

Ecological restoration and place attachment: Emplacing non-places?

Dr. Martin Drenthen
Dept of Philosophy and Science Studies (ISIS)
Science Faculty, Radboud University Nijmegen
PO Box 9010
6500 GL Nijmegen
Netherlands
e-mail: M.Drenthen@science.ru.nl

Abstract

The creation of new wetlands along rivers as an instrument to mitigate flood risks in times of climate change seduces us to approach the landscape from a 'managerial' perspective and threatens a more place-oriented approach. How to provide ecological restoration with a broad cultural context that can help prevent these new landscapes from becoming non-places, devoid of meaning and with no real connection to our habitable world. In this paper, I discuss three possible alternative interpretations of the meaning of places and place attachment in these 'new nature' projects, and show how all three imply a different view on human identity and history.

1. Introduction

A large part of the Netherlands lies below sea level or below the high-water level of the major rivers. To protect the land from floods, as early as the mid-14th century, a nearly completely connected system of dikes arose, which determines the image we have of the landscape of The Netherlands up to the present day. However, precipitation levels are expected to rise due to climate change, causing increased peak discharges of the rivers. The traditional approach to flood control – dyke reinforcements – has shown serious downsides, because it causes the peaty soil to dry out and the land to subside; whereas peak water levels are increasing. A breach in the dykes will have increasingly serious consequences; especially because the nation's most vital economic sectors lie in the lowest areas.

In 1996, the Dutch government therefore decided to abandon the traditional water policy with its emphasis on dike reinforcements, notable with regard to river management (Van der Brugge, Rotmans & Loorbach 2005). The new policy of flood risk reduction along rivers is

aimed at creating more space for the river and lowering high water levels, by means of deepening the forelands of the rivers, displacing dikes further inland, lowering of groins in the rivers and enlarging of summer beds. Dike reinforcement is now only considered if alternative measures are too expensive or provide inadequate flood protection. Ecological restoration plays a key role in the new policy: to reduce the risk of floods, many former agricultural areas are transformed into wetland reserves (so-called 'new nature'). Accessory objectives of the new river policy are the creation of ecologically sound, robust nature reserves and the improvement of the 'spatial quality' of the river region.

Implementation of these new projects sometimes runs into problems due to lack of support among local residents (Buijs 2009). Some of these problems relate to fundamental differences in how the river landscape is experienced and how the meaning of places along the rivers is interpreted. Whereas many governmental agencies and conservation groups welcome the development of new nature areas, other environmentalist groups regret the loss of many old (agri)cultural landscapes that disappear in the process of giving room to the river (Van der Heijden 2005).

Furthermore, many local inhabitants feel that their sense of belonging to the landscape has suffered from the restoration practices. In the public debate, restorationists (or 'nature builders') are often blamed for failing to recognize people's meaningful relations with the landscape. Some even hold that the new policy of 'Room for the river' actually diminishes the 'place for the people'.

The decline in place attachment relates to the fact that present-day river policy is to a large extent determined by a functional outlook. The dominant approach tends to neglect that river landscapes are infused with all kinds of meanings and that they are ultimately tied to issues of identity of its inhabitants.¹ Paying more attention to the meaning of these relationships, could help prevent ecological restoration projects unwillingly destroying the fabric connecting people to their places.

In this paper, I will discuss three possible alternative interpretations of the meaning of place and place attachment in 'new nature' projects along the river. I will also systematically show how different views on nature and river management are linked to different conceptions of

¹ Davenport and Anderson have presented an empirical investigation into 'place meanings and perceptions of landscape change' at the Niohrara National Scenic River in north central Nebraska. They show how the diverse meanings of rivers form a 'web of river meanings' in which issues of sustenance, nature, health ("tonic") and identity come together. (Davenport & Anderson 2005)

identity and history. In the next section, I provide a more detailed outline of the dominant approach to place in present-day water management. Next, I discuss the ‘traditionalist’ protester’s vision, where inhabitants, cultural history and place are closely tied together through the concept of a legible landscape (§3). In §4, I reconstruct the place-approach that many restorationists seem to adhere to, that seeks to ‘re-ground’ our sense of place in ecology and make a shift towards a longer time-horizon. After introducing the concepts of ‘palimpsest landscape’ (in §5), and ‘supermodernity’ (in §6), I will present a third, post-nostalgic alternative (‘wilderness as non-place’) that ‘complements’ the first two and acknowledges some of their more problematic aspects (§7). Finally, I briefly reflect on how to deal with this range of competing place-visions.

2. Place in modern water management

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Dutch river landscape has been the locus of a political clash between adherents of different visions of river nature. The immediate cause of the conflict was the intention of the Dutch Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management to heighten old embankments along the major Dutch rivers (Rhine, Waal and Meuse). River discharges were expected to rise due to both climate change and established water management policies² and therefore the old river dikes would be too weak for adequate flood protection in the near future.

Initially, in the beginning of the 1980s, it was decided that the dikes had to be reinforced as cost effectively as possible, by replacing the often century-old, small-scaled, heavily winding dikes with higher, more robust and straighter ones. The plan provoked much opposition. Landscape activists and many local inhabitants considered these plans disastrous for the beauty of the traditional typical Dutch river landscape, made famous by the works of 17th century Dutch landscape painters such as Jacob and Salomon Ruysdael.

After years of protest, the protesters eventually succeeded in stopping many of these plans, partly because of a paradigm change that had simultaneously taken place in water management thinking.

