

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast
Episode 66 - Doreen Massey

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show tells the stories of amazing women from history — from well-known to overlooked. We take the stage in Berlin and beyond to share them with a delightful live audience, and then bring these stories to you here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined by Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire. Hello there!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan! Lovely to be here today.

SUSAN STONE: It's lovely to have you! And it's lovely to have this talk, because in this episode we have our very first geographer. Doreen Massey was a pioneer in her field. She challenged existing ideas about space, place and power. And was compassionate, politically active, and hopeful.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our talk is presented by Agata Lisiak. Agata is a professor of Migration Studies at Bard College Berlin, and she's previously been on our show talking about Marie Curie and Rosa Luxemburg. Here she is, live from the stage:

AGATA LISIAK RECORDED AT ACUD: [SHOWS SLIDE] Doreen Massey – pictured here looking badass in a pixie cut, with a propped-up collar and a colorful scarf wrapped around her neck – was born into a white working-class family in Manchester in 1944 and died in her adopted home of Kilburn, a neighborhood in North-West London, in 2016.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

She was an academic, a public intellectual, and a prominent figure in British leftist politics. She was also, as one of her colleagues told me, “born a geographer.” Her commitment to geographical thinking extended to all areas of life, from football pitches to laundromats.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Massey once explained her lasting passion for geography by recalling her childhood fascination with maps.

DOREEN MASSEY CLIP: “I was lucky enough to have an atlas and a globe at home when I was a kid. And just one of the stories I tell at the beginning of one of the books I wrote – a really theoretical book – but to try to explain this passion for geography is how I used to sit in bed at night and spin the globe or turn the pages of the atlas and just close my eyes and jam my finger down and see where it landed. And if it landed on land to try and imagine what time it was in

that place, what the people were doing there, what season it was, you know, what kind of landscape it was, what kind of people. Incredibly naïve, I was a young kid, even then there was some kind of spirit of curiosity and enquiry about the wider world, which must have been one of the ingredients which led me into being a geographer. I've certainly still got it."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

When you look up Doreen Massey online, you'll see that she's sometimes referred to as a Marxist geographer, a feminist geographer, a cultural geographer, and so on. But she wasn't much into labels herself, neither professionally, nor in her personal life. Her thinking was definitely influenced by Marxism and feminism, but not exclusively: it was shaped by approaches from many different disciplines, from postcolonial theory to geology. And, as her colleague John Allen told me:

JOHN ALLEN CLIP: "Doreen wasn't just interested in geography for geography's sake. There was always a purpose and that purpose was political because geography and its relationships were always power-laden, full of inequalities, and she wanted to pull those out and try to make a better life for people politically."

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The concepts she developed – a global sense of place, throwntogetherness, power geometries, a politics of place beyond place, and many others – have since been picked up by academics from across different areas: from urban sociology to performance studies to migration research. Geography was central to how she made sense of the world. Here's why:

DOREEN MASSEY CLIP: "The way we are, and the way places are, is a product of our interrelations with everywhere else. England could not be England without having had that Empire. And the way in which it is England, is a result of all of those relations. The fact that I have the characteristics I have is a result of the geographies within which I am set. And those geographies, those relations within which I am set, are all full of power."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

So, let's have a closer look at the geographies within which she was set, the places that shaped her politics. Here's what she once said about her childhood: "I was born in Manchester. From about the age of four I lived in ... Wythenshawe, which was, at the time, as it was built, the biggest council estate in the world. And I lived in a bit which was built in the thirties, when it was really believed that working class people should have decent housing." Imagine! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

"And I grew up thinking of public sector housing as something wonderful. I really regret the passing of securities that that place used to offer — you know, I'm the welfare state generation. And I needed it, because I have quite a lot of problems with my health. I've got fragile bones, so

I broke my bones all the time. I needed the health service. So had there not been a welfare state and the hospitals, I would probably not have survived so well. And I had state education. You knew you could always get your bones mended, and you had a house, and there had been the 1944 Education Act, which meant that people like us for the first time had a right to decent schooling. And somehow there were enormous securities about all that. I really feel in a kind of physical, personal way the need for a welfare state, not as 'a safety net', but just for ordinary people simply to provide a decent life. I experienced that quite directly. A lot of one's politics comes from that kind of thing, it's not invented, you grow with it."

