



Decoupling farm, farming and place: Recombinant attachments of globally engaged family farmers

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A B S T R A C T

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Farmers have traditionally been perceived as having a deep attachment to land and place that contrasts with the mobility of modern society. In this paper, we use this work as a starting point for analysing new forms of attachments among a cohort of Australian farmers who are highly mobile in their business activities. In response, we devise a new way of thinking about farmer attachments that involves decoupling three elements: attachment to farming as an activity and source of agrarian identity; attachment to the farm as an economic and social unit; and attachment to place. Individual farmers recombine these different elements of attachment in different ways, depending on their specific context, promoting both mobility and stasis. We illustrate these recombinant attachments through examples of globally engaged Australian farmers who enact different configurations of attachment of place, farm business and farming identity.

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1. Introduction

The attachment of farmers to place and land has been extensively debated and researched within the rural studies literature. On the one hand, such studies have revealed farmers as being rooted in the land, and thus as embodying a deep, embedded and/or autochthonous attachment to place that contrasts with the perceived mobility and rootlessness of the non-agricultural population in contemporary society (Dominy, 2001; Flemsæter, 2009; Gray, 1998; Hildenbrand and Hennon, 2005; Kuehne, 2012). Genealogical inheritance and kinship, the co-location of home and workplace, and an intimate and embodied knowledge of the land, generated through the performance of repeated, iterative practices across a farm property, have been shown to tie farmers to particular rural places. In contrast to the elective belonging of in-migrant rural communities, farmers are sometimes perceived to be constrained and obligated by their inherited and economically-dependent connection to place, which in turn informs their business and land management decisions (Hildenbrand and Hennon, 2005; Gosling and Williams, 2010).

On the other hand, more limited research has suggested that the modernization of rural communities and global capitalist

imperatives have diluted the temporal and spatial connection to place among farmers that was once characteristic of agrarian rural societies (see for example Johnsen, 2004). Drawing on contemporary sociological theories of reflexive modernization and detraditionalization (see Beck et al., 1994), rural researchers have suggested that the reorganization of social relations across time and space are not uniquely urban phenomena, but have reconstituted local identities and connections in rural areas as well (Bryant, 1999).

In this paper, we interrogate the processes by which various emotional attachments to place and farm are formed and maintained in particular geographic, political-economic, historic and cultural contexts by focussing on a cohort of highly mobile and strongly business-minded family farmers who have actively sought to integrate themselves into the global economy. We term these farmers 'globally engaged' by virtue of the fact that in contrast to many of their counterparts who have been enrolled unwittingly into global processes and structures, they display considerable agency in actively negotiating their own pathways through the economic and political realities of global conditions. *Prima facie*, they could be considered to have a weak attachment to place, having sold family properties or spatially separated their farm property, business office and/or private residence. Yet, we argue that their business and lifestyle choices continue to reflect emotional attachments as well as rational economic decision-making and, accordingly, that they are characteristic of neither autochthonous local nor disembedded global actors.

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As a way of making sense of these complex, and seemingly contradictory, expressions of attachment to farm and place, we develop a more nuanced model of attachments that decouples these two components while still accepting that, in some contexts, they may well remain strongly connected. We first define *place* as a distinct geographical space comprising the biophysical attributes of the farm property and surrounding landscape, along with the social ties and relationships that are fostered within that space (Altman and Low, 1992). Second, *farming* as a practice and source of identity based on the cultivation and stewardship of the land and/or stock. And third, the *farm business* as an economic and social unit. We suggest that individual farmers may form separate attachments to each of these elements in particularistic ways, recombining them in new acts of place making or entrepreneurship depending on their own situation and priorities. As such, while some farmers may feel deeply committed to maintaining a connection to the family property, others may prioritize sustaining the farm business over attachment to a particular place at any given time. Mobility as well as stasis may therefore produce, as well as be produced by, farmers' emotional attachments. In what follows, we first situate the research by reviewing the existing literature on place attachment, rurality and farmers, before outlining our research methods, introducing our analytical model of the recombinant features of farmer attachment, and empirically examining these connections with reference to globally engaged family farmers.