In the years following the above-mentioned debate, river managers more and more realized that reinforcing dikes would not provide an adequate protection against floods forever. With the land subsiding and water levels rising, building ever-higher dikes ceased to be an option.

² Notably reduced upstream retention due to drainage, hardening of surfaces and canalisation.

It was thought that instead of restricting rivers in straightjackets of dikes, we should enable them to occupy the floodplains in times of high water.

In 1996, the Dutch government decided that, in order to give the rivers more room, human activities in the floodplains such as agriculture had to be discontinued and the riverside meadows should be transformed into wetland nature reserves. The 'Room for the river' plan provided the framework for this transition in river management. The plan does not entirely discard human activity from the floodplain. New technologies, such as floating houses, roads, factories and glass houses, can allow the river to flood without coming into conflict with vital human interests.

The reasons for giving the river more room were primarily utilitarian: to insure economical functions (transport, water supply, and agriculture), safety (flood protection), recreation and leisure, but also biodiversity / habitat protection. The recreation of new wetlands reduces flood risks, but also creates large recreational sites for hiking and cycling, for which there is high demand in a heavily populated area such as The Netherlands. A less anthropocentric motive for 'Room for the river' was the preservation of biodiversity: reinstalling natural dynamics in floodplains provides new habitats for several species and the new wetlands function as corridors in an ecological network that enable animals and plants to migrate and spread out.³

As a result of the shift in policy, many of the traditional water meadows will be transformed into swamps and marshes, traditional summer dikes will be breached, old clay depositions removed from the floodplain and ancient river branches uncovered, all this in order to reinstall natural water dynamics. In short: although the old technocratic water policy has largely been abandoned, this does not mean that the landscape protester can be entirely satisfied with the result, because the new plans will also drastically disrupt the old traditional agricultural landscape that Holland is famous for.⁴

Proponents of the new 'ecosystem based water management' nonetheless believe that the 'Room for the river' plan presents an opportunity to also increase the overall 'spatial quality'

³ Note that fragmentation of natural areas is the single most significant threat to biodiversity in The Netherlands. The Dutch government has committed itself to protect biodiversity through the European Birds and Habitat Directive and the Natura 2000 Ecological Network.

⁴ There have been efforts to ease the pain, though: the 'Room for the river' plan acknowledges that certain sites and features (so-called "keep off"-areas) will have to be excluded from nature development because of their cultural-historical importance. But still, overall, the 'Room for the river' plan will drastically change the layout and feel of the river flood plains.

of the river landscape. The term ‘spatial quality’ is introduced to give voice to place-based concerns within the overall framework of the ‘Room for the river’ plan. In a process of public participation⁵, the local population is actively involved in the renovation design process of the river landscape, and special attention is being paid to the interests and aesthetic preferences of local inhabitants (quality of housing, possibilities of recreation, and involvement of local entrepreneurs).

But although terms like ‘spatial quality’ and processes like ‘participatory spatial planning’ are meant to invite people to bring forward issues of place, they do not address considerations of place attachment *directly*. Most water managers believe that their primary concern should be ‘objective’ issues such as safety, economics (house prices) and biodiversity. The new developments may also present a chance to improve the ‘spatial quality’, but, ultimately, that is considered to be a side issue. ‘Sense of place’ is usually seen as a subjective feeling to such an extent that it will be hard to take them into account in government policies.⁶

For that reason, many believe that the new water management paradigm will remain dominated by functional motives, and that the managerial perspective on the landscape will eventually outflank other ways of looking at and dealing with the landscape.

In 2003, a survey was conducted into the changing public perceptions and appreciations of river landscapes in response to ecological reconstruction projects in the floodplains (Buijs 2004, also see Buijs 2009). The investigators interviewed local residents, holiday-makers and people who did not have a specific relationship with a particular river landscape, and asked them how the recent changes had affected their appreciation of the landscape.

Almost all respondents reported that they considered the new areas to be an improvement. They believed that the new wetlands were visually more attractive than the old water meadows and appreciated the increased accessibility of the areas (for recreation and the like). Most people also believed that the ‘nature value’ was higher than before, but some of the local respondents disagreed because they considered the traditional landscape just as ‘natural’ as the new one.

⁵ E.g. the project Waalweelde (<http://www.waalweelde.nl>), that provides a digital environment in which local inhabitants along the borders of the Lower Rhine (Waal) can actively contribute ideas into the spatial design process and a river simulation computer program that enables them to immediately see the effects of their alternative plans on high water levels.

⁶ Or that can even be influenced and changed with advertising and governmental campaigns.

The most important difference between local and non-local respondents, however, related to the sense of connection with the landscape. Understandably, non-local respondents did not value this aspect very highly, because, as occasional visitors, they had no consistent connection with these places. The local population, however, said that their feeling of place attachment had clearly diminished.⁷

Many feel that place-based concerns are not given their proper due in the dominant water management perspective. They believe that the whole idea of renovating or restoring the landscape in times of climate change tempts us into a ‘managerial’ perspective on the land in which place-related concerns are considered merely ‘subjective extras’?

