy rates in the UK, hence a lot of widening participation and there was a lot of money, European social fund money, so that we could try to engage a lot of these disenfranchised learners.

In this narrative, the college's position in its local area is as part of redressing a historical lack of education. Unlike the distanced or place-less relationship between a university and its locality noted by Chatterton (2000), the college is closely connected with the area in which it is situated, and its educational priorities are constructed in response to what is seen to be needed in this place. Tobston College's HE director, Catherine, evoked a similar narrative of the college's HE provision as responsive to local need:

**Catherine:** I think Tobston does need a proper university, and I do hope that in the next decade it achieves it, because I think it's a big enough entity, and I think it's shown itself willing to change and be transformed, and that's been a long time coming. I moved here in 1986, just after the miners' strike, and it was a very sad place then

**Holly:** Do you think it has changed?

**Catherine:** Mm [indicates agreement]. And I do think we [Tobston College's CBHE provision] have had a big part to play in that.

Here, investment in education, namely through the establishment of a 'proper university', acted as a reward for the educational changes that have already enabled the town to move away from its industrial losses. Crucial to both of these narratives was a blurring of the boundaries between education and the local area (Stich, 2014); although education was not responsible for the problems or sadness of the locality, it was seen to have been and to continue to be necessary to the changes that were necessary for the town as whole. This narrative reinforces the discourses through which education is seen as a regenerative tool (Lloyd and Payne, 2003), working to

redress the localised effects of social and economic processes that in fact extend far beyond the reach of education alone.

In Sebford, the history of industrial loss was a similarly important part of staff members' narratives of place, and of the college's role in its locality. Linda, Sebford College's HE Director, described this industrial loss as having very present consequences that the college was working to change. Seeing the college as 'firmly rooted in its local context', she went on to say that:

When you look at Sebford, it's very deprived, and you don't want to have generations of people who don't have hope, who don't have prospects. So I think of the work that we do in terms of raising aspirations - academically, personally, helping students.

Linda constructed HE as an opposition to a local lack of 'hope', much as Catherine described Tobston's CBHE as working to change the town's 'sadness'. In each of these accounts of Tobston and Sebford, the college was required to intervene in narratives of place in two interconnected ways. First, CBHE offered new, perhaps previously unimagined, futures for individuals in the town, in accordance with the discourse in which social mobility and higher education are inextricably but problematically linked (Avis and Orr, 2016; Brown et al., 2008). Second, and largely as a consequence of the provision of new futures for individuals living in the town, the future narrative of the town might one day be fundamentally altered.

This responsiveness to the immediate locality means that although the colleges were operating within national and international geographies of distribution, they were also narratively defined by the legacies of loss and lack that are specific to each town. In addition, as will be explored below in data from student interviews, the colleges and their student populations occupied a contradictory narrative position between the past that required change and the future in which change will have been made (Cahill, 2007). Because these students each had a long-term relationship to the place in which they were studying, they knew the place through both conflicting narratives, as a place that required change and as one that was undergoing change. In order that the places of Tobston and Sebford themselves retain their specificity rather than becoming interchangeable, the following analysis focuses on each place separately. When referring to individual participants whose data is included in these sections, I use their own descriptions of the place(s) they have lived and studied in, in accordance with the theoretical position of this article which sees place and subjectivity as narratively intertwined.

### ***Un/Educated: Place, subjectivity and HE in Tobston***

Frequently, student participants described a relationship between place, people and education that was consistent with the narratives of area-based literacy and numeracy problems given by college staff. The blurring across these factors of place, people and education to create a cohesive characterisation is described by Stich (2014) as ‘reputational affect’ – a pervasive sense of the places and people associated with an institution that becomes engrained and embodied. In this case, for participants who had lived in the area for a long time, it was important to narrate this relationship

between place and lack of education as changing. Jane had lived in Tobston all her life, sometimes in towns on the outskirts, but now ‘slap bang in the centre, you know, in the hustle and bustle.’ Jane began her HE study at Tobston College with a Higher National Diploma at the age of eighteen, and had returned to ‘top-up’ to a BA degree over twenty years later after learning through a friend that it was possible to do so. She depicted changing attitudes to HE in the town:

It has always been quite closed-minded with regards it being quite a little close-knit community and it not being city status, so there have been negatives in that respect and it has been quite closed-minded to, say, for an art student I’d say. I remember when I used to, I would get, years ago, sort of flack for being a student, an art student, from older, closed-minded, uneducated people, you know, although there is that sense of humour - people do like to have a sense of humour - but they’d say, “Oh, are you at university? Oh, are you brainy?” You know, there used to be that sort of joke going on.

