Experiencing nostalgia for ‘lost’ landscapes
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Abstract:
Interest in the phenomenon of nostalgia has increased across a range of disciplines in recent years, Geography included. In a period of political and social upheaval, the growth of a collective nostalgic yearning for a simpler time has been used to explain events across the political spectrum.

My research explores the ways in which landscapes are valued as heritage by communities and across generations. Taking the Derwent Valley, North East England as a case study and working in collaboration with the Land of Oak & Iron Landscape Partnership, the research explores the ways in which people understand and engage with their local landscapes and how this is mediated by their family relationships and collective memories, focusing on the ways in which memories of the industrial landscape are employed and deployed, transformed and translated, within and between local communities. The project particularly considers the ways in which nostalgia can play an active role in the construction of memory and heritage and questions the assumption that nostalgia invariably serves a conservative or backward looking impulse.

This paper will utilise some of the initial encounters experienced in undertaking fieldwork within the Land of Oak & Iron to consider what the feelings of nostalgia expressed within these situations can reveal about how individuals and groups negotiate the past as part of constructing a shared heritage and how this may influence their vision of the landscapes of the future.

Introduction
This paper aims to outline some key features of the nature of nostalgia as a means to gaining a greater understanding of how communities and individuals understand and interact with the heritage of their local landscapes. Specifically, it will suggest that nostalgia is part of a critical and ongoing process in which people, both individually and as part of communities, are evaluating, remembering and understanding their pasts. Whilst this can result in reactionary or backward looking responses to the present, it can also constitute a reflective and meaningful engagement with the past which can help to formulate and articulate a value system for the present and a progressive vision of the future.

The research project and the Land of Oak & Iron
In the context of the Derwent Valley in North East England, the research explores landscape and intergenerational memory and is undertaken in collaboration with the Land of Oak & Iron, a landscape scale heritage project led by environmental charity Groundwork North East and Cumbria. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) as part of their Landscape Partnership programme, which has recently closed to new applications having been HLF’s main funding programme for landscape heritage since it began in 2004 (Clarke, Mount & Anteric, 2011: 6). It specifically aimed to fund large, landscape scale projects, defining a landscape as “an area of land that has a distinctive landscape character, recognised and valued by local people.” Guidance specified that applicants should “be able to identify what makes the landscape unique and recognisable, what gives it its sense of place... Schemes should take an integrated approach that considers the needs of the built and natural heritage, management practices and the range of cultural heritage associated with the area” (HLF, 2017: 5).
Fig. 1 shows the Land of Oak & Iron project boundary which covers an area of 177km² and is “based on river catchments for the River Derwent and River Tyne...The landscape character changes as you travel down the Derwent Valley; from moorlands on the edge of the north Pennines to the west, to the Tyne and Wear lowland to the east. It is formed by a series of broad hills, separated by steep sided river valleys, scattered with woodlands, farm land, recreational and wetland areas near to where the River Derwent meets the River Tyne” (Land of Oak & Iron, undated: 15).

This is a part of the country that was heavily industrialised up to the end of the twentieth century with metal works and coal mining dominating the economy and cultural life of the area. 14 projects will be undertaken under the Land of Oak & Iron banner and they will include the restoration of industrial heritage sites like Derwentcote Steel Furnace, shown in Fig 2. There is also a strong focus on the natural heritage of the river and woodlands, with work including woodland restoration, the construction of fish passes and path improvements. The overall aim of the Land of Oak & Iron is to utilise the industrial and landscape heritage of the area in order to “deliver a legacy of job creation, tourism, regeneration and economic benefits” (Land of Oak & Iron, undated: 17).
Nostalgia and ‘heritage from below’
Nostalgia is a concept that has come to the fore in recent years and is often cited as one of the driving forces in populist, right wing or conservative politics - for example it has been described as playing an important role in the Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump’s election in the U.S. The research project explores the role nostalgic feeling plays in people’s perceptions of the past, how it shapes their visions of the future and what impact that might have on heritage projects - and therefore on the way that we use, manage and imagine landscapes - and indeed how projects might tap into or play with those kinds of feelings to increase engagement and impact with audiences.