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss alternative interpretations of ecological restoration along the river that all try to take place-based concerns more seriously. I will show how different perspectives on place open up the world differently and thereby open up different alleys to interpret human identity as well.⁸

3. Sense of Place and the legible landscape

Even though the new Dutch government policy recognizes the value of particular historical sites, many believe that the preservation of those features in the landscape that are spectacular enough to be considered sites of historic importance will not be enough to maintain the overall place identity of the landscape. According to many critics, the new policy justifies

⁷ Recently, Dan Firth (2008) has shown that relationships with nature are important in people’s lives, for a life worthwhile must “recognise and respect the positive meaningful relationships in nature”. According to Frith, such recognition and respect is only possible if one understands the “historical narrative” and respects “the narrative of its future trajectory.” People who have meaningful relationship with certain places draw on historic narratives that tie their own lives to these places. Terms such as ‘spatial quality’ are not suited to capture the reasons why people feel attached to specific places, for they abstract from these ‘connecting’ narratives.

⁸ A common way to approach issues like these is in terms of ‘framing.’ The frame analysis of social movement theory (Snow & Benford 1988 and 1992) starts with the idea that social movements construct ‘collective action frames’ with which people perceive and make sense of the world. Accordingly, one can interpret different conceptions of place as different socially constructed ‘frames’ that help us to organize and make sense of the world. E.g. Deborah Martin (2003) interprets the construction of place in urban neighbourhoods in terms of collective-action frames. She shows how social movements in urban neighbourhoods use a particular framing of place to “unite residents for a neighbourhood-oriented agenda” to further their political goals. However, a frame-analysis often implies an outsider’s perspective. In order to understand conceptions of place ‘from the inside’, I will take a different, hermeneutical approach and discuss visions of place as perspectives ‘through which the world comes to presence.’

large-scale interventions that will eventually endanger the old legible cultural landscape, and thus undermine the experience of being connected to the land and being at home in the landscape.

The Dutch river landscape is many centuries old. Remains of former human inhabitation are abundantly present and in plain sight for those who know where to look for them: wooded banks, terraces, dikes and large artificial mounds all testify of a long history of human habitation. Some features of these landscapes, such as the ancient hedges along the river Meuse, even date back to Roman and Germanic times.⁹ Remnants of other past events are still visible as well, such as the traces of previous floods (deep pools that remained after dyke bursts). The landscape is covered with remains of past human-nature dialogues: a mix of traces of historic events and natural events, and of past land use remains. In this ancient, small-scale landscape, culture and nature merged more or less organically into a meaningful whole, where biodiversity and cultural diversity go together. The river landscape reflects the (past and present) socio-economic efforts of people trying to survive in a landscape in which rivers are both a threat and a blessing.

Furthermore, the winding dikes and small ponds also provide a habitat for many animal and plant species. Indeed, according to many biologists, the traditional Dutch cultural landscape has more biodiversity than purely natural wetlands.¹⁰

According to landscape activist and nature writer Willem van Toorn¹¹, the Dutch river landscape is a ‘pictorial book of our memory’ – as indeed are *all* landscapes –, but the Dutch landscape is perhaps even more so, because “it would not have existed if people had not had the idea that it could be made from all this water. Nearly everywhere you stand in this Dutch landscape, you stand within the thoughts of people, neatly disguised as nature, and everyone is pretending it has to be like this.” (Van Toorn, 1998: 9) The Dutch river landscape therefore

⁹ For a study into the phenomenological meaning of landscape archeological, cf. Tilley 1994.

¹⁰ This view, usually labeled as the ‘traditional conservationists view’, has dominated conservation thinking in the Netherlands up to recently. Nowadays, it is being challenged by those in favor of ecological restoration as being too anthropocentric. Cf. section 4.

¹¹ Poet and novelist Willem van Toorn was one of the spokespersons of the *Foundation Save the River Landscape* (‘Stichting Red het Rivierlandschap’). As a child, he spent many a holiday with family in the Betuwe, a rustic area in the centre of The Netherlands. He became familiar with the landscape of large rivers, which often appears in his work. In his novels *Een leeg landschap* (‘An Empty Landscape’, 1988) and *De rivier* (‘The River’, 1999), he expressed his anxiety about the corrosion of the river landscape. He also wrote several essays on this theme (cf. Van Toorn, 1998).

can be read as an archive containing the history of The Netherlands, and its inhabitants. The ‘legible landscape’ tells a story about how humans have dwelled in these places and how they have related to the world and to one another, who they were, how they thought and how their successors became what they are now. Van Toorn:

“These landscapes remind us along complicated and sometimes unconscious lines that there is a past, that people who lived in that past had to deal with the world just as we have to, that they had to protect themselves against nature and at the same time use its resources” (Van Toorn, 1998: 66).

According to Van Toorn, we have a responsibility to take care of the old ‘signs’ in the landscape, out of gratitude towards our predecessors who, by living in it and with it, made the landscape what it is now.

“We have to stay in touch with this past – not because the past is better than the present, but simply because we owe our existence, our identity, our vision of the world to it, and because we can only think about the future by making use of our past experiences. A landscape that does not contain enough ‘signs’, or where too much of these signs have disappeared, cannot tell us much. [...] It is telling, that dictatorships that deny and despise the past, often destroy landscapes in a bewildering fashion, as if they want to rob the people from their memories.” (Van Toorn, 1998: 66)

The signs in the landscape make up a narrative that reflects the history of the place and the relationship people have and have had with it. For Van Toorn, we should not protect these old landscapes because of some ‘intrinsic’ feature of these landscapes themselves, but because the legible features enable humans to have a meaningful relationship with place and history. These signs make the world habitable; they help us to dwell here.

