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Reflections on Water: Knowing a River

Where should I begin to describe a place characterized by flux and flows? The Severn Estuary, where Britain's longest river meets the sea, is a big place, so maybe impressive facts are appropriate. "It has the second highest tidal range in the world" (after the Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia, Canada), I could say, but that doesn't convey the salty tang of the mud at low tide carried on the air to the shore or acknowledge the birds, mudworms, and diatoms that depend on the tidal movement for life. "Eels migrate from the Sargasso Sea to the Severn in their millions," I could say, without exaggerating, or expanding on the patterns of consumption that see the elvers caught and shipped to lucrative overseas food markets. "The Severn is a historic trading river," I can state, and recognize that this is not a noble claim, remembering the slave ships that passed through its waters and the money they accrued that helped to build the city of Bristol.

Place, as a concept, is central to the pursuit of environmental studies. It gives shape to our research projects (and corrals our ambitions). It is where habitats grow, power is exerted, boundaries are drawn, behaviours are exhibited, and experience lies. But what is "place"? It has a close relationship, and is sometimes used interchangeably, with "space," but space is abstract and potentially limitless. Place has confines. The Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of place start small, and very human (an open space in a town, a public square, a marketplace), eventually expanding in its fifth definition to define place as a particular part or region of space, a physical locality, a locale—a definition which sits more comfortably with those of us interested in environments which can, but do not always, include humans, and are certainly not always defined by their marketplaces and town squares.

Place is something real that can be experienced in person and pinned on a map, that we use to ground our more theoretical discussions. But it is also a way of thinking about and being in the world. We become attached to places; we develop a sense of place; we can think about "place" without reference to a specific site: it has a conceptual life that has intrigued key thinkers in our field of environmental humanities (and beyond).

Heidegger's (and Ingold's) discussions of "dwelling" and Tuan's exploration of *topophilia*, "the love of landscape," have helped me think more deeply about the complex connections between our inner and outer worlds, and being and thinking in the world.[1] But the fluid nature of rivers (as opposed to the fixedness of landscapes) encouraged me to look afresh at philosophies of place, and particularly those that consider the relational, and changing, nature of people and/in place.

Henri Lefebvre proposed distinctions between types of space that speak to the differences in knowing a river that I have observed over two years of researching the Severn.[2] He distinguishes between "perceived space" (that of everyday social life), "conceived space" (that is theorized by planners, cartographers, and the law, for example), and "lived space" (as it exists imaginatively, and is sustained through artistic practices). Lefebvre's "triple dialectic" allows scholars to understand places as multidimensional sites of processes of social construction, symbolic representation, and spatial practices. This multidimensionality can usefully complicate place, enabling us to identify and recognize differences in place-knowledge. Such differences have the capacity to cause tensions or even conflict among communities or opposing interest groups.

A river as "conceived space" is a regulated place where water companies, regional authorities, and environmental agencies co-manage the territorialized environment. This river can be owned, mapped, bought, and sold. The privatization of place, as Marx, Harvey, Armiero, and others have shown, enables it to be subsumed within capitalist structures in which natural resources are commodified, extracted, and exploited.[3] It also allows rivers to be regulated, maintained, and managed.

1 Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971; reissued 2001); Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974).

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, originally published in French, Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974); Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London: Sage, 2004).

3 Karl Marx, "Debates on the Law on the Theft of Wood," *Rheinische Zeitung*, 25 October–3 November 1842, available via the Marxists Internet Archive, http://marxists.anu.edu.au; David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Marco Armiero, "Seeing Like a Protestor: Nature, Power, and Environmental Struggles," *Left History* 13, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2008): 59–76; Stefania Barca, *Enclosing Water: Nature and Political Economy in a Mediterranean Valley, 1716–1916* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2010).

Getting to know the river has involved learning about its regulation, its cartographic representation, its legal geography, and its history of use and ownership. Documents, rules, and practices constitute the river.

Such a formulation of place may dominate the ways in which we are able to engage with it—determining access, regulating use, establishing codes of conduct—but it does not reflect the variety of knowledge of rivers, those forms of knowledge that reject, challenge, or subvert the "conceived" knowledge of place, or those that value more the "perceived" or "lived" qualities of place. Through my research, I have encountered groups who do not fit within—or have actively been excluded from—"official" definitions of place. These include villagers and farming communities evicted from their homes by the British military as it expanded its training estate during the Second World War.[4]

On rivers, too, there are groups which have been and are excluded. Studying the ongoing conflict between recreational groups—anglers and canoeists—over rights of use of rivers has deepened my understandings of place, knowledge, and power. Though the flow of water invites the contemplation of connectedness and movement, rivers in Britain (as elsewhere) are riven with invisible lines denoting what may and may not be done, and where. Anglers have worked within this system of ownership, while (some) canoeists and swimmers are challenging it.

