Mining memories in a rural community: Landscape, temporality and place identity

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ABSTRACT

Unlike formal 'heritage landscapes', the role of unmanaged, 'everyday' rural landscapes in perpetuating social memories and reiterating certain conceptualisations of place has been relatively overlooked within the rural studies literature. Using the case study of Askam-in-Furness, a former mining village in Cumbria, this paper addresses this gap by exploring how industrial remains within the landscape act as prompts for the recollection of both personal and social place-related memories. In doing so, it also extends some of the learning from urban-centred studies that have explored the affective ability of industrial ruins to bring memories of past people and places into the present. I demonstrate how vestiges of Askam's mining past have become incorporated into local people's experiences of the everyday landscape and, as such, play an important role in understandings of place and temporality. These processes are considered in some depth and their implications for the future management of landscape and 'heritage' are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Substantial attention has been paid within rural studies to the 'museumification' (Riley and Harvey, 2005: 277) of rural areas into 'heritagescapes' that commodify and stabilise aspects of rural history and tradition. This is linked to wider discussions about the consumption of the countryside (Woods, 2011). However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which informal, uncommodified aspects of history persist within rural landscapes, intertwining with everyday lives and holding various meanings for rural dwellers. Yet memory exists in all kinds of spaces, not just demarcated sites (Atkinson, 2007). Exploring the meanings of mundane rural spaces can deepen our understanding of the role that the past plays in shaping places and identities and open up a multiplicity of vernacular memories and relationships with the past.

The concept of memory and its significance to the human condition has been thoroughly scrutinised within social science disciplines. It is now widely recognised that there is an inextricable link between memory and place, with both personal and 'social' memories playing an important role in processes of place-making

and identity (Crang and Travlou, 2001; Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Hoskins, 2012; Jones, 2005; Moran, 2004). However, much of the literature on social memory and place has focused on (usually large or aggregated) landscapes of commemoration and similar 'formal' sites of memory, or *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), particularly those related to conflict, war and other traumas of modern history (Jones and Garde-Hansen, 2012).

Everyday spaces have received greater attention within the burgeoning body of work on ruins. This work has revealed how disused and abandoned sites can be powerful activators of memory and sensation that prompt us to acknowledge the pluri-temporality of the landscape (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013). As Tim Edensor demonstrates with regards to the urban domain, the commodification of heritage seeks to fix and stabilize memory, but in mundane spaces "ghosts are more freely able to haunt, for the regulatory processes that hold sway are less concerned with where and how things, activities and people should be placed" (Edensor, 2008: 330). These hauntings are perhaps expected in urban places where industry is celebrated as part of its heritage (Hall, 2008). This paper turns attention to places where industrial ruins may be viewed as out-of-place, unexpected or, at the very least, not equated with widely held perceptions of those places. For, although industrial ruins in the form of mining remnants are common in some rural areas of the UK, such as Cornwall and 'the Valleys' of South Wales, they are not generally associated with 'rural' in the

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popular imagination. Thus, industrial ruins in the countryside can grate with binary views of urban and rural places in which industrial land-use clashes with pastoral ideals. A focus on industrial ruins in rural places challenges this binary. Given this collapse of binaries, my use of the terms 'rural' and 'urban' throughout the paper may appear somewhat problematic. However, since the perception of a rural-urban divide remains widespread in non-academic circles, an investigation into 'urban' ruins in a 'rural' space continues to be useful in highlighting the increasing complexity of relationships with (perceived) rurality.

The interrelationships between industrial remains, memory, and understandings of nature, place and rurality have much to tell us about community and environment relations in rural areas, but have been little explored in this regard. This paper extends thinking on memory, ruins and the everyday to the rural domain. Using the case study of Askam-in-Furness (hereafter referred to as 'Askam'), a former mining village in Cumbria, I explore the way in which 'unconserved' features of past human activity in rural landscapes can act as informal reminders of a community's history, playing an important role in the way that place identities are formed in the present day. In doing so, I consider how forms of engagement with the landscape work to iterate certain histories and knowledges, creating a dialectical relationship between past and present. The focus on a former mining village serves to highlight the industrial, mining-related aspects of rurality that are often neglected in accounts that emphasise the idyllic or agricultural elements of the countryside. Attending to such questions offers a way of bringing to the fore some of the intersections between the formal representations, everyday lives and locality that make up a rural space (Halfacree, 2006). As I shall show, representations and experiences of rurality, nature and local history are all bound up in the way in which people relate to the mining remains that are a significant feature of Askam's locality. These vestiges form an unremarkable backdrop to residents' everyday lives, but emerge as important transmitters of meaning through the evocation of both social and personal memories.