Many old signs in the landscape follow a specific structure that is often repeated over again in a certain region, but differently in other regions. Careful attention to the specific details of local places reveals that there are subtle regional differences in dike construction, fencing, farmhouse architecture, and land use, which all help to distinguish one regional place from another.

Some of these regional differences in style are shaped by basic geology. Glacier rivers like the Rhine and Waal are broad and sometimes impressive streams that steadily flow through the landscape. In contrast, precipitation rivers like the Meuse are far more fickle: what appears to be a small tranquil stream in summertime can become a fearsome wild river in spring. These differences are reflected in the landscape surrounding these rivers too: in the height and shape of the dikes, the character of land use in the flood plain et cetera.

The narrative of the landscape depends not solely on the material traces in the landscape, but also on the stories people tell about it and the meaning they *invest* in it. The landscape plays a role in novels, poems, films and other ‘genres of imagination’.¹² Many of these histories differ from region to region as well, and add to a specific regional character of certain places. Removing the old dikes would erase these regional differences, and would result in alienating local inhabitants from their own neighbourhoods. From this perspective there is hardly any difference between the threat posed by heavy dyke reinforcements and by the creation of wetlands. Whereas the former will transform the ‘habitable, meaningful world’ into a uniform, merely functional landscape dominated by straight lines – a ‘systematized’ or even ‘medicalized’ landscape (with artificial veins, bypasses and heart valves) devoid of meaning –, the latter will have a similar result. By removing the human signs and imprints in the landscape, nature development will eventually wipe out all traces of human history in the landscape, and thus transform the legible landscape into an a-historical, monotonous and mute landscape.

According to Van Toorn, ecological restoration rests on a typically technological type of thinking:

“the type of nature that nature builders aspire to does not tell us anything; [...] humans are strangers, merely visitors in their own landscape. [...] The one danger to the Dutch landscape is that it will be crushed between two ways of technological thinking: that of large-scale dike reinforcements and that of ‘constructing nature’. [...] I fear that journalists, artists and writers will have to keep on explaining, that you can create something like nature, but that you can never restore a cultural landscape that has been built up over many centuries, once it is destroyed.” (Van Toorn, 1998: 77-78)

The engagement with the old cultural river landscape, at least as expressed by Van Toorn, clearly has an ethical side to it. One could say that the landscape activists represent an ethics of place, in which the ability of inhabitants to ‘read’ the signs in the landscape provides them with a ‘moral measure’ and a sense of belonging. The narrative of place provides them a broader context – the land is an *ethos* in the sense of *ἦθος*, if you will – that gives its inhabitants a sense of what it means to dwell in this place appropriately.

¹² The collective experience of the Dutch landscape has been influenced to a large extent by the works of writers like Hendrik Marsman and Nescio, or more recently by the works of Willem van Toorn and Koos van Zomeren.

Van Toorn and others' resistance against large-scale disruptions of the traditional river landscape can be seen as an articulation of an ethics of place that rejects the managerial perspective and opposes the proliferation of uniform space and the equalization of place. The central aim of this ethics of place is that we should recognize the specific ethos of each specific place; its ideal is a harmonious intersection of nature and culture in which the landscape is saturated with meanings and signs and populated by those who can and who care to read these signs. In this view, the land is a place where one can belong, and the sense of place can add to one's feeling of identity.

Supporters of this ethics of place oppose the view that sees the landscape as a blank slate that can be rewritten at will, where people are free to decide whether to organize a landscape with purely functional considerations in mind, or take into account considerations of 'spatial quality.' What is at stake here is a radical issue about the place of ethics¹³ in a human life. Are places interchangeable, manageable and can they be reorganized at will by humans? Or do they have an internal structure that humans have to adapt to?

4. Restoring Nature and Sense of Place v. 2.0

But there is another perspective that is equally interested in the legibility of particular places, but more favourable to the idea of ecological restoration. Many restoration biologists agree with the critics in their rejection of the purely technical approach of 'building nature' and the idea of nature as malleable. Ecological restoration should be about the attempt to reach a more sensitive relation with nature and landscape.¹⁴

¹³ I borrowed this idea that an ethics of place is actually about the place of ethics from Bruce Janz (Janz 2009).

¹⁴ Hein-Anton van der Heijden (2005) recently distinguished between two conflicting environmentalist discourses in Dutch new nature policy, that emphasize different environmental *values* "about what nature is and could be; about the relationship between nature, agriculture and development; about ecological mitigation, and so on" (p. 427). Van der Heijden claims that most groups who actively promote "sectorial nature development," are very technocratic in their approach to nature – what Eric Higgs would label as "bad ecological restoration" (Cf. Higgs 2003), whereas those environmentalist groups that are more skeptical towards restoration and try to "weigh sectorial interests against the background of increased environmental degradation" would subscribe to Higgs's conception of "good restoration" and put more emphasis on the value of a democratic nature policy and on the societal context of nature policy. As is shown below, at least *some* influential restorationists seem to evade this classification.

