

Landed Histories and the Geoweb: Virtual Communities in Place, in the Northern Rivers of NSW, Australia

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the development of an innovative methodology for tracing political economy; “landed histories” reflect the colonial land types and the relationships through which people and ecologies do the work of growing food on particular farmscapes now and in the past. We describe the role of the geoweb in facilitating local conversations between researchers, research participants and others as a participatory and political tool for farmers and their communities.

Background and Relevance

In *Europe and the People without History* Eric Wolf (1982) argued that trade in coffee, cocoa, and tea (as well as other alkaloids) drove the wave of transnational transformation that began in the late 15th Century; the contemporary globe now houses a system involving massive movements of foods of all sorts, exerting constant transformative pressures on peoples and ecologies. Not surprisingly then, food is the subject of constant debate and controversy, and serious political, social, economic, ethical and environmental issues associated with food regularly cause concern. While renewed interest in the role of consumption has developed of late, focus on food producers has lagged somewhat. At the heart of the project described here is an attempt to bring to light histories of land and the experience of farmers, their agency in the food system and the constraints and potential available within that.

Methods and Data

The term “Landed Histories” signals our development of a new methodological stance in reference to local history. Rural landscapes like the Northern Rivers integrate historical, ethnographic, architectural and agricultural information about food and the cultural dynamics and politics of the choices we make over time. Employing techniques arising from history, oral history and anthropology within a broader interdisciplinary framework, we work with particular parcels of land defined simply by land selection procedures and cadastral surveys. As a result, our histories are bounded and constrained by the lines created in the colonization and fragmentation of Australia into the fee simple parcels of land. Though not universal or entirely evenly felt throughout Australia, the imposition of English land and property law in the Northern Rivers created a political and economic geography that created a landscape of small-holder family farms, and it was this landscape through which settlers made their lives. These

were lives that were very much affected by global political and economic forces, and certainly most immediately by the ecological contexts in which people found themselves, but people could and did exercise agency through their relationships with their lands, and with each other.

The methodological consequences of the emplacement of our histories are quite intended ones, and need some initial unpacking. In the context of post-contact colonial Australia, “landed” histories are new ones, distinct if intertwined with the histories of the Aboriginal peoples of the continent. That is, the histories we evoke in this project are those of settler Australia – those of the people who landed in a new and different place, and engaged in a disruption of the existing *longue durée*, frequently violently, profoundly transforming older orders of being on the land. Perhaps ironically however, our methodology owes a debt of insight to contemporary reflections on Indigenous methodologies. Encompassed within the notion of land within Indigenous methodologies is a bundle of concerns related to the ongoing interrelationships between human and non-human entities within a landscape, as a fundamental part if you will, of the land. The ontological basis of a flexible approach to maintaining health of such relationships, and indeed of defining the pertinent relationships for long term sustainability as those which interact to create robust and resilient conditions for humans and non-humans alike, is this thoroughly encompassing and holistic notion of land. That this might be tautological is not a problem, it is the point; the methodology focusses on land as an inclusive set of relations, and in any one instance, the geological and epistemological boundaries of “land” must be open and expansive - capable of encompassing actors and their effects no matter how geologically distant.

It is important that agency be acknowledged in practice, and the practice of matching story to a name, the person to their insights, and the research results to the communities from which they are derived is part of a new ethics in community based research. The potential in this space has been greatly enhanced by the new digital tools and web-based technologies, which not only allow for new forms of knowledge translation, but also new forms of power sharing in the representations of communities thus developed. For that reason, the development of a geoweb tool is an integral part of this project - both an element of the research practice, and a strategy designed to facilitate ongoing free, open, and interactive access to the collected stories, for community members and participants. Landedhistories.org is designed to map food production in the Northern Rivers from multiple perspectives, by providing multiple entry points to the research, links to additional information, and opportunities for interaction and social sharing. The website is curated from materials related to the history and present of a selection of food producing properties in the region. This includes interviews (both audio and transcribed) with past and present farmers and related industry experts, historical and contemporary maps of the properties and surrounding areas, photographs, and archival material related to colonial land selection and cultivation.

Results

The site homepage is a ‘thick’ map, which starts with the location of a selection of farms within the Northern Rivers. From here, viewers can click directly into texts relating to each farm. The region can be viewed as a whole, zooming in and out of map detail, viewing layers of landmarks,

satellite vision of the land, or navigating to nearby sites. The farms displayed on this homepage can also be filtered, isolating particular localities, families, or farming methods. This location of farms through a customisable map provides opportunities for differential geographies to be articulated and experienced by visitors, and the map is quite intentionally designed with multiple different ways of entering and understanding the landscape in mind. Menus at the top of each page provide alternative entry points. In particular, there is a menu to navigate to directly to the stories of each farm as a complete individual ‘case studies’ of farming in the region. The case studies trace the history of each farm, providing a more linear narrative which, in some cases, is also tightly related to the history of one family. The same materials discussed in the previous paragraph are used here. These stories can be extended outwards beyond landedhistories.org through links to external information and explanations of key practices, administrative structures and historical events (including that found on participants’ own websites).

Pages are also tagged (and a tag ‘cloud’ and index of these provided). This allows visitors to navigate directly to topics of interest. For example, visitors may click on ‘organic produce’ to display all material from any of the farms related to this topic. In this way, the links between particular farms, and the stories of those who have lived and worked there, are made explicit. Links between farms according to geography, farming methods, industry, or community organisations, among many possibilities, give insight into the complex interplay between dimensions of socio-cultural, political economic and geographic contexts, and family history and personal narrative.

Conclusions

By providing multiple entry-points to the stories, and multiple ways of navigating through, between and beyond them, we aim to disrupt the linear narrative of research ‘case studies’. Instead, the site is an interactive and provides an avenue for ongoing reflection on local food knowledges and practices in the Northern Rivers. There is an overlap here between user-generated content (as in place stories, for example <http://www.landcare.placestories.com/>) and academic analysis. The site invites new contributions through the comments fields, ‘contact us’ forms (and other contact information provided) and social media ‘share’ buttons. Farmers are involved in curating their own narratives, through a research protocol based on respectful and collaborative representation and ongoing consent, rather than anonymity. The digital material related to each farm is initially password protected, and those who have been interviewed for the project are invited to log in with their unique password and view and approve or edit their stories before consenting to make them public. However, while digital projects make possible these new kinds of engagement and collaboration, we do not wish to over-state their capacity to overcome the typical challenges of participatory research. Participant involvement in this process has been as variable as the stories themselves. Researchers visit with those who may require assistance or discussion to participate in this process, but equally some farmers are unavailable and have consented to have their stories told without involving themselves in this way.

In addition, (although not necessarily evident to visitors) the content management system (CMS) has also been considered in terms of the micro-politics of research relationships. By developing the site in Wordpress, the most popular blogging and content management system (CMS) used on the web (and already used by some participants, not to mention free and open source) we shift the site development from university ‘studying’ the community, to university as part of the community, meeting people ‘where they are’ for conversation, representation and interpretation.

References

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