

FROM RESOURCE DEPENDENCE TO TOURISM: DISCOURSES OF PLACE IN TWO VERMONT TOWNS

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Abstract

As the viability of natural resource-based industries and manufacturing declines, many rural towns turn to the service sector—and to tourism in particular—for economic sustainability and community development. During this process, towns frequently promote not only their individual attractions, but also the “sense of place” of their community. But, how does a community know or choose what images and narratives of place to present? In this research, we explore how the character of place is constructed and circulated in two Vermont towns—both with histories of forest extraction—that increasingly rely on a service-based tourism economy. We explore the material and rhetorical operations that help to produce an official, ‘natural,’ ‘unique,’ and desirable sense of place. Throughout, we maintain a critical attitude toward the mobilization of place-claims for achieving specific and tangible goals of towns—goals that purportedly reflect the wishes of “the community.”

1.0 Introduction

Rural economies are undergoing change. The global economy and other factors have negatively affected the viability of traditionally rural activities such as mining, forestry, agriculture, and manufacturing. In response, many rural towns have turned to the service sector, investing in retirement, recreation, and leisure industries (Butler & Hall 1998; Ramaswamy & Kuentzel 1998). Tourism, in particular, is often proposed as a relatively benign development strategy that can offer rural regions a new foothold in the broader economy (Stokowski 1996).

This paper focuses on one particular aspect of the transition from resource-dependent economies to tourism. Researchers have pointed out that many rural

towns are engaged in a “politics of place construction” (Sancar 1994) to attract the attention of visitors and investors. Towns often promote not only their individual attractions, but also their more-encompassing “sense of place.” A review of the literature reveals a growing awareness of the politically contested nature of “places.” This paper engages with the dynamic, complex, and politically charged public discussions about place promotion in two Vermont towns—Brighton and Barton. Both of these towns feature histories of natural resource extraction and a more recent turn towards service-based tourism economies. The paper employs a discourse-based approach to studying place in order to reveal the rhetorical and material operations that construct and sustain the towns’ “uniquely attractive” character.

The data analyzed for this paper comes from secondary sources such as town plans, sections of local newspapers, and promotional brochures and magazine articles about the two towns. The findings from this analysis will provide the foundation for a larger research project that examines the control of, and access and contributions to, discourses of place in the two towns. This type of research can help to reveal, on the one hand, the coalitions formed around dominant visions and uses of place, and on the other hand, the silences, discontinuities, and contingencies that support these visions. By exploring the intersection of power and knowledge in place claims, this scholarship hopes to contribute to a more democratic and transparent social dialogue about the two towns’ character.

2.0 Literature Review

Community researchers have identified a pattern of transitional steps in the economic transformation of rural towns. Roughly until the 1950s, many rural towns enjoyed a competitive advantage in the national economy due to their proximity to natural resources. But expanding markets, various technological advances, and a growing awareness of environmental degradation upset the economic viability of traditionally rural activities such as agriculture, mining, and forestry. The low-cost labor and cheap land available in many rural areas attracted

the attention of the manufacturing industry, although the increasingly global economy of the 1980s and 1990s raised doubts about the feasibility of an economy based on manufacturing as well (Ramaswamy & Kuentzel 1998, pp. 63-64).

In response to these uncertain economic conditions, many rural towns turned to the service sector, investing in governmental, technology, retirement, recreation, and leisure industries (Marsden et al. 1993; Sancar 1994; Butler & Hall 1998; Ramaswamy & Kuentzel 1998). The advocates of tourism, in particular, have promised quick and extensive economic rewards, ranging from the generation of much-needed cash and capital investments to the creation of jobs and diversification of the local economy (Stokowski 1996; Goudie et al. 1999).

The increasing reliance of rural towns on leisure and tourism as sources of revenue has meant that they, “just like other consumer products, have had to turn to branding to identify and distinguish themselves” from other tourist destinations (D’Hauteserre 2001, p. 300a). Sancar (1994) identifies “a politics of place construction ranging across material, representational, and symbolic activities” in the competition between localities to signal their unique attractions to visitors and investors. Towns, in both urban and rural regions, have become engaged in conscious and explicit efforts to “boost” their image (Short et al. 1993; Sancar 1994; Urry 1995; Butler & Hall 1998). Roberts and Hall (2001) declare that local “efforts have been made in a variety of settings to consciously ‘improve,’ establish or change the sense of place of rural areas through the creation and re-creation of specific images” (p. 40). The subject of this paper is precisely this ongoing process of place construction and promotion in rural towns transitioning to a service economy.