Wouter Helmer, restoration ecologist and director of ARK Nature (a major Dutch nature development organization¹⁵), is one of the strong defenders of the ideas behind ‘Room for the river’. Together with landscape architect Willem Overmars, he has argued against the aspiration of ‘building’ according to so-called ‘nature target types’. Instead of ‘*constructing*’ new nature, we should ‘liberate’ nature. Nature development should start with a meticulous examination of those structural features on a particular place that are already present: the “genius of place” or else we will end up with “fake landscapes, a fake geomorphology and a fake history”.¹⁶ What has to be respected are, firstly, the (non-anthropogenic) natural processes and underlying geomorphologic structures that are characteristic of a certain place, secondly, the (anthropogenic) historical developments of a certain landscape as far as these contributed to the specific character of that area, and, thirdly, the societal functions that enable people to interact with these natural processes in ways that are both physically and economically sustainable.¹⁷ Respecting the genius of place implies that nature developers have to take into account the deeper geological structures of a particular place. What this means in practice can be illustrated by the recent treatment of old clay deposits in the forelands. The silting up of forelands with clay has accelerated highly since the construction

¹⁵ cf. <http://www.arknature.nl>

¹⁶ Helmer & Overmars 1998, p. 3. Notice the strong resemblance with Robert Elliot’s argument in his famous paper ‘Faking Nature’ (Elliot 1882), that is directed against the idea of creating new nature to justify the destruction of “original nature” elsewhere (often referred to as “compensation nature”). Elliott argues that genuine, “original” nature, unlike “fake nature”, derives much of its moral value from its “special kind of continuity with the past”. Many (e.g. Higgs 2003, Light 2003, Brook 2006) have argued that Elliot’s argument does not really work in the Old World, where the landscape has been altered by humans for centuries. Whereas Elliot would have to conclude that all Dutch nature will always be “fake” because of the absence of historic continuity, Helmer believes that he can restore *a sense of* “continuity with the past”. That does not mean, however, that Helmer’s position can be meaningfully labeled as “radicalized anthropocentrism”, as Van der Heijden does (2005, p. 437). Helmer’s intention is not to create nature according to human standards, but to reallow natural processes and thereby ‘rehabilitate’ nature as it would have been without human domination of the land.

¹⁷ Van der Heijden (2005) claims that Dutch restoration – and restoration in general – is entangled in a “paradox”, because “‘ecological development of nature’ results into ‘better nature’, but at the same time could be qualified as ‘bad ecological restoration’”, whereas “for ‘societal development of nature’ the opposite applies: ‘good ecological restoration’, but less ‘pure nature’.”(p. 443). If I am right that at least *some* advocates of restoration (such as Helmer) are – at least in principle – sympathetic to Higgs’s idea that nature should be meaningfully embedded in cultural and economical practices (although maybe not so much towards the idea of a ‘democratic’ landscape), then there could be a way out of the paradox.

of embankments. Respecting the genius of place in a floodplain could mean that instead of digging side channels to help the water discharge, one decides to ‘peel off’ old clay depositions and thus uncover ancient river branches (even though this is sometimes possible only by disrupting more recent legible layers).

Some of these projects can even help vitalize local communities. A few years ago, residents of Juliana-avenue in the city of Arnhem discovered that there had been an old creek in their street that was buried under the pavement almost hundred years ago. They started an association and re-designed a creek through their front gardens. Now, each year they celebrate a ‘Juliana creek party’, starting off by drinking water from their own well (which is very exceptional in The Netherlands). Such a party celebrates both the restored relation with nature and the revitalization of the place-based community.¹⁸

Ecological restoration can thus be seen as an attempt to complement the anthropocentric narrative that the cultural landscape activists refer to: not to eradicate human traces, but rather to – literally – dig up legible layers that precede habitation. By showing how the landscape must have been like before humans dominated the landscape and releasing the natural forces that early inhabitants had to deal with, we can deepen the scope of our sense of place. Restoration can thus provide human place-history with a broader context. In that sense, developing wetlands along the rivers could be understood of as a broadening and deepening of the ethics of place, rather than a destruction of it.

Restoration ecologist Frans Vera, one of the most influential individuals in Dutch nature policy, defends nature development with a reference to the so-called “shifting baseline syndrome.”¹⁹ In the history of human cultivation and domestication of the landscape, people almost always were aware of the difference between cultural landscapes and ‘pure’ nature. The contrast between these two helped to understand the workings of the human centred landscape from within the broader context of the surrounding nature. In our present historical situation, however, there is no original nature left anymore, no clear baseline. As a result, people have all kinds of unfounded ideas about how ‘real’ nature looks like and do not perceive the ecological decline because their ideas about nature change together with the

¹⁸ Higgs (2003) discusses more examples of ‘grass roots’ restoration projects, where the restoration of nature is considered to be not so much an technical endeavor, but a “focal practice” in which the human-nature relationship is infused with social and cultural meanings.

¹⁹ The term was first used by marine biologists Daniel Pauly (Pauly 1995).

deterioration of nature. According to Vera, nature development is necessary, because it can help humans establish a new baseline.²⁰

In essence, this demand for a new baseline seems to be a *moral* argument. It is aimed at providing us with a non-anthropocentric moral measure with which to look at ourselves critically. Nature development could give us a sense of how the natural world would have looked like if humans would not dominate the scene – it could help us regain a sense of what is ‘normal’ and ‘in tune’ and what isn’t.

Developing nature is, then, not the eradication of human history, but – on the contrary – the *placing* of human history within the broader framework of earth history. Each inhabited place has a narrative that precedes that of habitation. Retrieving the older layers in the landscape may thus deepen our sense of place. Confronted again with the way in which a river has changed its course during the past millennia, people begin to recognize what it means to live along a river. It can also help them gain a sense of place that is more in line with that of the first inhabitants of the land, who had to deal with natural forces that were much stronger than they have been during the past centuries. Such awareness can help people to recognize again the dynamic nature of the river and learn to live with that dynamism instead of simply trying to control it.