Massey's insistence to take spatial politics seriously was rooted in her childhood. In a 1992 essay titled "Space, Place, and Gender," she recalls a moment of revelation she had as a little girl traveling on the bus from Wythenshawe to the center of Manchester. So, she's looking out the window and here's what she sees: "...all of it - all of these acres of Manchester - was divided up into football pitches and rugby pitches. And on Saturdays, which was when we went into Town, the whole vast area would be covered with hundreds of little people, all running around after balls, as far as the eye could see. I remember all this very sharply. And I remember, too, it striking me very clearly - even then as a puzzled, slightly thoughtful little girl - that all this huge stretch of the Mersey flood plain had been entirely given over to boys. I did not go to those playing fields - they seemed barred, another world (though today, with more nerve and some consciousness of being a space invader, I do stand on football terraces - and love it)." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

I went to Wythenshawe last spring and was happy to see it bathed in the golden glory of my favorite plants: dandelions. I also took a bus from the council estate to the city center, but didn't see many football pitches on my way. Instead, I spotted something much more menacing: golf courses. [AUDIENCE GROANS AND LAUGHS]

Growing up in a working-class community laid the political foundations for Doreen Massey. Her visceral understanding of class politics was later reflected in her work.

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As a gifted child, she got into the Manchester High School for Girls – pictured here on a sunny April day – a fancy school that prides itself in prominent alumnae such as the Pankhurst sisters. All three went there! We also have some pictures of Doreen Massey from that school.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

You can see her here in the first row – sporting a bouffant. [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] And here's another class photo – she's also sitting in the first row.

After high school, Massey received a scholarship to study Geography at St. Hugh's College in Oxford, where excelled academically, but felt out of place as a working-class woman from England's North. In fact, she developed a lasting aversion to elite schools so much so that she later rejected job offers from prestigious universities and didn't hide her contempt for colleagues who succumbed to the lure of Oxbridge.

As a committed leftist, Doreen Massey was dedicated to popular education. In 1982, she took up a professorship at The Open University, spent nearly three decades there:

DOREEN MASSEY CLIP" "...and loved every minute of it. In a way the Open University has been, for me, the ideal place to teach and to do research because of its social project and because of the way in which it really encourages us as academics to speak beyond the academy as well as within."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

The Open University, or the OU, is located in Milton Keynes, about 50 miles north of London. It was established in 1969 by the Labor government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson to literally open up access to higher education to a wider variety of people. It was a social democratic experiment in mass education via television and mailed educational packages. At that time in the early 70s only about 8% of young people went to university. So, the OU was often referred to as "the university of the second chance": people, who for various reasons got off the academic track, had a chance later on in life, as mature adults, to get a degree. And Massey, as her colleagues told me, "felt proud of being part of a university that gave people that opportunity." For her, "The point of education [was] to give people the confidence and the awareness to think for themselves."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Massey commuted to The Open University from her home on Ariel Road in Kilburn. She didn't own a car so she'd take the train from London's Euston Station – or she'd catch a ride with her neighbor Stuart Hall. [AUDIENCE REACTS] Mmm...the acclaimed cultural theorist, pictured here [AUDIENCE GASPS] manning a nursery at the Women's Liberation Movement conference at Ruskin College in Oxford in 1970. So, that's half a century before the emergence of the internet daddy. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Clearly, a man ahead of his time!

For years, Massey and Hall would spend hours every week talking about all sorts of things, including politics, of course. They were involved in various projects together: reading groups, a manifesto, the journal *Soundings*, and more. When you read the essays, book chapters, and opinion pieces each of them published separately, or listen to their lectures, especially those from the 1990s, it's not always easy to tell who came up with this or that concept or framing first. Many of their ideas developed in conversation, and neither Massey nor Hall seemed proprietary about them: they cared about what those ideas could do, what action they could initiate, rather

than about citation numbers or impact as is common under today's neoliberal academic regime. They were politically engaged academics.