This is not a life- or health-defining struggle. Yet neither is it without meaning. Recreational engagement with place creates highly nuanced environmental knowledge, and recreational users have been among those who have worked hardest to protect rivers from environmentally damaging pollution, dams, and hydropower installations. Anglers in the UK are proud of their history of river stewardship, while on the Severn, a broad coalition of environmental, community, and recreational interests have opposed plans to barrage the estuary for tidal energy. I agree with Richard White when he claims that environmentalists "are most aware of nature when we backpack, climb, and ski. Then we are acutely aware of our bodies … we know and care about weather. We are acutely conscious of our surroundings." I challenge his assertion that such embodied, experiential knowledge of place is inferior to other ways of knowing and being in place—through work, for example. White suggests that "work entails an embodiment, an interaction

4 Marianna Dudley, *An Environmental History of the UK Defence Estate, 1945–Present* (London: Continuum, 2012).

with the world, that is far more intense than play. We work to live. We cannot stop. But play … does not so fully submerge us in the world. … A game unfinished ultimately means nothing."[5]

Working on the river has changed considerably in the twentieth, and into the twenty-first, century. Rather than barges plying goods on the tides between Bristol and Gloucester, or large ships piloting in to Bristol city centre harbour after long voyages, the majority of trade entering the estuary is unloaded at Avonmouth and Royal Portbury docks; fruit and vegetables are unpacked in windowless warehouses, and cars unloaded and parked in neat rows. The acquisition of knowledge of place through labour continues—but the river flows past, tangential to the work itself. More connected with the river these days are the Environment Agency, which monitors water quality and manages water use, and nature conservation bodies such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The Severn Estuary (and the rivers that feed into it) is an internationally recognized habitat of significance for wading birds and wildfowl, wintering migratory birds, and large numbers of fish, some of them migratory, too. While ships refuel at the docks, the RSPB reminds us that the estuary is a "vital service station where birds can rest and refuel" on their long journeys from Siberia to North Africa.[6]

Up and down the river, fishermen use the tides and weather conditions to catch fish by rod. On the Severn there is also a long history of catching fish with nets and baskets. As an industry it has all but disappeared, but some people still hold rights to fish in this way, with woven *putts* and *putchers*: objects shaped by human knowledge of river, tide, and fish. The incoming tide flows through the basket, taking fish (mainly salmon) into the tapered end of the funnel, from which they cannot escape. Surfers—yes, the Severn has a hardy band of river-surfers—pore over tide timetables and congregate on certain days when the tides run high and bring a surge that forms a peeling river wave, the Severn Bore, that they ride upriver for miles (the world record for longest continuous wave ridden is held by Gloucester man Steve King who surfed the Severn Bore for 7.6 miles, or 12.2 kilometres, upriver in 2006).[7] These groups know the river, its flows and peccadillos, its animal presences and the ways in which other forces—a southwesterly wind, say—affect the water

5 Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for A Living?: Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1995), 174.

6 RSPB website, "Campaigning for Nature Casework: The Severn Estuary," accessed 13 July 2015, http://www.rspb.org.uk/whatwedo/campaigningfornature/casework/details.aspx?id=tcm:9-228221.

7 King has surfed further, on the Severn and on the Amazonian river wave (the *pororoca*), but this is his Guinness World Record-recognized distance.

Figure 1:
A salmon fisherman and his dog, by an "engine" of putts on the River Severn (date & photographer unknown, circa 1900; source: The Mary Bruton Collection, Thornbury and District Museum).

and the wider river environment. They have also forged strong relationships with each other, with identities crafted through the repeated practice of a skill and through being in place. Contra White, I argue that these activities are no less "submerged" in the world for the fact of being play, not work. A game can mean many things.

Getting to know the river has involved talking to these, and other, groups and individuals, observing and interacting with their activities, acknowledging their perspectives. Recreational knowledge, embodied practices, and water-based skills constitute the river too.

I have been acquiring knowledge of the Severn by seeking out the records and testimonies of people who have had relationships with the river, calling on a broad range of sources, including oral histories, newspaper archives, film and photography, and the documentary recordings of the river as "conceived place": plans, maps, and legal records. I have felt the historian's responsibility of giving voice to historical actors underrepresented in the historiography, and of noting engagements with place that have been largely forgotten or overlooked by others. My knowledge of other people's knowledge of the river has grown.

