

FOCUS:

EMPLACING THE “LOCAL”: IDENTITY FORMATION & SENSE OF PLACE IN BETWEEN THE RIVERS.

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For the past several months I have been visiting the grounds of what was formerly known as the Land Between the Rivers, walking amongst its forested glades, serpentine roads, and tiny lakes tucked in the shady nooks scattered through the hilly landscape. I have been visiting these remote parts of the country trying to understand what it meant and still means to the long displaced residents of Between the Rivers (hereafter BTR). During one of these sojourns on a lazy summer afternoon, hot and out of breath from my long trek, I asked my community companion at the end of a long discussion on place, culture, and identity, how he would describe what BTR means to him and others living in the area. Speaking in the characteristic style I have come to associate with the people of these parts, he answered with a counter-question, “How do you express what a place means when its sounds, smell, look, and feel are so deeply imprinted in your mind and soul that it becomes part of you? When you are away from it, you ache to return. Whatever its shortcoming, this place is home and this is where we belong.”

My community companion’s response is central to my research in Between the Rivers. Hidden beneath the numerous stories of displacement and betrayal is a palpable concern for place and cultural heritage. Officially known as Land Between the Lakes (LBL), locals still refer to it as Between the Rivers in an act of resistance to the physical and symbolic displacement in the hands of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).



For the community of BTR their place was more than a piece of land. Instead, it was the interpretive frame through which they defined and evaluated their own lives, and the lives of those in their communities. Sociologists have defined sense of place as not only the ability to locate things on a cognitive map, but also the attribution of meaning to a built form (Rotenberg & McDonogh 1993). Places are social constructions, created from ascribed qualities to the existing social and material environments. Places are also constructed as people develop a shared sense of history from collectively held stories. Thus, meanings that we assign to places remain embedded in social places, are historically contingent and share common cultural attributes. This is especially the case for the community of Between the Rivers.

During one of our conversations, a community resident pointed out that identity in BTR, “... was unspoken, but clearly understood, that the commonly heard phrase ‘Between the Rivers’ was inclusive, encompassing not merely our family and farm but the neighbors and their places. Our place was an integral part of Between the Rivers. The people of Between the Rivers had managed to live in relative independence of outside influence for the entire history of this nation. Between the Rivers was our home where outsiders might visit, but where we belonged” (Interview 1).

This sense of place and cultural identity was shattered for the first time almost half a century ago when the

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community was displaced in the wake of a dam building initiative in the name of national development. The story of the displacement of the community in the aftermath of construction of the dam and the subsequent struggle to retain access to their culture, heritage and place is the essence of my study. I came to BTR hoping to understand what place meant and still means to a community of people and how it is constructed in the discourses of the state and environmental agencies.

The sense of belonging that emerged in BTR was challenged with the introduction of the dam building projects on the two rivers in the 1960s. Building of the dams and the creation of the national recreation area in the community land contributed not only to physical displacement of these well-knit communities, but also to a loss of their heritage, history and identity. Referring to this symbolic loss of identity and the willful sidelining of the local cultures, a former resident pointed out,

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“Our heritage is being misrepresented in all the ‘official’ documents. In a generation we will officially have never existed and there will have never been any concerns about the management of LBL. When TVA sent federal marshals and bulldozers, people had to respond. With the bureaucratic dismissal combined with the frustrating politeness, many of our people have just thrown up their hands and all but given up. The opposition we are facing is so amorphous, there is very little to fight against” (Email communication).

For the former residents of Between the Rivers, the forced displacement over a period of three decades remains an example of government injustice and insensitivity to the concerns for identity and heritage. With the authorization for dam building in the BTR land, TVA started the construction of the Kentucky dam in 1938. Using eminent domain, TVA removed a number of families from the region or bought their most productive farm land. The community could never understand why TVA needed to flood their lands in the name of flood control. As one resident aptly pointed out,

“one thing which we always felt was ironic was that they said that this had to be done in the name of flood control but the permanent level of that lake is higher than the worst of the floods that we have ever got. We never understood how the management can implement flood control by permanently flooding the best farm grounds” (Interview 2).

The displacement thus remains more than physical separation from their land. For the folks of Between the Rivers, the removal from between the rivers signaled the loss of their cultural heritage and identity. Place attachments, sociologists argue, result from accumulated biographical experiences: places are associated with the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, exhilarating events that happened to us in place. The longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel, and the greater their attachment to it (Elder et al. 1996, Paige 1996, Selznick 1996). Recent community struggles in BTR for reclamation of a sense of place,

heritage, and cultural identity is a response to this history of displacement.