Massey had little patience for colleagues who felt so cozy in lecture halls and conference rooms that they hardly ventured beyond them. She certainly did! Not only was she a fixture at protests and community meetings, she also understood the mass appeal of television and embraced the medium with all its awkwardness and silliness. If you dig deep on YouTube, you'll find a 1999 BBC2 documentary about Mexico City, in which a grinning Massey hovers above the metropolis in a helicopter and traverses its many social worlds asking pointed questions:

DOREEN MASSEY IN TV CLIP: [JAUNTY MUSIC] "So, the question we have to face is, who holds the power here? Who calls the shots in a city as big as this? [TRAFFIC NOISE] Whose city? Whose city is it?"

[AUDIENCE GIGGLES]

As an established and widely admired scholar, Massey was up for the OBE – the Order of the British Empire – and gleefully rejected it. [AUDIENCE CHEERS AND LAUGHS] Which, in light of the ongoing royal horror picture show [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] continues to be an important gesture. She did accept many other awards and honorary doctorates though, and, as you can tell by these photos, she looked quite pleased to receive accolades.

Alongside her illustrious academic career, which she somehow managed to have without ever obtaining a PhD – which, unheard of today, though she did have a Master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania – Massey was politically involved locally and internationally: with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, municipal socialist projects in London, the UK miners' strike – so she basically spent the 1980s fighting Margaret Thatcher on several fronts. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Later on, she became an avid supporter of the Occupy movement and the anti-austerity movements in Greece, among many other initiatives. One of her concepts – power geometries – was adopted by no other than Venezuela's then president Hugo Chávez as one of the five engines of the Bolivarian Revolution: *la nueva geometria del poder*.

Building on Massey's observation that any place – a country, a city, a neighborhood – is the product of political, economic, and affective relations between different actors, and that those relations are unequal – shaped by gender, race, class, and other factors – Chávez set up the foundations for communal councils, in which community members identify their economic and social priorities, and organize themselves bottom up to solve their problems with assistance from the state. Well, the actual implementation of this concept hasn't been as liberatory as Chávez initially envisioned. Still, Massey was elated to break academia's elitist boundaries and chuffed, as British academics say on Twitter, [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] that her ideas made it outside university lecture halls and pages of academic journals onto actual streets. When she arrived in Caracas in 2007, she was struck by the sight of political billboards announcing new geometries of power, and photographed them with admitted self-indulgence.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Massey's participation in a wide range of political projects doesn't mean that she instantly belonged in those spaces. In fact she often did feel like a space invader. Here's how she recalled her experience of working on a Labour Party policy committee in the 1970s: "...it is difficult to exude gravitas when you're 5 ft 1 and the committee room table comes up to your chin, when you're blond, and a GIRL, who is not wearing a suit. Throughout my intermittent attempts to engage with "the establishment" of this country I have been left in no doubt that your ideas are evaluated through a filter, unacknowledged and often unintended, of expectation of a particular kind of embodiment. You can play the required female game and smile a lot, or you can adopt a deportment that says you take yourself very, very seriously. There is a self-importance that brings out in me an overwhelming desire to prick it. It is itself a form of class and gender war."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Massey's thinking was clearly influenced by feminist theory, to which she also contributed greatly herself. As she once said: "Feminists have to be everywhere. And doing feminist geography is about a lot more than studying gender, specifically, it's an outlook on life." She was wary of all essentialisms, including those in the women's movement of her time (and arguably now) because: "...the discussions that were going on in some parts of early feminist geography were about the problems of being a woman, but also about being a particular kind of woman. And 'that kind of woman' (with husband and children etc) did not include me. I knew the category itself was problematical."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Massey collaborated with artists including ACUD's neighbor Olafur Eliasson. She wrote an essay for the catalog accompanying his spectacular Tate Modern show pictured here *The Weather Project* and also visited his studio here in Berlin. She also regularly worked closely with Platform, a London-based collective of artists, activists, and researchers addressing social and ecological justice issues. And she supported their efforts to push major museums, including the Tate, to break sponsorship deals with "big oil". And she is pictured here with one of the activists at that event. One of Platform's members, James Marriott, told me what happened at that event:

JAMES MARRIOTT CLIP: "And of course, who turned up, was very happy to do it was Doreen, you know, and again, I just love that naughtiness of her. Because now I understand that, you know, there were lots of other academics, bless them, who would go well, I can't be involved in this kind of, basically pirate thing, squatted the main gallery, and they're gonna get kicked out and into, because if I do that, then I'll be struck off the list of being a proper, you know, Tate talker person and she, you know, she done lots of stuff for Tate, big stuff, you know, but no, no, no, Doreen, because she was basically badly behaved a lot of the time, was great. She's like, right, let's do this. And in she marched and bang, she held you know, just I loved her for that, really badly behaved."