In terms of landscape heritage the study will interrogate the ways in which these kind of negotiating processes take place in relation to the Land of Oak & Iron and what the interactions are between the ‘official’ heritage project (i.e. the Land of Oak & Iron) and every day heritage. Key to understanding this is drawing a distinction between the ways in which people interact with the ‘heritage’ landscape and how they interact with the ‘local’ landscape. This means considering landscape in the broadest sense, whilst in the context of the Land of Oak & Iron Landscape Partnership project, landscape means something quite specific, the research will consider perceptions of landscape that go beyond the formally defined and designated natural or urban landscapes to embrace a ‘sense of place’ more generally.
Drawing on Iain Robertson’s concept of ‘heritage from below’ (Robertson, 2012) the project will tease out the complexities of heritage work within communities and families. Robertson’s definition of heritage from below explicitly recognises some of the tensions which can arise between grassroots heritage work, or even unconscious/semi-conscious heritage work; and large scale projects. Robertson states that “the idea of heritage from below rests on...the realisation that, whilst the economic realm cannot be wholly separated from heritage, there exist uses of the past in the present that are only minimally related to the economic and that such uses can function as cultural resources for counter hegemonic expressions” (Robertson, 2012: 1). He lays out an understanding of heritage that runs counter to (or perhaps alongside) projects focusing on tourism and economic benefits to encompass “people, collectivity and individuals, and their sense of inheritance from the past and the uses to which this sense of inheritance is put...[and]...the possibilities that result from that deployment of the past” (Robertson, 2012: 1).

‘Heritage from below’ is fundamentally about how people use the landscape in the present and the ways in which this is influenced by past practices integrated into everyday life. It represents “a claim to a way of life based on past practices that embody a nexus of interconnections between identity, collective memory and sense of place made meaningful by landscape. This sense of place identity does and did come from access to land and from a particular view of landscape, but, crucially, it is a landscape of activity...[it]...is a current way of life made more meaningful by a sense of inheritance from the past...underscored by embodied practice” (Robertson, 2012: 2). This is a form of heritage which is not always captured by large scale heritage projects in that by their very nature they are ‘about’ heritage and create ‘the past’ as another space.

Heritage from below could be described as an understanding of heritage which works in opposition to what Laura Jane Smith calls the ‘Authorized Heritage Discourse’ (AHD) (Smith, 2006). Smith presents the AHD as the “authorized or dominant discourse” (ibid.: 43) in heritage, both in terms of practice and theory. Some characteristics of the AHD are that it tends to reflect “the grand narratives of nation and aesthetics...Bolstering and privileging expert and professional judgements and stewardship over ‘the past’...[it has] tended to stress overarching themes and skated over more nuanced aspects of the discourse” (ibid.: 42). In Uses of Heritage Smith critiques the AHD which is characterised as a discourse created and perpetuated by institutions, governments etc., rather than the ‘bottom up’ forms of heritage with which this study is concerned. However, whilst Smith’s critique of the AHD is to some extent outside of the scope of this project, the alternate understandings and processes which she puts forward in opposition to the AHD are useful in further exploring the characteristics of heritage from below. Smith seeks to explore active ‘heritage work’ in contrast with a passive heritage ‘gaze’, which is described as a feature of how people engage with the AHD. Smith outlines the key principles of heritage as a cultural process with the aim of exploring “new ways of understanding the nature of ‘heritage’ and the ‘work’ that this concept does” (ibid.: 44).

Smith is explicit in stating that her understanding of heritage as a cultural process “commences from the premise that ‘heritage’ is not a ‘thing’, it is not a ‘site’, building or other material object. While these things are often important, they are not in themselves heritage. Rather, heritage is what goes on at these sites, and while this does not mean that a sense of physical place is not important for these activities or plays some role in them, the physical place or ‘site’ is not the full story of what heritage may be. Heritage, I want to suggest, is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process” (Smith, 2006: 44). She goes on to describe an experience with Waanyi women in Boodjamulla National Park in Queensland, describing how what was conceived as an archaeology project became also about oral history, and the women would talk whilst walking the places that are meaningful to them. The experience demonstrated that “whilst the sites were intrinsically important to the women, it was the use of these sites that made them heritage, not the mere fact of their existence” (ibid.: 46). This was an important part of not just remembering the past but also shaping a
future; through the process of fishing “new memories were being created…whilst also negotiating new meanings about what it meant to ‘be’ at Boodjamulla” (ibid.: 47). Thus, “heritage was not static or ‘frozen in time’, as the conservation ethic tends to demand, but rather was a process that while it passed on established values and meanings was also creating new meanings and values” (ibid.: 48).