One could say that restorationists like Helmer and Vera want to *morally* deepen our sense of place into a “sense of place v.2.0”. Like the advocates of the cultural landscape, they, too, want to provide our human world with a context that can give us a ‘measure’ of normality. Seen from this perspective, by confronting us with a ‘measure’ that can limit our cultural appropriations of place, restoration could complement and correct, broaden and deepen our sense of place.

Proponents of this idea of ‘regrounding’ our sense of place criticize the defenders of the old cultural landscape both for their anthropocentrism and for their conservatism. In the idealized traditional cultural landscape narrative, nature does not really have a voice of its own. Nature development helps correct this human-centeredness. The legible signs inscribed by humans are not the only ones that tell a story: nonhuman beings and processes left their traces as well. All kinds of natural processes, from ecology to geology, made these places into what they

²⁰ Cf. Vera 2006. Vera himself does not actually use the term ‘place’ but rather speaks about our ‘view of nature’.

have become. Humans are merely co-authors of the landscape, the first chapters of the narrative of each place were written by nature itself.

Helmer cautions us that the emphasis on a new baseline should not amount to a dualism that would forbid any human interference. We do not have to choose between purely cultural and purely natural landscapes. Instead, the new nature areas could be seen as cultural landscapes themselves: as new dialogical human-nature practices that enable both nature and humanity to express themselves in a particular way. According to Helmer we should acknowledge what is there, but at the same time ‘revitalize’ the landscape by allowing new developments. If we recognize that signs and traces add to the meaning of a landscape, why then should we not also be allowed to leave meaningful signs in the landscape ourselves, provided they are in tune with the land?²¹ Maybe it is possible to reinterpret new nature development not just as the uncovering of old texts, but also as the writing of new meaningful traces in the landscape?

5. Towards a Palimpsest Landscape?

The two alternative views presented above differ considerably, but reconciliation between them is – at least in principle – conceivable. Both seek to preserve a sense of continuity with the past; they mainly differ in their time horizon. It might be possible to reconcile the ‘emplaced’ view of restoration as the art of uncovering old traces with a view that is concerned with the legibility of the landscape. A common ideal could be a multi-layered landscape in which one can witness different legible layers on top of each other. Archaeologists speak of multi-layered texts as ‘palimpsests’. The term palimpsest originally refers to recycled parchment documents. In Medieval times, parchment paper was so expensive that people took older documents (often from Greek antiquity), bleached the old ink, and re-used the parchment for writing new texts over the old ones.²² Archaeologists use the term palimpsest because they are concerned with reading different legible layers in the soil, and are trying to find ways to read the older layers without destroying the more recent ‘texts’ on top.

²¹ Van Toorn admits that we should not turn our landscapes into museums. He praises the modern highways in Tuscany, because even they somehow mirror ancient Roman pathways. The new should take into account the old, not by deifying it, but by somehow paying tribute to that which already exists while creating something new.

²² Nowadays, historians use new imaging technologies to decipher the ancient texts without having to destroy the newer texts. In this way, a few years ago, a hitherto unknown text by Archimedes was discovered, hidden under the text of a medieval prayer book.

If we conceive of ecological restoration as the uncovering of ancient layers and the cultivation of the lessons learned from reading the older text, then the palimpsest landscape could be a landscape ideal worth striving for: a multi-layered legible landscape that reflects human history and ‘grounds’ our sense of place in an understanding of the earlier and deeper layers. The big challenge is, of course, how one can uncover deeper layers (for instance clearing older river channels) without destroying more recent depositions on top.

Some experiments with such multi-layered landscapes start from a pragmatic perspective: those signs that still manage to convey a meaningful story about the landscape or that enable a meaningful interaction with it are cared for; those who don’t are allowed to disappear. In the Groenlanden project (along the river Waal near the city of Nijmegen), for instance, restorationists allow agricultural land to become wetland again, although remnants of defensive works from the cold war are actively maintained and the structural features caused by a 19th Century waste dump are considered to be an interesting diversifying ‘gradient’ for future natural developments.

But often it will prove difficult to acknowledge both time horizons. Old wooded banks get trampled underfoot by reintroduced Konik-horses, road remains have to yield for old water channels et cetera. Nevertheless, there seem to be opportunities to creatively combine the two perspectives on the legible landscape within the overall policy framework of Room for the river. If we succeed in dealing with the palimpsest problem of how to uncover old layers in the land without destroying the more recent layers, we may indeed reconcile place concerns and new nature development to a certain degree.

We should, however, be cautious not to hasten to the conclusion that all tensions can be solved. Despite the obvious similarities between both approaches, underneath the conflict between the cultural landscape activists and the restorationists lies a cultural divide that may not be so easy to reconcile.

Willem van Toorn rejects the ideal of nature development, because the new managerial landscape view represents a view of life and of history that he despises:

“The cultural landscape does not have a lobby. It is, at least in The Netherlands, protected by a small group of artists and intellectuals. They protect it against a light-hearted kind of post-modern thinking in which history is just a grab bag, from which one can carelessly throw away anything that is not fashionable. [...] I consider it a dangerous development that, with nature construction, people aspire to create landscapes, in which humans are present only as tourists – and no longer as residents

for whom the signs and narratives of the land are food for their spirit.” (Van Toorn 1998, p.76-77)

Van Toorn seems to distinguish a model inhabitant – capable and willing to read the signs of the land – from an equally stereotypical version of the post-modern ‘visitor of the landscape’ who is not connected to place in any way, neither to the landscape itself nor to history²³. Where the place-dweller passively receives the meaning of his life from the place and its history, the post-modern visitor – notably the city-dweller who visits the river landscape for leisure – thinks of himself as a self-invented, autonomous being²⁴.