Many of the initial attempts to study place in a rigorous manner were developed within the field of geography. Humanistic geographers such as Tuan (1974) and Relph (1976) conceptualized places as “meaningful” for individuals or groups of persons, and attempted to capture the fullness of people’s experiences with their environment. They were interested in studying people’s feelings about places, especially their feeling of being

“inside” places. In these accounts, place emerges from the interaction between human experience and a given physical environment.

Subsequent place research has both built on and criticized Tuan and Relph’s phenomenological conceptualization of place. In his study of the sense of place of a region in northern Idaho, for example, Ryden (1993) follows Tuan’s and Relph’s frameworks when he talks about the “invisible” landscape of “usage, memory, and significance” that is “superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map” (p. 40). He points out, however, that “the key to seeing, understanding, and sharing with others the invisible landscape” is language (p. 41). According to him, the meanings of places are “communicated, expressed, and maintained” by folk narrative, that is, by the stories told by the people who live there (p. 46). Stokowski (2002) argues that, “place affiliations are sustained by rhetorical (i.e., in the classic sense, persuasive) uses of language, with participants using stylistic devices such as icons, imagery, argumentation, symbols, and metaphors, among others” (p. 372). Ryden and Stokowski, therefore, draw attention to the narratives, myths, fables, songs, and other linguistic creations that transmit and sustain a community’s sense of place.

While Ryden puts on the ethnographer’s hat in his study of place, Rodman (1992) worries that external observers often “smooth” the multiplicity of local place meanings into a single narrative. Rodman points out those places are “multiple constructions” and that their consolidation into a story or a narrative is often the result of political moves. “Places, like voices,” Rodman argues, “are local and multiple” (1992, p. 643). Massey (1994) makes a similar argument when she conceptualizes place as a product of constantly changing social relations and dynamic social processes. She concludes that, “there is, in that sense of a timeless truth of an area, built on somehow internally contained character traits, no authenticity of place” (1994, p. 121).

Recent scholarship in the place politics of tourism, community, and natural resource planning has taken these concerns seriously. Thus, Stokowski (2002) declares that research “must advance into analyses of the

presentation, evaluation, and negotiation of divergent place discourses created by people engaged in social interaction” (p. 380). And Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels (2003) recommend that place research allow “expression of place-based experiences and affiliations that may not otherwise be heard or considered legitimate” (p. 110). They hope that the inclusion of a “broader range of voices and values centering around places” (p. 89) will take the planning process farther than the polarized interest- and user-group politics will (e.g., “environmentalists” versus “loggers”).

Discourse theory provides a useful framework for analyzing the political effects, multiplicity, and variety of place claims. Conceptualizing place as an object of discursive practice allows researchers to focus on the contingent and transient structures that make a locale meaningful, nameable, or simply “there” for people in their conversations. It means “rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary” (Foucault 1977, p. 76). Rather than recovering the foundations of an “authentic” or “traditional” sense of place, this approach examines the complex and fragmented events that – sometimes linked or interdependent, and other times not – come together to give meaning to a place. By investigating the contingency of the events that have created a particular place (and thereby questioning the discursive boundaries that have confined that place), researchers and scholars will have gone a long way toward ensuring that discussions of sense of place in rural tourism planning are “progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward-looking” (Massey 1994, p. 147).

3.0 Methods

The main sources of data used for this paper are written texts that contain images or narratives about the sense of place of two Vermont towns – Brighton (and its village, Island Pond,) and Barton. Using the techniques of content, narrative, and discourse analysis, three types of texts are analyzed: (a) town plans, (b) sections of local newspapers, including editorials and letters to the editor, and (c) promotional brochures and magazine articles about the two towns.