The story of Between the Rivers is thus a story of place. It is a story of a community who had lived in the region for two hundred years. Located in the borders of western Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee, Between the Rivers is just what its name suggests – a sizable piece of forested land located in between two rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee. Prolonged geographical isolation contributed to the development of a unique culture in the region and created a sense of belonging for the community. The community of Between the Rivers was thus emplaced – with a well-defined sense of identity, culture, heritage, and belonging, which changed with the decision to dam the two rivers and convert the land in between into a preserved forest resource. Sociologically speaking, place attachments facilitate a sense of security and wellbeing, define group boundaries, and stabilize memories over time (Halbachs 1992). With the displacement of the community in the hands of TVA, the people of BTR lost this sense of security, belonging, and well-being.

For the former residents, the effect of this displace-

ment and recent attempts to commercialize the preserved land has been primarily two-pronged. On the one hand, the community residents lost all authority on their forested land that had once been their home, experiencing a shared sense of loss of identity in the process. On the other hand, recent attempts to commercialize the protected land (by formulating plans to introduce recreational activities, and attempts to wrest control over remaining cultural resources) have contributed to a further sense of distrust and loss of control over the community's own history. Yet, in their attempts to resist, the community members were unable to find support from either state (government agencies) or non-state (environmental groups) actors.

Part of the reason for such contradictory identification rests in a lack of a cultural understanding of place and heritage questions in debates on environmental conservation. The state agencies involved in *Between the Rivers* had a very different perception of the issue. TVA and later the Forest Service viewed place in *Between the Rivers* through the lens of scientized knowledge of land management and forest preservation, effectively sidelining the cultural and symbolic dimensions of place attachment. Documentary evidence with the administration presents the locals as “backwards” and refers to the community as a “few individuals standing in the way of progress” thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes. Discourses on conservation within the mainstream environmental organizations also follow a “globalized” narrative. Driven by their organizational logic, the environmental groups in BTR constructed the place as a neutral background against which environmental struggles occur in response to the increasingly global treadmill logic (MacNaughten & Urry, 1998). The lack of support from either state agencies or mainstream environmental organizations thus can be attributed to a lack of adequate appreciation of local narratives in shaping human environmental relations.

While concerns of the residents of BTR for their place and cultural identity inform my research, I do not wish to present BTR as the perfect utopia. In fact, history of BTR is interspersed with stories of conflicts and contestations. The community, in other words, is



similar to any other communities - fragmented, fraught with tensions and simmering conflicts – yet, fighting for their rights to their own culture and heritage. Instead, my research addresses a broader question, one that impacts academic, policy, and movement discourse. By highlighting the existing disconnect between cultural preservation and environmental conservation in the policies of state and environmental agencies, my research suggests that emplacing sociology and enculturating environments needs to be seen as primary concerns for discourses on environment.

Indeed, attempts to emplace environments are already in place in BTR – in the form of place-based contestations involving local communities, private and local business initiatives, and local and regional environmental groups. Their inroads into globalized environmental discourses however will benefit further from a reformulation of the mainstream environmental framework.

As I wrapped up my research and said goodbye, I was reminded of a simple story of a little boy's understanding of place, community, and displacement as seen by people both inside and outside BTR. Looking back as a grown man he reminisced about his perception of an incident long ago,

“The Delta Queen, a paddle wheeled excursion boat up from New Orleans, would sometimes pull into the bay where Nickell Branch used to feed into the Cumberland River. The calliope music could be heard throughout the hills and hollows with the result that families would drop their chores, pile into automobiles, or head down through the woods on foot to the bay where the boat would be anchored. Before long a crowd would gather to take in the spectacle of the paddle wheeler, the lively music and the deck lined with wealthy tourists. People on the shore would take advantage of the impromptu gathering to visit, laugh and dance to the music. I don't know exactly when it dawned on me, but it finally did. The tourists on the big boat were lined up along the rail, taking pictures of us. The boat had not pulled into the bay for our amusement; the calliope had summoned us out of the forest for the amusement of the tourists. I don't believe I have danced since” (Nickell & King 2004).

An enplaced and encultured environmental discourse might induce him to dance again.

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