The real concern for those worried about the transformation of the river landscape is about us. The real trouble is that *we* lose our ability to read the landscape. According to critics like Van Toorn, the new sense of place v.2.0 will, to a large degree, be dependent on experts, historians and ecologists, to provide people with a credible narrative that makes that particular place legible again.

“The type of nature that nature builders aspire to does not tell us anything – that is why these newly created nature areas have to be provided with information pavilions and signposting, and treasure hunts are organized along routes with special tree species and ponds with half-domesticated otters; humans as strangers, as visitor in their own landscape.” (p.77)

Ultimately, the new restoration narratives cannot make up for the loss of the feeling of belonging, because they do not flow from a genuine connection to the landscape. The traditional sense of place and sense of belonging relied upon a specific knowledge of what was appropriate, what was ‘in place’. The traditional landscape somehow provided its inhabitants – those who knew how to read the signs of the land – with a ‘moral measure’. On the other hand, the deeper textual layers that interest restoration biologists are not legible to

²³ Chiara Certoma mentions that to the “deep form of exotism embraced in western culture, where no primitive harmony or authentic immediateness is present” is perpetuated by “the environmentalist myth [that] non-industrial societies possess a degree of ecological wisdom that has been lost in the process of industrial development” (Certoma 2009, p. ...) [insert page number] Van Toorn’s distinction is similar, but he situates this tension between modernism and authenticity *within* western society.

²⁴ It must be said, however, that this postmodern visitor will probably in some sense feel connected to the city he lives in – a type of place attachment Van Toorn does not seem to consider. Conversely, this way of thinking “disregards that local inhabitants can be very proprietorial about their land and resources” (Certoma 2009, p. ...) [insert page number].

most of us: we need experts to explain them and draglines to bring them to the surface. It is not the land, but the ‘nature experts’ that provide us with a new sense of measure or baseline.

6. Non-place in Supermodernity

At this point, it can be helpful to look at the work of the French anthropologist Marc Augé. Following the definition of Marcel Mauss, Augé starts with the idea that place is culture localized in time and space. Augé distinguishes three aspects of place: (1) places are historic; inhabitants of places do not make history but find themselves in it; (2) places constitute the identity of those living there; (3) places define relations; they link one person to others living there (Augé, 1995: 52). However, according to Augé, we live in an era of “supermodernity”, in which people have a different relation to history, to themselves and to each other. Therefore, more and more locations lack the three features of anthropological place: “non-places”. Supermodernity is determined by three figures of excess. The “overabundance of events” refers to an acceleration of history: history ceases to be a stable point of reference. As a result, the feeling of being a successor of our predecessors is more and more strange to us. The second excess of our time is “spatial overabundance”. Due to increased mobility, we are able to visit more places than ever before in history. Augé points out that, paradoxically, this spatial overabundance leads to a shrinking of the planet, because different places in the world more and more resemble each other. Due to our increased mobility, we are unable to really connect to specific places.

Finally, the third figure of excess refers to the rise of individualism. According to Augé, we do no longer collectively share places as shared frames of reference, but instead, all of us have our own ‘trajectory’ in space.²⁵

Net result this threefold abundance of supermodernism is that more and more places in the world lack the aspects of place that enable people to integrate place in their lives in a meaningful way.

Typical examples of non-places are airports, service stations, supermarkets, malls, and hotel chains. Most non-places have been especially designed to optimize the thru-flow of people: no one is at home there; everyone is just passing through. Furthermore, most airports and shopping malls did not grow organically, but were designed and redesigned solely for

²⁵ Some will argue, in contrast, that many people are actively involved with their place, today more than ever. However, a conscious effort to collectively invest meaning in place – to which many local communities indeed seems to commit themselves these days – could be interpreted as precisely a symptom of the erosion of place, that apparently does no longer come about spontaneously.

purposes such as efficiency and prestige. These non-places do not contribute to anybody's feeling of identity. According to Bruno Bosteels, people in non-places are typically "passengers or customers or both at once [who] immerse themselves in the [...] anonymity of an empty space without history, as if trapped and immobilized in a time without events. What people usually do in such places [...] would seem to involve little more than waiting, remembering, or shopping while passing through" (Bosteels, 2003).²⁶ Non-places "do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory,' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." To be sure, non-places *can* be filled with meanings, but because all people occupying these locations are either at work or just passing through, the meaningful signs in non-places will probably be the result of advertising campaigns, corporate identity projects and the like.²⁷

No one is really at home in these non-places. Only a very narrow part of people's lives takes place there. Non-places do not reflect a genuine history or define a person's identity; neither do they genuinely help to define the relationships that people have with each other.²⁸ Non-

²⁶ Although one could also give a more positive description of the relationship between passengers and non-places. Some people even appreciate non-places such as airports precisely because being stuck there enables one – for instance – to read a book without being called away for all kinds of societal demands

²⁷ The idea that places can be artificially loaded with meaning closely resembles the often criticized 'postmodern' idea that nature is merely a social construction. For other criticisms on this postmodern constructivism, cf. Soulé & Lease 1995. A critique that focuses more on landscapes and ecological restoration can be found in Eric Higgs's *Nature as design* (2003). Higgs criticizes a merely technological approach to ecological restoration because it would inevitably lead to a 'commodification' of nature. By conceiving of restoration as a technological practice, 'focal' meanings and practices of local place-based communities are being neglected, and our imagination will eventually be 'colonized' by universal but sterile stereotypical images of nature. (Cf. Higgs 2003, p. 203-206). What Augé's analysis adds to these criticisms is both a historical explanation of this transformation of place into non-place, and a better anthropological understanding of what this transformation of place means for place-based identities.