Case study: Chopwell

The village of Chopwell is the first of three case study areas chosen for fieldwork and the research will explore some of these ideas mostly through interviewing, which is the main method of data collection. Chopwell is a former mining village in the middle of the Land of Oak & Iron area. It is interesting because it has this twentieth century heritage of coal mining but it also has a much longer history as the site of Chopwell Wood, meaning it has strong links to both the industrial and natural heritage of the area. In terms of Chopwell being the site of ‘lost’ landscapes, this is a village that only exists because of the colliery it was built to serve, which itself has now completely disappeared. The layout of the village is basically the same as it was when it was built and the geography actually reflects the class structures of the people who live there, with different zones for different types of workers, and this spatial segregation of different ‘types’ of resident continues today. Yet in many ways the village looks very different to how it did when the mine was working and even its more urban features - particularly its main street - can be said to be ‘lost’ landscapes in a sense. Many people talk about the number of shops, pubs and clubs there once were in the village; it was completely self-sufficient in fact, and this has now completely changed.

Defining nostalgia

The following excerpt from a local history book produced in the 1990s by Chopwell residents will be used to consider the nature of nostalgia and some of its characteristics, demonstrating some of the feelings and ideas that will be explored through the fieldwork:

“My early knowledge of woodland was formed by the Milkwell Burn Wood, commonly known as the Burn Wood, since I lived down Low Chopwell, in the 1940s. Although only two fields away from the house the journey was sometimes a nightmare due to Farmer Storey’s cows! To a small five-year old, cows were sly, horned monsters who, once they sensed your presence, always made a bee-line to block the way to the exit stile. The Burn Wood had not been replanted with conifers and was a wonderful mixture of trees and open grassy glades – ideal for picnics. Walking through a grove of young birch where the small leaves filtered out the heat of high summer was a refreshing experience. Clumps of primrose, carpets of bluebells, bushes of blackberries and hazelnuts in season. If it hadn’t been for the occasional stray cow pat to attract the unwary sandaled-foot, it was literally heaven – straight from the pages of childhood fiction. In 1946 we moved across to the colliery streets and I was introduced to the main wood. This was a different environment to the Burn Wood, yes there were trees, flowers, birds and animals but it was so different. I became homesick for the old woods (Alan Wright)” (Horden & Wright, 1995: 7).

The memory articulated here is explicitly about formative experience, about harking back to first knowledge - this strong image of this place that was literally heaven, surely comes at least in part from the fact that it was a first impression, a place that was unrivalled because of a lack of knowledge of other places like it. No place will ever be as ‘good’ as this again. This does not relate simply to place, it is also about the passage of time; a feeling that places cannot live up to what they once were: this one place becomes the model for thinking about what a place ‘should’ be. This phenomenon does not apply exclusively to beautiful places; participants have spoken about places that they loved as children in Chopwell - the pit heaps, the streets where they lived - which they now recognise would probably be seen by outsiders as downtrodden or dirty, but this has no impact on how they see the past and how they
experienced it. In fact, participants have talked about how much they loved living in the same colliery streets that the individual in the original quote was so upset to have to move to:

“That was me [sic] playground [the pit heaps]...as a kid they were just brilliant, like Disneyland but just black, dirty (laughs). And most kids were the same, we used to slide down them on...anything we could get wor [sic] hands on, shovels...they were huge, towered way above the houses...brilliant...fun.”

These ideas point to nostalgia as being related to both the spatial and the temporal.