Both Brighton and Barton adopted new town plans in 2002. These documents set fresh visions and goals for the towns, and spell out the two communities’ “official” wishes for the future. While the plans present the towns’ goals in neat, bulleted lists, a review of the last 5 years’ editorials, letters to the editor, and feature articles of two local newspapers reveals the complexity and messiness of community debates about the future of the towns. For this paper, articles published in the Caledonian Record (St. Johnsbury, Vermont) and the Burlington Free Press (Burlington, Vermont) were collected and analyzed. These articles were retrieved by an all-text database search on the terms “Brighton,” “Island Pond,” and “Barton.” The Burlington Free Press is the newspaper with the largest circulation in the state, while the Caledonian Record is one of northeastern Vermont’s two dailies.

In contrast to the multiplicity of ideas about the two towns expressed in the newspaper articles, full-length features in the Vermont Life magazine and tourist brochures collected at official visitor centers tend to portray the towns from unidimensional perspectives. Vermont Life magazine published its initial issue in 1947, and is now published by the Vermont State Department of Tourism and Marketing. Promoting Vermont qualities and lifestyles, it boasts a larger out-of-state than in-state subscription list. With the help of published indices to Vermont Life, all of the articles that featured Brighton and Barton from 1947 through 2004 have been identified and included in the analysis (a total of eight articles). Although this is a relatively small set of feature stories, it gives an historical perspective on community events, affairs, and people.

Of course, none of these sources are unbiased. Town plans both describe a place and “boost” its image. Editorials and letters to the editors of newspapers provide opinions, and are meant to persuade. Tourist brochures and Vermont Life magazine were created to promote the state to outsiders, and to attract new residents and tourists. All of these sources play rhetorical and discursive roles in establishing and manipulating place meanings.

A full and comprehensive discourse analysis would consider the intentions of the authors that produce these documents, as well as the characteristics of the audiences

that read and react to them. But the general purpose of our analysis was to identify the ways in which these secondary documents construct the towns' senses of place. Data analysis proceeded as follows. First, each set of documents was reviewed for examples of practices and symbolism used to support claims about the unique character of the towns. A generalized coding scheme emerged from this initial review. Second, the documents were re-read and the coding scheme was systematized. Third, it was ensured that the coding categories dovetailed meaningfully and that the differences among them were evident (Patton 2002). Broadly speaking, the analysis sought to examine "how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals" them (Phillips & Hardy 2002, p. 6). Rather than treating the texts as windows to their authors' intentions, motives, or consciousness, the focus was placed on the "work" that these public documents perform in authorizing specific experiences, identities, characterizations, and imagery as relevant to the discussions about the towns' character.

The economies of Brighton and Barton have always been dependent on the towns' natural resources. Following their inception as railroad towns, the timber industry employed a large proportion of their residents. Later, both towns relied on the furniture manufacturing industry, before reinventing themselves as tourist attractions over the last two decades. The inclusion of two towns in the analysis, rather than just one, was hoped to provide a clearer understanding of the role of local arrangements and contingencies in weathering larger, regional shifts in the economic bases of rural places.

4.0 Analysis

4.1 The Historical Towns: People Against Nature

Located in the northeastern corner of Vermont, the towns of Brighton (Essex County) and Barton (Orleans County) became permanently settled by persons of European descent only after the Revolutionary War. The towns' populations remained relatively low in the first half of the 19th century. Brighton's town plan attributes this to "the relative isolation of the township in a rugged, and often harsh, environment. Travel, for example, was limited to sleds and snowshoes through the long winter season" (2002, p. 35).

The frontier imagery does not solely describe the white settlers' experiences in the area, however. It also taps into and further reinforces a broader narrative about the towns' central location in a three-county area known as Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. A 1981 Vermont Life article featuring the town of Barton, for example, states that "the name [i.e. Northeast Kingdom] inspires curiosity and conjures images of a rugged terrain, an independent people, of a region where Winter winds blow a little colder, snows drift a little deeper, and people grow a little harder" (Khouri 1981, p. 3). This characterization of the land found its way into recent debates over the future of the towns. In a response to an editorial on the economic plight of Brighton, for example, a reader of the Burlington Free Press contended that "the Northeast Kingdom is not a wild frontier [...]" A quick geography lesson might help: Most parts of the Northeast Kingdom are 90 minutes from Montreal, like Burlington [...] and three-and-a-half-hours from Boston, like Burlington" (2001, June 23). The towns' early settlement history, therefore, does more than reveal how things "really" were two hundred years ago. It also serves as a supporting element in constructing (or contesting) the towns' present character and future direction.