I begin by contextualising the central themes of the paper, before introducing Askam in more detail and describing the methods that were used to explore the relevance of the past mining landscape for current residents. This is followed by a discussion of key themes that emerged from the research and their significance for understanding the interconnections between place, memory, temporality and identity. Some of the implications for thinking about present-day 'heritage' management are then discussed, before these strands are drawn together in the conclusion.

1.1. Memory, industrial ruins and everyday space

Memory is a complex, slippery and elusive concept that has been extensively discussed within the academic literature with regards to (among other things) individual and group identity processes, history-making, learning and everyday life. This paper does not set out to delve into these complexities of memory, but it is important to briefly explain here what I mean by the terms personal memory and social memory, as they are referred to throughout the discussion.

Personal memory is the recalling of events, experiences and situations from within a person's own lifetime. Its distinguishing feature is that it involves "the sense of being personally implicated in whatever experiences are being remembered" (Cubitt, 2007: 43). The memories recalled may be of specific and discrete moments, but may also be of people and places more generally. Social memory is the more elusive concept of group memory (also sometimes referred to as collective memory) in which information and experiences from the group's collective past are passed down

to current generations, primarily through traditional practices, oral history and stories or folklore (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; Harvey, 2002; Riley and Harvey, 2007). They may also be embedded within material culture and, as I shall argue, within the landscape itself. Social memories are social products and, as such, are reinforced by regular interaction with other members of the social group (Cubitt, 2007). It is through this process that community identities are formed in relation to its past and through which a sense of social belonging can be reinforced. I use the term 'social memory' in favour of 'collective memory', as it is a more flexible phrase that avoids implying too great a cohesion within the memories of a group − which are inherently multiple and potentially contradictory (Woolf, 2003).

Although I am distinguishing here between social and personal memories, the line between them is blurred. Personal memories are embodied within the individual, but they remain socially and culturally contextualised in that they are always situated within the social world in which the individual is/was embedded (Cubitt, 2007). On the other hand, social memories are often still deeply personalised by being linked in some way to personal or familial histories. Personal and social memories are thus deeply intertwined.

Maurice Halbwachs (2007 [1950]), a prominent theoriser of memory, stressed that social memory is multiple in that it does not discriminate between varying versions of a remembered past. This is in contrast to history, which strives to be unitary and universal. Pierre Nora makes a similar distinction, defining history as a representation of the past that claims universal authority, whereas memory is by nature affective, magical, and multiple. He describes self-consciously created spaces of commemoration as the 'modern' creation of history through *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), in contrast to what he sees as 'true' memory or *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory), where practices and knowledges are passed down through the bodies of the collective. Whilst Nora's point about the 'fixing' nature of history (or 'modern memory') is an important one to which I shall return, care should be taken to avoid romanticising other forms of memory, as they are not free from a politics of their own. Memories can be selective and involuntarily twisted or rewritten by present-day concerns and consciousness. They can also be manipulated by hegemonic forces to serve particular political purposes (Cubitt, 2007; Said, 2000).

Despite its romanticist pitfalls, Nora's distinction between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire* does point to the importance of exploring not just processes of remembering related to formal commemorative or 'heritage' sites, but also those related to more mundane or everyday sites. After all, the past is visible not just in spaces that have been conserved, renovated or 'heritageised', but also in spaces that have been re-appropriated for other uses and in ruins and 'wastelands' that have been left to degrade without formal use.

The role that such spaces play in processes of memory is something that has been taken up by a number of social scientists writing about urban and industrial areas. For instance, the affective ability of ruined or derelict spaces to conjure up memories and 'haunt' the present has been well explored in relation to the city. In his exploration of the 'phantasmagoric' working-class spaces of Manchester, Edensor describes how "the city endlessly moves on, but in doing so leaves behind traces of previous material forms, cultural practices, politics, ways of thinking and being, and modes of experience" (Edensor, 2008: 315). These traces persist through processes of urban change and arise not just in the spectacular, but also in the mundaneness of everyday spaces. In contrast to hegemonic heritage practices that reify the past, ruins can open up the multiplicity and mystery of the past by stimulating involuntary memories and offering a kind of contested or 'anti-' heritage