Jane’s description brought euphemistic representations of class, such as ‘uneducated’ and ‘closed-minded’, together with the history of the town as an HE cold spot, a place unused to undergraduate student subjectivities. Despite her spatial position ‘in the hustle and bustle’ of the town centre, she showed that her education had marked her as an outsider to it. The narrative was also temporally inflected, positioning the disjuncture between place and HE in the past. In this way, a narration of her difference from other people in Tobston also saw her as representative of the possibility of positive change in the town. Like Benson and Jackson’s (2013) analysis

of narratives of improvement in Peckham, Jane was invested in imagining a progressive relationship from acknowledgement of past difficulty to a more positive imagined future. The narrative's performative depiction of linear progression away from 'closed-minded[ness]' was similar to Catherine's narrative of the town as moving towards a less 'sad' future.

Although Jane was careful to fix more negative representations of Tobston in the past, other students described current struggles with occupying subjectivities as students in the town. Ben lived with his parents around 12 miles from Tobston College's HE site, in the nearest large town to Tobston, where he had lived for the whole of his life. He frequently described himself as having taken a risk in coming as far as Tobston for HE. His accounts of place were therefore situated in his home town, and described the complexities of occupying a student subjectivity in an HE cold spot:

Ever since starting uni, everybody says, "Oh, you're too intelligent for me." It's like I have a slightly, if you've noticed, if you speak to anybody from [home town], my accent's slightly more, less [home town]-fied than most people and vocabulary, in places, does get a bit archaic. Probably not today when I'm doing this, but in general it does. I get a bit cocky with my language.

Studies of 'studentification' depict homogenous groups of students whose occupation of particular geographical areas of the city creates divisions in living conditions and social practices between student areas and residential areas, with each area retaining and reinforcing its difference from the other (Smith, 2008). In contrast, students like

Jane and Ben, who were 'local' or 'commuter' students, were surrounded not by the universal place-making practices of studentification, but by the place and the 'everybody' they had always known. In contrast to the insular student communities observed in studentification literature, Jane and Ben were only too aware of their divisions from 'everybody' around them.

For another participant, Anna, the signifier 'uneducated' was closely linked to her strong negative feelings about Tobston as a place. Anna grew up in Tobston, and returned to live there with her mum in the year before beginning her degree, following a relationship breakdown and financial hardship. She had lived and worked in nearby larger cities since leaving home, and her perceptions of Tobston across her interviews were strongly inflected with comparisons to these other places. When asked what she thought of Tobston, Anna responded:

I think Tobston is a bit of a shit hole. There are not many prospects for anyone, plus the people are uneducated. They're rude, like there's a lot of hate crime and stuff. Drugs, drugs are rife, like someone got stabbed in, again on the street this weekend. It's just things are getting worse. Someone murdered her husband. I've just heard so many horror stories. I just don't think there's much here for anyone.

Anna's subject position in this narrative relied upon a disengagement from Tobston and all that she associated with it. While Jane positioned the problem of 'uneducated people' firmly in the past, it was very much in the present and future for Anna, who saw it as 'getting worse'. Her depiction of the lack of 'prospects' for people in

Tobston in many ways reinforced the perceptions of the college's HE director and tutors, who described Tobston as needing a university, and as struggling to emerge from a history of sadness and loss. However, at the same time, Anna's words highlighted the difficulty involved in using HE to redeem or regenerate an area when the factors contributing to the area's decline extend far beyond the reach of education itself.

***'They're trying to make it a lot better': Place, subjectivity and HE in Sebford***

A repeated feature of students' descriptions of Sebford was their awareness of the regeneration work in the town. The work took on the identity of an externalised 'they' who were narrated as attempting to make changes to an enduring legacy of industrial loss and subsequent deprivation. Richard had always lived in a nearby town, first with his parents and at the time of the study with his girlfriend, around five miles from Sebford. In his narrative of Sebford, there were important changes taking place:

I think there's a mindset of people round here that's not a good thing. But I think it's somewhere that's - they're trying to make a lot of changes now in Sebford, just like a lot of big, like new buildings being built and stuff like that. I just think they're trying to change the image of what it used to be about. Like, it used to be [local industry], and obviously that's gone. So there's been a lot of jobs lost there, but I think they're just trying to make it a lot better.

In analyses of student place-making, HE students are positioned as active agents of change, bringing with them a generic set of spatial practices that come to characterise areas of university towns and cities (Smith and Hubbard, 2014). In contrast, Richard's narrative gives the capacity for place-making to others, and sees the place as defined not by student populations but by economic shifts and industrial loss. As Taylor's (2012) study of responses to regeneration in post-mining areas of north-east England highlights, the paradox of regeneration efforts is that they are necessitated by a past they seek to erase. Richard's subject position in the above excerpt is that of an observer from the uncomfortable in-between moment between the past that is not yet erased, and the future that has not yet succeeded in the erasure. It is striking that Richard does not name the college, its CBHE provision or himself as part of this process of change; despite the staff perception that the college is crucial to shifting the legacies of industrial loss in the town, Richard represents himself as passive in a process of change that happens at a distance, as a consequence of investment and employment, and yet that is felt at the level of 'mindset'.

