

Borderlands, Bridges and Belonging: the Tamar Bridges as a vehicle for cultural heritage valorisation

Joan Buchanan
PhD Student at Northumbria University

Abstract

This paper explores the Tamar bridges, spanning the cultural, historical and geographical borderlands of Cornwall and Devon. This analysis of literature will examine the signification of the physical and psychological human construction of place and spatial identity through these bridges. This symbolic tangible and intangible border reflects the significance of place and facilitating cultural memory. The cultural construction of place from a literary perspective has led to imagined communities as part of the tourist gaze (Anderson, 1991; Watson, 2005; Hardyment, 2000). Du Maurier described as a child, closing her eyes as she went over the Tamar Bridge, passing into this magical 'Neverland' (1968). This wild, romantic escapism, where landscape mediates 'sense of place', is part of the economic value of tourism (Robinson et al, 1999). In addition to the cultural touristic value, cultural social valorisation is powerfully symbolised on crossing the Tamar bridges – 'Welcome to Kernow' in the Celtic language, occupational identities of fishing and mining designated on a shield and a towering Celtic cross on the border. These bridges have a wider symbolic value rooted in territory and identity (Convery et al, 2012), reflecting Cohen's psychology of borders (Cohen, 1986; Cosgrove, 1984).

This cultural, social, economic valorisation of place signified by the bridges, is political too. From the historical Celtic-English border division by King Athelstan in 936 to the recent designation and protection of the Cornish as a national minority by the Council of Europe. The increased mobility of 'the outsider' facilitated by the building of the bridges and proposed government control by Plymouth Council in the 1970's, (Payton, 1993), may have driven this need to become a protected minority. In contrast, oral histories of those living on both sides of the bridges, suggest a dynamic spatial identity for kinship and trade (Milden, 2012).

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