The two towns' populations increased considerably in the 1850s, following the construction and opening of railroads connecting Montreal, Quebec, and Portland, Maine. According to the U.S. Census, between 1840 and 1860, Brighton's population grew from 157 to 945 persons, while Barton's residents increased in number from 892 to 1,590 (see Table 1). Brighton's town plan states that the town was uniquely suited for a major train station, as it "offered a convenient and almost perfect midway point between Montreal and Portland" (2002, p. 35).

References to the town's past character as a transportation hub can also be found in recent Vermont Life articles that promote Brighton's historic and recreational resources. A piece publicizing the town's snowmobiling opportunities, for example, makes the link between the past and the present explicit: "In a sense, Island Pond's emergence as a snowmobiling crossroads is an echo of its past, when its position on the rail line connecting Portland, Boston and Montreal made it a bustling railroad town. Today it

Table 1.—Populations of Brighton, Barton, and their respective counties, 1840 - 2000.

	Brighton	Essex County	Barton	Orleans County
1840	157	4,198	892	13,634
1860	945	5,786	1,590	18,981
1880	1,691	7,931	2,364	22,803
1900	2,023	8,056	2,790	22,024
1920	2,280	7,364	3,506	23,913
1940	1,754	6,490	3,371	21,718
1960	1,545	6,083	3,066	20,143
1980	1,557	6,313	2,990	23,440
2000	1,260	6,459	2,780	26,277

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). United States census of population; University of Vermont. (1981). Two hundred years and counting: Vermont community census totals, 1791 to 1980.

is the snowmobile, not the locomotive that provides the power” (Vara 1997, p. 37). The analogy drawn with the town’s historic role and position constitutes a significant operation in the tourism proponents’ rhetoric, as it connotes the potential recovery of a lost, but booming Golden Era. After describing the by-gone town as a “cosmopolitan, international tourist stopping-off point,” for instance, a 1980 Vermont Life article offers a cheery description of the possibilities introduced by modern forms of tourism:

During the Summer and the sporting season the town is once again a cosmopolitan place, drawing visitors from throughout the Northeast and Canada. Some even fly in and land at the local airport. Island Pond [i.e. a village in Brighton] has weathered well the transition from parlor cars to Winnebagos and private planes. (Kaufman 1980, p. 42).

The arrival of the railroad in the early 1850s affected the fledgling towns of Brighton and Barton in crucial ways. Sherman, Potash, and Sessions (2004) declare that the village of Island Pond was practically “created” by the railroad, while Barton was part of a handful of towns that “shifted their centers to meet the tracks” (p. 226). The timber industry grew as it took advantage of the new means of transportation. In the industry’s “heyday” in Brighton’s county, “eight mills worked at a feverish

pace trimming into clapboard and furniture the 57-foot long logs” (Pike 1981, pp. 62-63), while “Barton was a booming industrial and resort town” (Khouri 1981, p. 4).

Historical Census figures show that the populations of Brighton and Barton peaked in the first decades of the twentieth century and declined steadily after (see Table 1). The 2000 Census puts the populations at their lowest levels in a hundred years. The population decline experienced by the towns over the 1980-2000 period contrasts with the slight increase experienced by their respective counties over the same period.

The Census Bureau reported in 1980 that 40.3 percent of Barton’s employed population of 16 years and older worked in the manufacturing sector (similar data were not available for Brighton). The figures reported by the 2000 Census for the same category were 20.7 percent for Barton, and 27.2 percent for Brighton. Hence, the percentage of persons employed by the manufacturing industry in Barton halved over the two decades. The closing in 2001 of a major furniture plant located in Brighton has caused further concern over the area’s economic situation.

The analyzed documents paint a rather incomplete picture of the towns’ histories. There is no mention, for example, of the Native American tribes who once

inhabited the area, or of the different classes of citizens that built the towns. The received histories focus clearly on the towns' economies, not on their societies – and land is something to be conquered, in a physical sense or symbolically.