But the connecting sinew between knowledge and place is experience (as suggested by Tuan).[8] Through walks, river-bank litter analysis, and outdoor workshops my own experiences of the river have influenced my personal sense of place, and connected me to others for whom the river is a "lived" place, such as ceramic artist Tana West.

In 2009, West walked the length of the Severn from its source in the Welsh mountains to its estuary (a distance of 220 miles, or 354 kilometres). Along the way, she extracted mud from the river bed. She carried the sediments with her, and back in the studio incorporated them into ceramic objects that reference historical manufacturing processes that have existed by and near the river. The tiles she made for *In the Vernacular* are coloured only by the presence of metallic dusts held in the soil: remnants of past industry, invisible to the naked eye, but released through the creative process and the firing of the clay. I find her work profound: it captures place, beautifully.

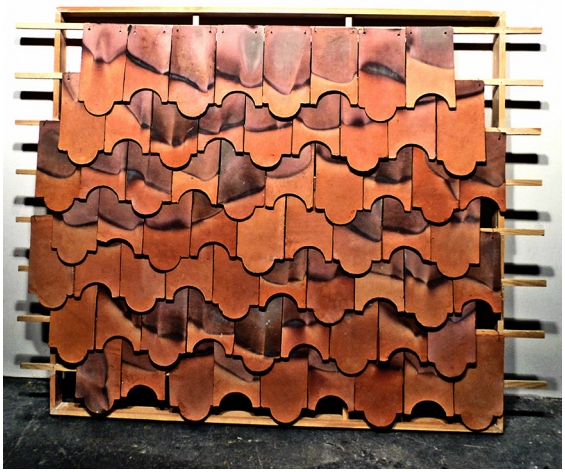

Figure 2: ©Tana West, *In The Vernacular* (2009), installation of tiles made with River Severn mud. The coloration occurs from minerals and metals found in the sediment, and cannot be predicted before the firing takes place.

West's artistic practice feeds a knowledge of place that is released through a creative process. It resides in a conversation between imagination and experience, and expresses the river representationally. The environmental historian's task is also to get to know the river better and to represent it well. The written word will always be our chief currency and conduit of knowledge, but it is not our only way of expressing and representing place. There is much to be learnt from responses to and iterations of place which reside beyond the spheres in which we feel comfortable and skillful.

8 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

Figure 3:
©Tana West, *Subject to Change: River Severn* (2009), documentation. The research process is as important to West as the end product, and she documents it carefully. This shows a section of her Severn walk route, found objects (natural and man-made), and an image of her extracting mud from the riverbed.

With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, I held a one-day workshop with West at Severn Beach that brought a diverse group of people together to establish a temporary ceramics manufacturing base.[9] Amateur potters, members of a local community group, and academics were taught how to form and shape the clay, which had been extracted from the estuary mud flats the day before. We pressed it into moulds, collectively dredged it with shaped frames to create a water "pipe," and freestyled on our own using the materials around us. Sheltered in the lee of the seawall, we worked the clay as the tide receded in front of us, exposing more of the raw material. From the base, we could see the Severn Bridge that connects England and Wales, and the processing plants of Avonmouth. We talked about the river while we worked and our conversation drew in passers-by. The experience placed the river in the context of the lives of people who live by it. The energetic wind whipped around us the whole time, yet by the end we had crafted a range of objects from the mud of the river, and appreciated them, "stilled at the edge of the Severn's turbulence / and the tangled waters of two river currents."[10]

9 Mireia Bes and Ana Miguel, "Into the Mud," The Power and the Water project website, 15 July 2015, http://powerwaterproject.net/?p=618.
10 Gillian Clarke, "White," *A Recipe for Water* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009).

Getting to know the river has been about looking beyond what we already know about it and seeking knowledge in places that are less familiar. Knowing the river is also about using that knowledge creatively to express the river in imaginative ways, to sustain its future as a "lived" place.

Place grounds us. But place itself is not grounded. Notions of place shift with time, cultural and environmental change, and political climates. Notions of place both bind us (as groups) and separate us (through our individual experiences). Being alert to many different ways of knowing place has deepened my appreciation of the river's role in shaping local history, identity, and environment. It has also challenged narratives of the decline and death of industry and commerce, as I observe other uses—environmental, recreational, artistic—that have grown or that still thrive. It has become important to me to include these practices, through which knowledge and place are sustained and developed, in the narratives I produce. Getting to know a watery place has unsettled the solid habits of research and opened up new possibilities for acquiring, interpreting, and expressing knowledge.

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