Titel

All Flesh is Grass. Deep mapping as an ‘essaying’ of place.

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Kurztitel:

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In this brief paper I will focus on the background to a ‘deep mapping’ project called Either Side of Delphy Bridge being undertaken by an arts practice led research team at the University of the West of England. This is part of a larger research programme called A Grey and Pleasant Land? An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society which is funded by the United Kingdom’s Economic and Social Research Council. The project aims to explore older adults’ experiences and perceptions of the physical, social and cultural landscapes in which they locate themselves and employs a mixture of ethnographically-informed, scholarly and creative approaches in creating a ‘deep mapping’. The research takes place in a rural area of North Cornwall and the team working on it consists of myself, an artist and the project’s Principle Investigator, the ethnographer Sarah Blowen, Jane Bailey, an artist and the full-time PhD student on the project, and our web designer Dan Buzzo. The selection of images that are presented here are first thoughts for sections of the digitally based deep mapping we are working on – assemblages of material equivalent to those in an artist’s notebook pages. They are intended to illustrate the kinds of ‘thick description’ that I believe a deep mapping approach shares with ethnography.

[Biggs_1]

In 2004 I produced and published a book called Between Carterhaugh and Tamshiel Rig: a borderline episode, an idiosyncratic history / geography / ethnography of the parish of Southdean, located in the English-Scottish Borders region. While many of my own artist colleagues where puzzled by this hybrid work, the European ethnologist Ullrich Kockel and some of the

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1 Edited by Jane Bailey and Katharina Eisch-Angus, this text was deliberately kept in the style of the spoken paper as given at the Tübingen conference.
ethnographers working with him were very positive about the work. This led me to explore ethnographic literature so as to help me develop what I have since come to see as deep mapping as an *essaying* of place. This aims to address the relationship between memory and the politics of place and identity. The book begins:

“For much of my childhood I suffered a recurrent nightmare. It began as I took the route of a familiar daytime walk – a muddy, flint-studded path that leads away from the house into a wood. I follow it through the well-thinned hazels and out onto the edge of the farmland beyond. I am alone. Arriving at the fringes of more established woodland, thick with young saplings between vast, smooth-trucked beech trees, the path takes me along the edge of a rough strip of grass between the wood and a large, L-shaped field. In the distance there is an orphanage where, on daytime walks, I sometimes hear children laughing and playing together. Now there is only silence. Where the path turns a corner towards the lane I pass an old wooden shed that is gradually disappearing under nettles and briars. When I reach the point where the path crosses the narrow lane a vast black wolf confronts me. It stands at least as tall as myself. It always appears as if out of the air, materialising at the edge of the shadows just where the lane runs in under overhanging trees. I know instantly that my only hope is to lie down on the road with my eyes closed, hold my breath, keep absolutely still. I must play dead, as I have done in this dream hundreds of times before. On each occasion I wait to see what will happen next. Usually, after what seems like an eternity of the wolf sniffing around me, I wake in absolute terror just as it starts to eat me alive.”

I quote this passage at length because it allows me to introduce two spaces central to deep mapping as *essaying*. The first folds together physical landscape with the process of dream or reverie and makes possible the appearance of spectral traces that continue to haunt the present. Framed in an auto-ethnographic context in the text, these spectral traces are excavated
from the vernacular re-workings of folk memory that underpins the oldest ballads from the English-Scottish Borders region. The second space is accessed through *staying with an image* – in this case the wolf of the dream. This process of *staying with* – borrowed from the post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman – facilitates a particular, sensuously resonant connectivity across time and space and between a wide variety of topics – in this case childhood sites, etymologies and histories around Borders place-names, or the ethnography of an old song still sung today, scape-goating, land rights, otherness and terrorism, for example.

In the book the tensioning of these two dynamic spaces serves to draw together extensive fieldwork, a programme of auto-ethnography and traditional forms of scholarship so as to set up a *wager* – to borrow a term from Paul Ricoeur’s writing on metaphor and art. This *wager* relates to questions of ambiguity, risk and identity in *essaying* place. In the book this is introduced in terms of the ways in which particular landscapes can become powerful psycho-social echo-chambers, catching the academic questions we bring to them and subtly bending or changing them, bouncing them back to us full of strange reverberations and unexpected resonances that disturb our preconceptions about *who* writes and *for whom*. Working on the *Southdean Project* and, later, meeting and working with the site-specific performer Mike Pearson, allowed me to understand deep mapping as *essaying*.

*Why essaying?* The term ‘essay’ derives from a French root meaning ‘a trial, attempt, or essay’ – which in turn derives from the Latin ‘exagium’, which indicates ‘weighing up’ or ‘testing of material’, relating the term ‘to assay’ – as in ‘assaying’ the mineral quality of an ore. Understood in this context *essaying* suggests an expanded examination / evocation of place, site or landscape over time – an approach in which *both* the testing spirit of the sciences *and* the imaginative, wondering approach of the literary essay have a part.