These types of memory are so often from childhood and are made all the more rich because of their status as formative experiences, from a time when sensory experiences can feel very vivid, and in this quote we get an idea of that sense memory, the huge variety of plants and flowers, the heat, even the cow pat and the sandaled foot all paint a very vivid picture. Sense memory is often associated with nostalgia, a smell or a song that can take you back to a certain time or place and the sense of it as lost. For example one participant said of a local social club,

“every time I go up The Gaffers, because it was me [sic] Dad’s haunt, it still has that feel to me when I go in...it’s still got that smell about it and that’s a very strong memory when I go up there”

We see now that nostalgia is not just about time and space, it is also related to loss and desire.

The memory expressed in this quote gives a strong sense of this person living in a small and knowable world; even the bad things were knowable – they were just cows. And this is something that can be noted in other conversations with participants, this sense of a smaller simpler world that an individual can personally understand and even master. One respondent talked about how as a child living in the area of terraced housing in the village known as the Colliery Streets there was almost a micro-geography that everyone understood, they were ‘the streeters’ and each street has its own gang of children - Trent Street were the Trenters, Clyde Street the Clyders, and so on. This was a world that she knew intimately and in which she understood all of the rules.

So we have this small, knowable, bounded world and then we have a break. It is only a small break, of ‘moving across to the colliery streets’ but this was enough to make this individual feel homesick; yes there were trees, flowers, birds and animals but there was something different about them, something had changed. It is this break with continuity and how people deal with it and react to it that can shape how they see both the present and the future.

This homesickness that he talks about echoes the origins of the idea of nostalgia, a term which was first defined as a medical condition that was said to affect Swiss soldiers fighting abroad in the seventeenth century. Those who were afflicted were said to suffer from “loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, as well as marasmus and a propensity for suicide” and the nostalgic was possessed by a “mania of longing” for home (Boym 2001: 4). Specifically highlighting the fact that the emergence of nostalgia as a phenomenon coincided with the birth of modernity, Boym describes nostalgia as “a longing for that shrinking “space of experience” that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations” (ibid.: 10), explicitly bringing together a number of the themes that can be seen in the original quote - the loss of a knowable world and a desire for a time and place that is now out of reach.

There is a palpable sense of loss in the way this person talks about the woodland of their childhood and this can be seen in even small details of conversations with participants. One person, for example, spoke of watching coal trucks going past where they lived as a child and seeing place names like Calcutta on the side, commenting ‘we would see the names of all the places that have stolen our steel industry’.
This study seeks to go beyond simply identifying nostalgic feeling; exploring the ways in which it influences people’s construction of the past, their sense of heritage and also their conception of the future. These kinds of nostalgic feelings should not need to represent a closing down of change or fear of the future. There have been various attempts to define different types of nostalgia. For example, probably most influentially, Svetlana Boym defines two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective.

**Nostalgia for the past and its impact on the future**

For a restorative nostalgic, Boym writes, the past is “not a duration but a perfect snapshot”, they are searching for an absolute truth, a carbon copy. This is the nostalgia of traditions and ceremonies, continuity through repetition. In contrast, reflective nostalgia is more flexible. It is more about the individual than the institutional. Reflective nostalgia however “reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another” (Boym, 2001: 50).

Whilst there is much to take from Boym’s characterisation of nostalgia, and particularly in the examples she describes which reflect the complex layers of remembering and forgetting which shape nostalgic feeling, the two definitions fall into the trap of being what Bonnett describes as an attempt to ‘save’ nostalgia (Bonnett, 2015: 1). This tendency to try and ‘sift’ through case studies to find ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nostalgia is unproductive. Similarly, Tannock defines two types of ‘nostalgic vision’, one of retreat and one of retrieval (1995: 457), which reveal the nature of continuity available. In the former, continuity is only available through reflection - there is no tangible way of achieving continuity in the present. The latter offers elements which can be ‘retrieved’ for the present in the construction of the future. “The ever present danger” (ibid. 548) of locating value in the past, Tannock asserts, is the suggestion that it is unavailable in the present.