4.2 The Contemporary Towns: Utility and Aesthetics of Nature

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that Brighton's and Barton's 2002 town plans encourage economic growth. Coupled with the preservation of the town's "unique" character, Brighton sees an opportunity in the area's "growing tourism" (2002, p. 4), while Barton's plan states that "tourism will likely serve as the town's leading economic industry for the foreseeable future" (2002, p. 11). Both of the plans list the towns' established and potential tourist attractions.

Barton's plan introduces its natural resources as essential to the survival of the town's economy. The resources "include the forests (for foliage and habitat for sporting game and birds), recreational water bodies including streams and lakes for fishing, and the general scenic beauty of the area" (p. 11). The plan immediately follows this enumeration with a further exhortation on the resources' importance: "The town's residents should have a general awareness of how these resources are critical to the town's economy and environment" (ibid.).

Barton's characterization of the town's water resources appears very utilitarian: "Barton's extensive water resources, lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, offer many forms of recreation. Besides these resources being of obvious natural value, they are of great economic value because of tourists, fishermen, boaters, swimmers, and hikers" (p. 22). In contrast, Brighton's description of its resources is more pastoral: "All living things need water to survive, and Brighton is fortunate in the quantity and placement of its water resources. [...] Also, beautiful lakes, rivers and ponds design the countryside adding light, color and life to the rolling hills" (pp. 31-32). This concern with presenting a romantic and pleasing image of the town emerges repeatedly in the Brighton town plan. The plan's authors, for example, "envision in the park, on Cross Street, a nostalgic skating rink, with lights and perhaps music, to keep at least a little part of our town quaint"

(p. 5). And in a discussion of land use districts, the plan states that, "open land is particularly valuable for tourism and recreation. In the words of the 'Planning Manual for Vermont Municipalities', 'open land provides residents and visitors with an opportunity for quiet and spiritual enrichment [...].'" (p. 8). The construction of the land as a scenic resource reaches a climax in the careful categorization of certain places in town as "points to look at" and others as "points to look from" (p. 38). Oddly enough, two pages later, the plan refers to Brighton as the "Snowmobile Capital of Vermont." There is no discussion, however, of the apparent incompatibility between snowmobiling and the quiet enjoyment of the outdoors.

Brighton's town plan makes use of several studies, statistics, and inventories of the area's natural communities, especially in connection with wildlife and habitat management. The plan contends that, "Brighton is rated fourth in terms of ecological values of the 78 towns in Vermont that are included in the Northern Forest. [...] Brighton rated well because it scored first for natural communities, second for rare animals and high for rare plants and wintering areas" (pp. 32-33). This portrayal of the town is also sketched out in the most recent Vermont Life article concerned with Brighton. In the article, the Wenlock Wildlife Management Area, accessible from Island Pond, is described as "one of Vermont's premier birdwatching spots" (Pfeiffer 1998, p. 50). The article lists the "notable birds" that one may find at the Area, and offers directions for driving there.

What is striking about Brighton's plan is its reliance on ecology (wildlife in particular) as a mechanism for town boosting. It is not clear from the planning document as to whether public comment was sought on this choice of futures – or whether the framing of the place-image was a top-down, expert driven decision.

4.3 The Future Towns: Complex Visions of Reality

Feature articles and letters sent to the editors of the Burlington Free Press and the Caledonian Record, however, suggest that the public does not always receive uncritically the depiction of the towns' lands as scenic or ecologically important. The public forum provided by the newspapers reveals discussions about the character

of the land – and about the suitability of tourism as a development strategy – that involve very different visions of the towns. Commenting on a newly proposed wildlife management area near the town of Brighton, a citizen attending an official hearing declared that, “some people think we need to sit by and let this land become an eco-park. [...] I don’t think so. I think we should manage these lands to the fullest” (Burlington Free Press, 2001, November 7, p. 1B). Addressing the same issue, a letter to the editor of the Free Press asserted that,

perhaps this is a part of some master plan, as some in the [Northeast] Kingdom suggest, whereby Chittenden County [Vermont’s most populous county] types allow the Kingdom to spin into economic doom so that it can then be bought up and become a playground for the privileged when they are done plundering Northwest Vermont and have run out of pretty places to pedal their bikes, trails to hike and clean water in which to swim. Seems plausible: Bike racks are beginning to outnumber rifle racks in Island Pond. (2001, September 24, p. 5A).