2. Place attachment, rurality and farmers

Place attachment has been a phenomenon of interest to anthropologists, geographers, sociologists and environmental psychologists who have emphasized the role of material and cultural ties to place in forming identity (Mee and Wright, 2009; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Trudeau, 2006; Walsh, 2011); the links between place, community and social formations (Mah, 2009; Savage et al., 2005); place attachment as a symbolic relationship (Altman and Low, 1992; Low, 1992); and the affective, cognitive and behavioural components of place attachment (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Lewicka, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Raymond et al., 2010; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Collectively, this research has revealed attachment to place to be a complex and multi-dimensional relationship that can take many forms. In an early attempt to develop a systematic typology, Low (1992: 166) proposed six kinds of symbolic linkage to place, including genealogical linkage through history or family lineage; linkage through the loss of land or destruction of community; economic linkage through property ownership and inheritance; cosmological linkage through religious or spiritual association; linkage through religious or secular pilgrimage; and narrative linkage through storytelling and place naming. Low noted that these dimensions of place attachment may be mutually constitutive, but also that 'the distinctiveness of the categories emerges in the emphasis of place attachment type within certain cultures and cultural settings' (p. 167).

Low's typology can be reduced to two modalities of spatial relationship to place. Attachment to place based on pilgrimage, cosmology or narrative may be constructed and articulated from a distance, with adherents infrequently or never visiting the physical place concerned; while place attachment through loss or destruction recalls recent or historic experiences of dispossession and dislocation. Economic and genealogical ties, in contrast, emphasize occupation and presence. Low described genealogical place attachment as 'maintained, strengthened, and acted upon by living in a place, by being born or marrying into a household, or by staying in a location for a period of time' (1992: 167), and economic linkages as 'strengthened and

reinforced when a person works in place or with the resources of a place' (ibid.). Accordingly, economic and genealogical attachment to place may be perceived to be relative, gaining weight with stasis, continuity and the co-location of residence and work.

Focussing on instrumental relationships of everyday interaction as a marker of place belonging, Savage et al. (2005) noted that 'earlier community studies saw people's involvement in their neighbourhood and local social life as central to understanding their engagement and commitment to place' (p. 87). From this perspective, increased residential and everyday mobility, the stretching and segmentation of social relationships over space, and the globalization of cultural references and experiences, might be viewed as weakening attachment to place and forms of local belonging (Beck, 1997; Lash and Urry, 1994; Relph, 1976). Yet Savage et al. (2005) challenged this assumption in their study of neighbourhoods in northern England where they observe how residents articulate 'emotionally charged accounts of their relationship to place' (p. 87). As such, they posit the concept of 'elective belonging' to describe 'residential attachment that articulates a distinctive ethics of belonging that has nothing to do with the claims of history' (2005: 53). Indeed, they argue that 'rather than a concern with the quality and nature of local ties and personal relationships, it is this ability to place oneself in an imaginary landscape which is central to people's sense of belonging' (ibid: 90). Similarly, recent geographical research has documented the capacity of individuals to construct a sense of 'home' in transitory settings (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Walsh, 2011), and to articulate mobile, multiple and dichotomized notions of belonging within relational processes of place making (Bærenholdt and Granås, 2008; Powell and Rishbeth, 2011; Simard, 2000; Walker, 2011).

Tensions between what we can characterize as *embedded* and *elective* forms of belonging to place are evident in the literature. Anthropological studies in particular have documented the embedded place attachments of both hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies, emphasizing the performative and phenomenological elements of long term engagements with place (Behar, 1986; Pitt-Rivers, 1971; Strang, 1997). Similarly, studies of counterurbanization in Britain and North America by Bell (1994), Harper (1988) and Salamon (2003) identified distinctions articulated within rural communities between 'old' and 'new' residents based on genealogy, kinship, economic activity and local knowledge, which enabled 'locals' to claim a more 'authentic' attachment to place than 'newcomers'. Yet, research has also pointed to the strong elective belonging of in-migrants to rural communities, manifested in their locational decisions (Halfacree, 1994) and their subsequent involvement in community activities and interest in local history and events (Clope et al., 1998; Woods et al., 2011) as well as that of transitory rural residents such as second home owners (Pitkänen et al., 2011; Stedman, 2006). Smailes (2002), for example, noted that strength of attachment to a new community was unrelated to length of residence as new residents established feelings of belonging relatively quickly, or else departed within a few years of arrival. In all cases, he argued, the number of social organisations that residents belonged to was highly correlated to strength of community attachment.

Accounts of the embedded place attachment of rural communities also emphasize the centrality of farming practice to this relationship. Salamon (2003: 182–3), for example, makes a contrast between agrarian and postagrarian forms of land attachment:

a farming community has organic coherence because its residents have strong ties to the land that defines the place. This agrarian attachment to land as a part of place differs from the characteristic postagrarian attachment to land as personal property or investment.

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