

Maxwell Street: Writing and thinking place

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[Spotlight on... banner]

[CH]Maxwell Street: Writing and thinking place

[AU]Emma Rawlings Smith

This article puts Tim Cresswell's most recent book *Maxwell Street: Writing and Thinking Place* in the spotlight.

Tim Cresswell is Ogilvie Professor of Geography at the University of Edinburgh, poet and author of cultural geography titles including *Geographical Thought: A critical introduction* (2013) and *Place: An introduction* (2014). These are key texts for undergraduate geographers, and since the inclusion of place as core content in A level geography (DfE, 2014), the latter text is a must-read for teachers keen to develop their understanding of place; the most central geographical concept. Cresswell's (2019) latest book *Maxwell Street: Writing and Thinking Place* will appeal to readers interested in urban life, cultural geography and the city of Chicago. It explores place from the real-world context of a colourful market in one of the city's oldest residential districts. Such a focus on a particular locale is rarely taken in school geography, where subject content is commonly organised by themes, concepts or case studies (Taylor, 2013).

Maxwell Street is a book in three parts. It reverses the usual structure of academic texts, which often start rather than end with theory. To begin, Cresswell considers how one writes about place. In part two Cresswell meanders through Maxwell Street, drawing on rich historical sources and the author's own experience to interweave methods, texts and representations in a montage format. In the final part, Cresswell contemplates how geographers think and write about place in order to provide a theoretical framework for use when exploring other places.

[A]Writing place

Geography is commonly referred to as 'Earth writing'. However, as Cresswell notes, 'relatively little attention has been paid to the "writing" part' (2019, p. 11). With a first doctorate in geography and a second in creative writing, you can understand why Cresswell does not want to downplay its importance when he suggests that 'the act of writing is part of the process of relating to place – not just a record of it' (p. 3). How the text has been presented is equally well thought through. Side headings are set in the wide left margin, allowing the reader to focus on the text without distraction. Inspired by methods including assemblage (DeLanda, 2006), montage (Benjamin, 1999) and list-making (Perec, 2010), Cresswell captures a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of place by moving in and around this historic Chicago neighbourhood and advocates approaching the study of place as an assemblage. The inward orientation of place or assemblage 'is concerned with how materialities (things), representations (meanings, ideas and ideologies) and practices (things people do) gather together in place' (Rawlings Smith *et al.*, 2016, p. 6). Throughout the book, Cresswell draws on a record of situated narratives, texts and illustrations to tell the story of how this century-old market flourished and declined, while the University of Illinois increasingly asserted its influence over the area's development. In a section titled Beginnings, we are introduced to Dr Philip Maxwell, a physician and later state treasurer of Illinois, after whom Maxwell Street is named. Then the reader is asked how else an account about place should begin, whether place names are listed, boundaries defined or stories of arrivals told. To conclude part one, Cresswell recalls his first encounter with Maxwell Street – a place which would become woven into the fabric of his career.

[A]Market/Place

With a focus on the area around the intersection of West Maxwell Street and South Halsted Street (located at 41°51'53" N, 87°38'49" W), part two brings together ideas about place to create a non-linear narrative which spirals around and explores Maxwell Street from different perspectives. Cresswell describes the intersection, lists the names of local places, defines Maxwell Street's boundaries and then gathers stories of arrivals, changes and diversity. Following Perec's (2010) lead, he makes an attempt at 'Exhausting a Place in Chicago' with a list of people, things and activities in

Maxwell Street from the vantage point of a seat in Caribou Coffee on the southwest corner of Maxwell and Halsted. List-making is a method which school geographers could easily use to approach their own place and unlike ethnography, narrative or other qualitative methods, it is relatively uncomplicated to write a list of what gathers in place through observation. Indeed, there is something to be said for slowing down, watching and noticing things, people and activities in place. According to Smith 'to really understand a city, you need to walk its streets and read its geography through the soles of your feet' (2012, p. xiii). This is especially true for your own locale, which can often be overlooked in haste.

[A]Place materialities, meanings, and practices

There is a feeling of foreboding as part two unfolds and the initial flourishing narratives of excess, value and diversity are replaced with a sense of failure as Maxwell Street is exposed as a gritty and marginal place; a place that is to be neglected and marked for erasure. In the decade or more that Cresswell took to research and write about Maxwell Street, a visible transformation in the area's identity, function and sense of place was driven by city planning and the University of Illinois's expansion (Figure 1 and 2). The act of drawing a red line around Maxwell Street on the 1939 Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) map indelibly marked the area as a 'D rated' neighbourhood; a place where it was impossible to get a mortgage and a zone for future development. Cresswell notes that this particular map 'was thus an instrument in the area's almost inevitable decline' (p. 102). The representational power of the HOLC map, was further exacerbated by the racial work of the Chicago School of Sociology. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess created urban land use models and urban ecological model of order and disorder, while their students researched urban life; their research method became known as participant observation and kick-started the modern discipline of sociology. Park's (1925) urban ecological model defines areas of the city by land value, power and ascribes marginal areas as blighted in preparation for prescribed renewal. With the use of ecological metaphors, such as 'blight', to describe marginal areas of the city with greatest migration and mobility, Cresswell makes the connection between race and blight and contends that the discourse of blight was used to legitimate the process of urban renewal, compulsory purchase and the inevitable erasing of Maxwell Street.