In their 2001 book *Theatre/Archaeology* Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks argue that in the final emergence of theatre/archaeology – which generates

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3 German: *Verbindung, Verbindungs-, Vernetzungsfähigkeit.*
5 German: *Wette, Wetteinsatz.*
6 “In betting on the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time that my wager will be restored to me in power of reflection, in coherent discourse.” Paul Ricoeur: *The Symbolism of Evil.* New York 1967, p. 335.
deep mapping as I understand it – the disciplines of theatre and archaeology are no longer discrete: “They coexist within a blurred genre [...] or a science/fiction, a mixture of narration and scientific practices, an integrated approach to recording, writing and illustrating the material past.”

Although deep mapping as essaying also draws on both the social sciences and creative arts, it does so in order to interweave many disparate, tensioned ‘describings’, ‘showings’, and ‘evokings’ of the spaces, materiality and temporalities of a place. The aim is to produce another, richer, more resonant patterning of meaning. The wager involved in such work requires that each particular ‘voice’ retain its own distinct character and inflection so as to maintain a necessary tension between the interwoven parts and the whole, rather than creating a new, hybrid discipline.

I will give you an early example of this weaving process in relation to a second publication, called 8 Lost Songs. I collaborated on this with a musician – Gary Peters – with a view to evoking the relationship between Southdean’s historical past and certain Borders ballads – heard as an oblique articulation of a women’s sub-culture at odds with the violent dominant values of the traditional Borders mentality typified by the masculine figure of the Reiver. I wrote eight brief summaries of carefully researched historical material that Gary then turned into lyrics and set to music. I also wrote a set of detailed ethnographic commentaries on eight fictional – but geographically specifically located – Borders ballads, each kept in a traditional character and based on one of the same eight historical events. The results became a CD and a book with a folder including a map and eight small prints. The work presents itself as a scholarly homage to a lost record by a folk singer called Janet Oliver. However, it simultaneously and deliberately raises doubts about this claim of her having rediscovered eight ‘lost’ traditional Borders ballads.

What’s important here is the juxtaposition – within the matrix of a multi-media narrative – of material, orientations and strategies, so as to solicit both imaginative empathy (which Paul Ricoeur argues is vital to social and political reconciliation) and critical reflection on hierarchies of knowledge and the truth claims they sustain.

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Having suggested some of the methodologies employed in deep mapping, I will now turn to our current *Either Side of Delphy Bridge* project. Encouraging reading, listening and looking *between the lines* from a position of critical solicitude\(^9\) is central to this project. We have developed a variety of text-based and other strategies to encourage this. Our aim is to evoke the lived connectivity\(^10\) of various different constituencies. While we are primarily concerned with the connectivity of the various groupings of older people living in rural north Cornwall, we also wish to evoke the ways in which this is in turn intermeshed with innumerable other connective “meshworks”, to borrow Tim Ingold’s term.\(^11\) This aim requires that we move between and beyond *disciplinary* modes of writing or making so as to try to enter *spaces-between* in which it is possible to enact Geraldine Finn’s insight that “we are always both more and less than the categories that name and divide us”.\(^12\) Consequently we are trying to develop a form of deep mapping that establishes its *wager* through what Finn calls

“[…] *speaking from* the *space-between* representation and reality, language and life, category and experience: the space of the ethical encounter with others as the other and not more of the same – a space and an encounter that puts *me* into question, which challenges and changes me, as well as the other (the otherness of the other) and the socius/the system that contains and sustains us.”\(^13\)

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\(^12\) See Geraldine Finn: Why Althusser Killed His Wife: Essays on Discourse and Violence. New Jersey 1996: [156](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ricoeur/)

\(^13\) Ibid. p. 176.
In the fieldwork undertaken we have employed a conversational approach that aims to combine *speaking with* participants, rather than *speaking of* them,\(^{14}\) with “a curiosity about particularity and a willingness to be decentred in acts of translation”.\(^{15}\) For example, Jane Bailey invented a set of fifty-two cards – a mix of texts, including quotes from participants, and images relating to the project – to facilitate creative conversations. When the cards are laid down, one by one, in relation to each other this placing creates gaps between the cards which then act as an invitation to discuss the relationships between the elements depicted. Each time the cards are ‘played’ a unique pattern is generated, and a distinct conversation develops.

The question here is in how to work through a critical solicitude for the participants in the deep mapping process that creates a shared understanding, that of ‘selves in question’. That is of selves who, if only by moments, live with the realization that they are both more and less than ‘local’, ‘academic’, ‘older person’, ‘outsider’, ‘farmer’s wife’, ‘artist’, ‘former quarryman’, ‘ethnographer’, ‘parish clerk’, ‘student’, ‘social scientist’, ‘postmaster’, ‘supervisor’, ‘tourist’, ‘relative’, ‘researcher’, or whatever. If this leads to a greater capacity for empathetic imagination the deep mapping process will itself modify – hopefully for the better – the connectivity it engages with.