[AUDIENCE GIGGLES]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

All of Massey's friends and collaborators I got to speak to emphasized how curious she was about the world. She struggled with health all her life, but that didn't stop her from traveling far and wide – even all the way up to the Arctic, which she did, for her 60th birthday, on a small ex-Soviet research boat, and then commemorated that trip on the cover of her opus magnum, *For Space*. In short, as one person told me, she was “a huge ball of energy”. And she liked to laugh.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

I remember that laugh myself. I mean, I only met her once, but there was a lot of laughter. I met her after a talk she gave at the Think and Drink Colloquium (which is an excellent name for any event), [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] a lecture series that sociologist Talja Blokland runs at Humboldt University in Berlin every Monday evening. For everyone in the audience: you're invited, it's free, everyone is welcome. And Doreen Massey came to Berlin to give a talk there in 2013. I remember the room was completely packed. She was amazing, so charismatic. Serious and entertaining at the same time. And listening to her, I thought she'd make a great dinner companion. And, we went to dinner after her talk, with a small group of colleagues. Of course everyone wanted to sit right next to her. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Because the academic celebrity vibe was very palpable, but not because she was a diva, but because we wanted to sit right next to her. She herself was very down to earth, not snobbish at all, very casual, and very very funny.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

She was also, as I learned from her friends, a very private person and didn't reveal much about her life in interviews. She once defined herself: “I am daughter, sister, friend, lecturer, fan of Liverpool Football Club.” (Not common for someone from Manchester, right?) [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] “I am me because of all the relationships I have.”

She was very close with her parents and traveled regularly to Wythenshawe to see them, until they died. And she also had a beautiful relationship with her only sister Hilary who is still alive. So, Massey must have talked about football a lot because all of her friends I spoke to emphasized that she was a huge Liverpool fan. She is known to have hummed their anthem on epic hikes she liked to take with her sister Hilary.

[CLIP OF SONG YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE]: When you walk through a storm,
hold your head up high. And don't be afraid of the dark...

Any Liverpool fans in the audience? No? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I don't do football either. Massey did, and her sister as well. The Massey sisters also shared interest in birdwatching. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Here they are on a hiking trail in Lake District. And though you see them admiring ducks in this photo, Doreen's favorite bird was the swift.

Massey didn't have any children, but, as one of her friends put it, "She unconsciously created a family of people who were very close to her and very affectionate towards her. That sense of family of thought. It's really special."

Doreen Massey died suddenly on the 11th of March 2016, leaving her friends and comrades with an overpowering sense of loss. Her dear friend, socialist feminist Hilary Wainwright, wrote a moving obituary for Massey, in which she conveys that widely shared feeling of shock and emptiness. One of the people grieving Massey wrote: "now we understand what everyone else felt about David Bowie". [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So, Bowie died two months before Massey. Although her fame was nowhere close to that of a global rock star, Massey did have a strong following across academia, activist groups, and art circles. Her commentary, her sharp mind, and her laughter are dearly missed.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

And there's still so much to learn from her. One of the biggest takeaways and inspirations for me, personally, is her insistence that there is an alternative to the neoliberal order. She had lived through the post-war welfare state era – which, by the way, she didn't think was ideal, more of a social-democratic compromise than the truly liberatory politics she was striving for – but she knew that despite what the high priests and priestesses of neoliberalism claimed, another world was possible, and still is. Much of her work in research, education, political organizing, and other collaborations was focused precisely on that: fighting neoliberalism – it's such a difficult word! I mean it's everywhere, and it's impossible to pronounce! Fighting neoliberalism and setting up foundations for a world centered on a sense of responsibility and a politics of place beyond place, acknowledging the profound ways in which humans and non-humans are interconnected, addressing the unequal power geometries that shape the geographies in which we are set, and developing inclusive political structures for this new – better – world to emerge. We can still build on that.