While Richard portrayed Sebford as progressing towards positive change, other students expressed doubt that the regeneration efforts they were seeing could be successful in resignifying the town in collective imagination. Robert lived with his mum in a town ten miles from Sebford. He moved to an adjacent town at the age of 'five or six', and had moved house a few times since, always staying, as he put it, 'in the same sort of fifteen minute area'. Robert's descriptions of place were perhaps the most lively of all the participants in this study, because he knowingly and exaggeratedly engaged with familiar characterisations of place. For example, at one point he described Sebford as 'my Vietnam', in a reference to Hollywood film

depictions of war. In making this reference, he depicted himself as both haunted and defined by the experience of living in Sebford as a source of trauma. He was similarly humorous in the description below:

Sebford's always going to struggle, because it's just one of those towns that - there's always that shit town that you kind of just go to through necessity, not actually nostalgia. You don't ever really want to go there but it's like, "Oh, I need to go and pick that up," or, "I need to go and do that." There's always one of those towns.

Everybody has one that you don't ever really want to go to, but you do, just every so often. And they are trying to rectify that. They are trying to sort of get away from that image, because they've opened up a Nando's, a Turtle Bay. They've opened up that stupid fucking hotel, that nobody's ever going to use, because nobody's ever said, "Let's have a romantic weekend away in Sebford." And, you know, the shops are opening and closing faster than they can make money out of them.

In contrast to Richard's, Robert's narrative depicted Sebford as having an enduring negative quality that is unchangeable despite superficial efforts towards regeneration. Like Richard, he was aware of the building work currently underway in the town as an attempt to change the 'image'. His argument that the newly built hotel would remain unused suggested that regenerative initiatives were powerless in the face of a universal, timeless and inevitable response to the place as a whole. The success of the hotel, in his view, relied upon fundamental changes to the way the town was viewed.

He could not imagine a future in which visits to the town would be made through choice, rather than necessity, and in which relationships to the place would allow for the 'romantic' rather than the functional. The space of the hotel therefore came to symbolise, in his account, the intractable reputational affect (Stich 2014) of the place.

The negative characterisation of Sebford was, in others' narratives, integral to its future as something better or different, and to CBHE's role in the town. For Robert, this future was made impossible precisely by the reasons that it was seen by others as necessary. The description of an ongoing present in which the reputation of the cold spot remains unchanged creates an implied contradiction, therefore, with the future-oriented narrative of HE in which HE both offers futures to those in the town, and changes the future of the town itself. While Robert's residence in the area throughout his life and including his undergraduate study suggest a commitment to it, this commitment was contradicted by his vocal disengagement from the area. The incompatibility of these subject positions is once again representative of the complexity of HE where provision is required by and reliant upon a history of need and lack. Furthermore, despite the discursive policy associations between educational opportunity and area prosperity, both Richard and Robert characterised Sebford as struggling against a multitude of local and national economic factors that remain largely untouched by the provision of HE in the town.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that, as both massification and stratification of HE continue in nations like England, there is increasing need to consider the relationship between institutions of HE and their local environments. The findings presented here build on

existing literature in two interrelated ways. The first is in considering the role of the HE institution in its locality, where the colleges discussed in this article represent a departure from the 'global' university (Chatterton, 2000) and its connections with the local area. Instead, these colleges are discursively positioned as 'local' both in terms of HE reputation (Stich, 2014) and in terms of FE traditions of relationships to local communities and employers. The role of these colleges in their local area is further complicated by the historical absence of HE from each locality. In these contexts, HE provision is seen as particularly necessary because it has been absent. However, given that the past absence of HE is symptomatic of a larger economic history of industrial decline, the capacity of HE provision alone to redress this larger history must be questioned. This article therefore locates discussions of degree education and social mobility within specific geographical locations, arguing that the connections between HE provision and area regeneration should be similarly problematised.

Secondly, the article responds to literature on student place-making, asking what processes of place-making look like when they are not practised in university towns and cities. This second contribution of the article builds on the first; with the introduction of HE to new places in which there is little or no history of university education and where the student population is relatively small, there are different considerations for the establishment and maintenance of student subjectivities. As Jenny and Ben's (above) narratives show, these experiences are far from the homogenised social groups of a university city, and instead students risk becoming more educated but less recognisable according to the spatial narratives that define their localities. Throughout the article, a conceptualisation of spatial narrative subjectivity is built and applied. This framework highlights nuances of place that

might otherwise be elided by broader categories of inequality such as those of social class (Pahl, 2012). Overall, the article makes a case for considering place, both in terms of the local and national distribution of HE and in terms of the related local narratives of opportunity, as playing a fundamental role in the inequalities of student experiences of HE, and one that should be taken forward in other national and international contexts.

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