This brings me to my second reason for referring to this process as *essaying* – namely Edward S. Casey’s claim that if “a position is a fixed posit of an established culture, a place, despite its frequently settled appearance it *is an essay in experimental living within a changing culture*”.\(^{16}\)

Given the close and complex relationships between notions of ‘place’ and assumptions about normative behaviour, this definition invites questions about

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\(^{15}\) James Clifford: An Ethnographer in the Field. In: Coles, Alex (ed.): Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn. London 2000, pp. 52-71, see p. 56.

\(^{16}\) Edward S. Casey: Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World. Bloomington 1993, p. 31.
disciplinary and academic posits and reinforces Geraldine Finn’s concern with speaking from – or in this context writing/making from – a space-between. Engaging with place as a locus of connectivity in this way challenges and changes us through our understanding of ‘our’ disciplines as locations that both contain/constrain and sustain us.

[Biggs_5]

This line of thinking about essaying also converges with Ruth Behar’s description of a feminist rethinking of the essay, seen as “an act of personal witness” that is: “at once the inscription of a self and the description of an object” – and as both open-ended and able to desegregate “the boundaries between self and other”. Consequently essaying can be understood as an uncertainly located and contingent qualitative, experimental act, rather than as a given practice already positioned in terms of a history, its status as a genre, and so on.

For example, as ethnographers you are familiar with interview transcripts which we coded both to indicate its relevance to themes under investigation and social sensitivities. Connectivity reveals itself in part through an interviewer’s sensitivity, in the act of transcription, to the structuring tensions between tact and disclosure. ‘Transcription’ here is in no small part a registering of a colour or affect – something to be marked so as to make more explicit complex social dynamics barely implicit in the literal wording of the text.

[Biggs_6] [Biggs_7]

All that I’ve said so far presupposes a deep mapping occupied with, and attempting to give an account of, both a particular, geographically located ‘place’ as a locus for connectivity and, simultaneously, spaces-between that can both mediate and contest our presuppositions. This requires particular attention to a second level of structuring tension between tact and disclosure. Our work here has to treat our categorical knowledge of, and the manifold

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threads of our experience *in* ‘place’ as material for the extended act of interweaving that makes apparent the ongoing, unacknowledged patternings of connectivity – and so opening up other possibilities. This requires us to construct condensed patterns and juxtapositions of the diverse material we gather in ways that put in question the existing presuppositions that underwrite connectivity. We try to do so by making explicit the tensioned space that, as I have already indicated, Geraldine Finn locates between “category and experience, representation and reality, language and life [that] is […] the necessary and indispensable space of judgement: of creativity and value, resistance and change”.\(^\text{18}\)

Again this links deep mapping as *essaying* with the feminist reconfiguring of the essay as a means of challenging ‘high-altitude’ academic thinking that forgets the contingencies of its particular geo-political and historical location. In *telling* and *showing* the specifics of particular places the process of *essaying* follows and extends the trajectory of those feminist academics who, in the 1990s, reoriented the essay form so as to unsettle orthodox academic writing and the authority invested in it.

[Biggs_8]

Finally, in one strand of creative research, titled *All Flesh is Grass*, we aimed to juxtapose the ‘*long dure*’ of habitation in St Breward – signaled in terms of recording all the names appearing in extant public parish documents – with the limited temporality of our own research project as a lived process, and with the daily weather forecast. Referring back to the “names and stones” of the past is meant to document the process through which we come to meet with, and learn the names of, people currently living in the parish in the context of the daily climatic change that colours their lives.\(^\text{19}\) The title, *All Flesh is Grass*, reflects social continuities and anxieties within the parish. Blocks of text, comprising names from wills and related documents in the St


Breward parish records, are then juxtaposed – via a footnote – with Miwon Kwon’s claim that it is “historically inevitable” that “we” will abandon “the nostalgic notion of a site and identity as essentially bound to the physical actualities of a place”. This highlights the fact that those who claim to articulate cultural positions in the name of ‘history’ and ‘theory’ often blithely disregard the basis on which others – for example the inhabitants of St Breward – base their self-identity. Given that identification with the physical actualities of a place sustains the identity and selfhood of the majority of those who produce the world’s food, a certain critical solicitude with regard to issues of connectivity is at issue here.

Our aim as essayists in north Cornwall is to provide forms of “non-dominating, dialogic knowledge” that negotiate, in practice, the late Cliff McLucas’ largely untested claim that deep mapping should be a “politicized, passionate, and partisan” evocation of a site, involving “negotiation and contestation over who and what is represented and how”, and giving rise to “debate about the documentation and portrayal of people and places.” While we may fail to live up to McLucas’ bold claim, we are trying to develop a process that strives to remain “unstable, fragile and temporary… a conversation and not a statement”.

Literature:


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21 Clifford McLucas: There are ten things that I can say about these deep maps. Available at: http://metamedia.stanford.edu/~mshanks/projects/deep-mapping.html [28.03.2010].
22 Ibid.


McLucas, Clifford: There are ten things that I can say about these deep maps. Available at: http://metamedia.stanford.edu/~mshanks/projects/deep-mapping.html [28.03.2010].