So, if you'd like to learn more about Doreen Massey, I made it very easy for you, because I made a podcast! [AUDIENCE REACTS APPRECIATIVELY] It's a ten-part series on space, society, and power, inspired by Massey's life and work. I interviewed her collaborators and friends and also other scholars, activists, and artists who engage with spatial politics in ways that I find inspiring. You can find it on any podcast app.

[KATY ASKS FROM AUDIENCE] What's it called?

Spatial Delight! [AUDIENCE REACTS APPRECIATIVELY] The podcast is called *Spatial Delight*, which was the working title for Massey's arguably most important book, *For Space*. But also read Doreen Massey.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

The first essay I ever read was *Space, Place, and Gender* – the one where she talks about herself as a space invader. It's beautifully written and continues to resonate even though it was published thirty years ago! Another essay I recommend is *A Global Sense of Place* – it was published in *Marxism Today* in 1991 and includes a vivid passage of Massey walking down Kilburn High Road, which is the shopping street in her neighborhood in London, which she uses to illustrate her ideas on globalization, British imperialism, and social inequalities. You can find it online for free, or in a recent selection of her political writings published by Lawrence and Wishart.

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND CHEERS]

SUSAN STONE: Agata Lisiak on Doreen Massey recorded in Berlin's ACUD. Thanks to Johannes Braun, Adomas Laurinaitis, and Christian Becking for their kind assistance. We also had support from Anaïs Engler and Abdullah Naseer at the show.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: For more on Doreen Massey, do check out Agata's series about her, the beautifully named *Spatial Delight*, wherever you get your podcasts.

SUSAN STONE: As we've mentioned on a previous episode, I worked with Agata on this series as a senior editor. And while as a former cultural studies scholar I had read some of the other academics mentioned in the series such as Stuart Hall — I had never been aware of Doreen Massey. Katy, had you heard of her before Agata's talk?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: No, I hadn't either, no.

SUSAN STONE: She seems kind of well-known for her period in the UK as this kind of public intellectual. That's not something I had too much familiarity with, I guess.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I think maybe the Open University connection is the thing, right? And I think it's hard to understand if you're not of a certain generation, from the UK. But the Open University was this – still is in fact – this amazing institution, but it used to be very visible because it was for people who wanted to study, but maybe didn't have time to take out from work. So early in the morning they had all these crazy TV shows, which we would get up as kids and put on the TV, and there would be a guy talking about physics at 7 in the morning – fascinating. So you would have these kinds of incidental encounters with intellectuals just in your own home. Obviously intended for students, but they became part of society, yeah.

SUSAN STONE: Well, if you want to have more encounters with Doreen Massey, do check out that podcast, because it really takes you all over the place. It covers a world of topics, from Coventry Cathedral to academic protests in Germany, to politics and urban planning in Turkey, so hopefully it gives you a bit of that kind of academic or complex thinking in the home, but you can take it anywhere with your podcast.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Ah, that's just what I need! So, if you'd like to see a live Dead Ladies Show, here in Berlin, we'll be joining PodFest Berlin again in October. The festival runs from October the 13-15, and there will be all kinds of live tapings, workshops, and other opportunities for podcast makers and fans (of all interests and languages) to meet up.

SUSAN STONE: That's right! Our show will be October 14th at 8:15pm. To purchase advance tickets, which you should do, just follow the link in the episode or on our social media, @deadladiesshow.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And if you're in New York, you can see a Dead Ladies Show there just about monthly. Follow them on Instagram @deadladiesnyc to get the latest news. They also have a newsletter, as do we, and we'll put links to those both in our show notes.

SUSAN STONE: You can also now find us over at BlueSky — we're @deadladiesshow.bsky.social. And, we have a Patreon with fun features as well as a Teeublic shop, and I'll drop links for you in the show notes for all those things.

For more on Doreen Massey, some pictures and some links and information about Spatial Delight, do just go over to our website, deadladiesshow.com/podcast

Thanks again to Agata and to our other co-founder Florian Duijsens who is busy this summer teaching and having adventures. And thank you, Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: My pleasure, Susan! And thanks to all of you listeners, fans and friends out there. We love it when you share our show with others! We'll be back next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme song is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. See you next time!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, boop-boop-be-doop!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)