In some of these attempts to define nostalgia there is a blurring of lines between form and function, something which Dames tries to address in suggesting that nostalgia should be considered “not as a symptom that explains something, but as a force that does something” (2010: 272). This is not to negate the more problematic elements of nostalgia, but to recognise that simply viewing nostalgia as something to be diagnosed or weeded out, and then condemning the negative elements is unproductive - “diagnosis always finds the same thing, the thing it already knew was there; functionalist analysis will continually find differences, ironies, nuances” (ibid.: 273). Dames suggests that nostalgia can be seen as part of a therapeutic process and whilst we may not agree with the end product of the process, viewing nostalgia as a “process rather than a thing” (ibid.) is presented as a useful way forward in understanding how nostalgia is felt by individuals and how it impacts on the world.

In his writing on nostalgia, Alastair Bonnett has rejected as unnecessary this attempt to ‘rescue’ the concept from its conservative reputation. That rather than being the opposite of critical thinking, nostalgia can be seen as part of a process of meaning making, it “calls us back to meaning…nostalgia evokes the possibility of meaningful events, relationships or things...These nostalgic forms become new standpoints from which to observe the world. And they have the capacity to mess up neat demarcations between the modern and non-modern, the real and the fake. This argument also places us at a critical distance from the insistence that nostalgia should be understood as a tragic narrative.” He goes on to suggest that “it is useful to consider the way that nostalgia destabilises the assumption that the past is indeed ‘lost’...it contains an optimistic aspect which hopes to humanise, learn from and colonize the past” (Bonnett, 2015: 6).

Writing about visitor responses to heritage sites, Laura Jane Smith notes that nostalgia can mean different things in different places. For example, when researching in a country house she collected comments which suggested nostalgic feelings linked to deference and a sense that things were better in the past,
whereas in the setting of an industrial museum “the sense of humility and nostalgia expressed…was not at all disabling, but rather centred on an active process of remembering. The word nostalgia…was used by many respondents interchangeably with, or as shorthand for, a sense of reminiscing or remembering” (Smith, 2006: 219).

And the small number of interviews undertaken so far as part of this project do already demonstrate that people are much more able to be self-critical and self-aware about these kind of rose tinted nostalgic visions of the past than some definitions suggest. People definitely express feelings of nostalgia, or of a sense that it was ‘better’ in a previous time both spontaneously and when they were asked, for example:

“I think that will die [the sense of community], what we had. And it’s funny I always think I was born at the best time but when I talk to Bob [older family friend]…he thinks he was born at the best time and yet his time was much harder than my time. So I don’t know…”

But there is also a clear awareness that this is something people are prone to, particularly as they get older, and participants are able to distance themselves from those feelings and be critical of them:

“It can never be like it was and sometimes I do think we look at it through rose tinted spectacles, everybody does that”

There is also a feeling that people accept that there is no going back, it is impossible to return to the past, and whilst there are things about the village landscape that people miss, particularly the social clubs and the shops, they belong to a different time and a different way of living. ‘Going back’ is not possible, or even desirable. So, in response to being asked whether they looked back to a time that was better, people said things like:

“No not really…there was really hard times…It’s still good times now. I suppose community spirit was better but it’s still good now…it’s easy to say isn’t it, aw, it was better years ago, but it’s fine now otherwise I wouldn’t live here”

And they expressed the importance of looking forward rather than back, saying things like “the past should be honoured but you have to move on”.

Conclusion
This paper sought to outline some of the key features of nostalgia and its relevance to the study of landscape and memory in the context of the Land of Oak & Iron project. In doing so, the multi-faceted nature of the concept of nostalgia is highlighted along with the complexity of people’s relationship with the past and the processes at play in heritage and identity formation. Like heritage, nostalgia can be seen to be a ‘process’ rather than a ‘thing’ and viewing it in this way acknowledges the agency of individuals and communities in mobilising what they consider valuable from the past in shaping their visions of the future. This is crucial in ensuring heritage projects are inclusive and meaningful for ordinary people as well as acting as a vehicle for regeneration or economic benefits. As the project continues in Chopwell and two further case study areas, the different ways in which the past is constructed will be considered in differing contexts. It is intended that this will result in both a greater understanding of the ways in which memories are transmitted and transformed across generations and provide tangible recommendations for the ways in which ‘heritage from below’ can be more effectively understood and integrated into large scale heritage projects.
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DOI:10.1080/09502389500490511