Public debates about the role of natural resource planning in the future of northeastern Vermont are hence inextricably linked not only to studies of ecologically rare and sensitive communities, but also to cultural norms and struggles to define activities “appropriate” to the area. In response to the elimination of hunting camps on recently purchased state and federal lands in the Brighton area, a camp owner and president of the Traditional Interest Association wondered “if children are going to be able to enjoy and learn from that land like I did. [...] I just feel like Vermont’s heritage – a heritage that helped define who my Dad was, a heritage that’s shaping who my son is – was cheated” (Burlington Free Press, 2003, March 30, p. 1B). The connections between landscape and identity, place and person can become important resources in discussions of tourism as a rural development strategy. In a letter to the editor of the Caledonian Record, a resident of Canaan, Vermont (the town located in the state’s northeast corner), for example, claimed that,

few of us who live in this northeastern most part of the Northeast Kingdom are interested in making a living catering to tourists, although we can put

up a few in the three or four little motels which exist in this region. Most of us would rather have employment in constructive forest-based industries than just make up the beds, sweep floors and wash dishes in tourist accommodations. (Caledonian Record, 2001).

The description of tourism-related employment as “just” making up beds, sweeping floors, and washing dishes is obviously limited but it serves the purpose of presenting forest-based jobs in a favorable light. It is important to notice, though, that the description is part of a struggle to define which activities, identities, and experiences should be considered relevant in community discussions about and plans for the future of the area.

It is perhaps not surprising that public commentary about the character of the land and its inhabitants feature a wide and complex range of positions, interests, and values. What a discourse-theoretical study of place can reveal, however, are the operations that allow certain constructions of the towns and development strategies to appear common-sensical and self-evident. The settlement and railroad era histories of the towns, the listing of their scenic spots, scientific inventories, and the area’s cultural traditions, constitute resources to be used in fashioning specific arrangements of activities on the land and supporting what are said to be particular “community” goals. It is important to keep in mind that different actors attempt to promote different visions of the towns, and that it is useful to examine how various stakeholders circulate and manipulate these visions. The next stage of our research project will involve interviews with community leaders and residents engaged in or directly affected by the planning process in the two towns. It is hoped that a study of their contributions to, control of, and access to discourses of place will illuminate the “maintenance and activation of power in the creation and negotiation of landscapes” (Greider & Garkovich 1994, p. 18).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper studies the construction and promotion of place in two rural towns transitioning to a service economy using secondary sources. It employed a perspective that tried to be sensitive to the rhetorical

and material operations that make it possible to talk about the towns in certain ways and to defend or contest certain development strategies. The analysis endeavored to examine the rhetorical structures that must be in place before different community members can meaningfully present and expound on specific images of the towns. Representations of place in the two towns were shown to be contingent on, among other things, particular interpretations of the towns' histories, "appropriate" activities in the area, and federal and state wildlife management and land conservation initiatives.

While Brighton and Barton share a historical reliance on resource-dependent industries and a more recent downturn in economic fortunes, an important difference between them lies in their general approach to planning. While Brighton's town plan attempts to list and classify its tourism-related resources thoroughly – as well as to suggest specific management actions – Barton's plan starts with the belief that,

'planning and regulation', in general, have developed too strong a grip on the community and on the individual property rights of its citizens. Therefore, it is critical that the planning efforts address those issues which are, in fact, of serious concern to the citizens of the town of Barton, and to maintain sensitivity to preventing the adoption of frivolous or overly subjective regulations which do not. (p. 3, original emphasis).

That difference and all other findings of this paper will be explored in a subsequent stage of this research project. The main assumption underlying this research project is that people create places as they talk about them. The secondary data analysis performed in this paper will therefore be complemented by an ethnographic study of planning in the two towns.

Critical engagement with structures that support claims about the "authentic" or "unique" character of places ought to loosen essentialist representations of place and allow place claims to emerge in their full complexity. The messy and political character of discussions about place in the context of rural tourism planning should be acknowledged rather than stifled by statements of how things "really" are. The force driving this research is the

hope that we can design rural tourism planning processes that do not shy away from the political aspects of place claims. People make the world they live in – and this type of scholarship will help us understand how.

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