[insert Figure 1 near here][caption]Figure 1: Artist and onlookers at 910 Maxwell Street in 1950. Photo: Charles W. Cushman/IMLS Digital Collections & Content on Flickr (CC BY 2.0 licence). [end]

Central to the story of Maxwell Street are the voices, representations and practices of local characters, journalists, photographers and others. One example is the black novelist Willard Motley who sees himself as a participant in the life of Maxwell Street. By observing and experiencing life in the neighbourhood, using a method not dissimilar to modern ethnography, Motley writes place according to what he can hear, see and smell, thus producing a rich sense of mobilities, diversity and difference. Cresswell argues that the ethnographic gaze is not without dangers of power and privilege, especially when the observers, as was the case with Chicago School sociologists, were white, male and middle-class and the objects of their gaze were ethnically diverse and working-class.

[insert Figure 2 near here][caption]Figure 2: Historic Maxwell Street Sunday market in 1958. Photo: Charles W. Cushman/IMLS Digital Collections & Content on Flickr (CC BY 2.0 licence).[end]

Drawing on various archives including the Chicago History Museum, the University of Chicago and the Harold Washington Library, and his own urban wandering, Cresswell interweaves narratives and images to create a local theory of place. He documents how historical urban planning decisions would seal the fate of Maxwell Street and traces a path of urban decline, through the characters who inhabit, work and visit the market. With the certainty of urban renewal overshadowing Maxwell Street, Cresswell considers how historic places in our urban fabric can be appraised, mapped, valued, campaigned for, and even protected. This is something relatable. For example, London's industrial

heritage is woven into the fabric of the Kings Cross redevelopment, which has added value and authenticity to a neglected built environment. This has, however, come at a cost to the local community whose identity was lost as members were displaced. For Maxwell Street, Cresswell notes how everything was destabilised; the market relocated and the community identity changed as the fabric of the place was redeveloped then rebranded as 'University Village'. Most buildings were partially or wholly reconstructed (Figure 3), only the façade of 717 West Maxwell being retained in the university's development plans. What was left of Maxwell Street were materialities and memories. Boxes of objects such as hubcaps, brooms and crates collected and stored as an archive of things or kitsch. These things hold meanings and will no doubt be treasured long after the memory of the market of old fades. Maxwell Street's identity has changed and the place re-made. According to Sack, 'a place is made when we take an area of space and intentionally bound it and attempt to control what happens within it through the use of (implicit and/or explicit) rules about what may or may not take place' (2004, p. 243). Maxwell Street has gained regulation and order, yet, lost some of its rich culture, vitality and old identity in the process. In the following passage, Cresswell describes Maxwell Street's identity in flux:

[start quote] *At the corner of Maxwell and Halsted there is nothing much to see. On the many days I've spent time there, the place has been open, sparsely populated, clean and tidy. Maxwell Street itself runs precisely one block on either side of South Halsted Street. On the southwest corner of Maxwell and Halsted is a Caribou coffee shop, part of a Minnesota-based chain. Look west and you'll see the playing fields of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Look east and you'll see a large concrete arch set in a red brick wall. Engraved in the concrete are the words "Maxwell Street". This declaration seems too grand by far for these two blocks of nothing in particular. Above it are two further names – "University Village" and "Marketplace" – as if the area no longer knew what it was called* (2019, p. 21). [end quote]

[insert Figure 3 near here][caption]Figure 3: The reconstruction of the Maxwell Street retail facades in 2005. Photo: Payton Chung (Flickr, CC BY 2.0 licence).[end]

[A]Thinking place

Place can be thought of as a textile where threads of phenomena, such as materialities, meanings and practices, gather together, combine and are made and re-made into something unique (Casey, 1998). This 'reactionary sense of place' focused on rootedness, attachment and singularity distinguishes 'here' from 'there' and is in contrast to a progressive or 'global sense of place' (Massey, 1991) that focuses on flows, connections and networks. To introduce part three, Cresswell asks the reader how place can be theorised in a way that takes us beyond the opposition of a reactionary and a progressive sense of place. By leaving theory to end of his book, he is able to use 'fragments and snippets of Maxwell Street' (p. 165) to construct his meso-theory of place. Cresswell proposes that a reactionary sense of place lies on one axis of place – its vertical axis and a progressive sense of place lies on a second horizontal axis. With little in the horizontal axis to explain why places become connected in the way that they do, he further suggests that a theory of place needs an account of time and change. Temporality is therefore the third axis of place and is itself an effect of verticality and horizontality. Bringing power into the discussion, Cresswell questions what kind of place Maxwell Street could have become had it been declared a historic place. The influence of power and decisions by urban planners can have significant consequences, for Maxwell Street one red line signified the end of the old market. This is of course not the end of Maxwell Street. The place is still there, the community and urban fabric is changing. 'Studentification' has given the redeveloped area known as University Village a new identity.

[A]Conclusion

Not since reading Massey's (1991) narrative of Kilburn Road, have I been so gripped by an exploration of place. The centrality of a single locale allows the reader to develop a rich sense of place while the story of Maxwell Street unfolds. Cresswell carefully weaves together a decade of his own research with the ideas of key thinkers on space and place. Consequently, *Maxwell Street* will

have wide appeal to geographers in schools and universities, and for me, the engaging approach Cresswell takes and the methods he employs can all be transferred to our own locale. Who would not want to write their own version of Maxwell Street?

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