²⁸ Although, of course, we should add that all non-places tend to be filled with meaning by people using them. Augé, too, acknowledges that there are hardly any 'pure' non-places – people are investing meaning in new places constantly. In the 2004 movie *The Terminal*, Viktor Navorski, an eastern immigrant finds himself stranded in JFK Airport, and must take up temporary residence there. He is forced to make his home in the airport terminal – the pivotal non-place. As Viktor is trying to find his way around, however, we gradually come to know the terminal as somehow a place of its own. Both perspectives collide in a brilliantly funny scene: Viktor is shaving in a public restroom, when a worn out business man comes in and asks: 'Ever feel like you're living in an airport?'

places make up a purely functional, sanitized landscape. Such an arrangement of space misses the specifics of a regional place that enable people to feel connected to it.

At first sight, Augé's notions of anthropological 'place' seem to resemble Willem van Toorn's remarks on the old river landscapes, for both address the degradation of the traditional link between history, identity and place. Nevertheless, the concept of non-place should give us serious reason to reconsider the idealizations of the old cultural river landscape, and the place-attachment of its inhabitants. According to Augé', as soon as we consider certain places as 'places of memory', we have already started to transform them into non-places. Should that not make us a bit more suspicious about the simple opposition between emplaced old cultural landscapes and the new landscapes as non-places?

Underneath the pleas for the cultural landscapes along the rivers is the assumption that its inhabitants all share a certain sense of place and know how to read the signs in the landscape. There are, however, good reasons to seriously question whether this assumption is actually justified.

The rural areas of the western world are less and less home to a traditional rural population – families that have been living in a specific area for many decades or even centuries – and more and more to well-to-do people from elsewhere who moved their from the city or from other rural areas.²⁹ Peter Howard has pointed out what this means for the place attachment: “[Although] the newcomers are likely to be as keen to promote local identity as those displaced, [...] some may well regret a passing of perceived authenticity.”³⁰ The newcomers often lack the special knowledge and authentic sense of connection that the traditional population is believed to have. Van Toorn may say that “you can never restore a cultural landscape that has been built up over many centuries, once it is destroyed” (Van Toorn, 1998: 77-78), but a similar thing is true for the type of place attachment to these landscapes. The new attachments to the land will differ drastically from the traditional bonds. It seems that less and less people really feel connected to a location in the sense that Van Toorn is expressing.

²⁹ “[I]t is now widely accepted in northern Europe that areas designated and conserved for their attractiveness soon become the property of the comparatively wealthy, many migrating to the area specifically for that purpose. In many of the most attractive parts of England, those on merely average incomes are unable to live in the areas where they were raised.” (Howard 2004, p.427).

³⁰ Howard 2004, p. 428. Also see Lowenthal (2008), who shows that the meaning of the concept of authenticity itself has also shifted dramatically through history.

Of course, we all feel connected to a particular place every now and then. Moreover, most of us feel connected to more than one place. I feel connected to the town of my childhood, to the nature reserve where I spend most of my holidays as a child, to the neighbourhood where I have lived for the last 20 years, to my university campus, to the forest and hills close to my home town. But I also feel connected to the breathtakingly beautiful Tavignanu Valley in inner Corsica, where I spent two summer holidays, to the Eiffel mountains in Germany, where I like to go hiking every now and then, to St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, where I attended some environmental philosophy meetings.

However, the reasons that I value these places have just as much to do with me as with the actual place itself. True, I also value the Tavignanu Valley for its actual beauty. I can learn about the local ecology and explain weather patterns; I can describe its sounds and smells; I can to a certain degree 'sense' how this place reflects the stubborn Corsican soul. But most of the old signs in the landscape will evade me as a visitor. I do not live in its stories; I am unable to distinguish the subtle differences between local dialects that tell myths and heroic tales; I've never learned to 'watch the aging of the stones.' In short, I dare not to pretend to be able to read these signs as someone actually living there could. Furthermore, I value the Tavignanu Valley for its ancient mountain paths, partly because you cannot find these in my own country. These old paths also appeal to my imagination because they remind me of the bedtime stories from my childhood about troubadours and shepherds.

Furthermore, the places that I have a special connection to are probably very different from those of my neighbours or my colleagues (although we will share some of them). Of course, to some extent some places still are shared reference points that partly determine peoples relations to each other,³¹ but places are no longer the taken for granted background shared by all people.

If Augé's diagnosis of our age as supermodernity makes any sense, then most people today are already distanced from their roots to a degree that is far beyond repair. Non-places will appear everywhere, albeit not in a pure form, and we *are indeed* to a large degree destined to be "only present as tourists." Geographer David Lowenthal (2007) has outlined how the decline of rural economies, the abandonment of agricultural landscapes and the loss of traditional ties have shifted landscape attachments throughout the developed world.

³¹ When my colleagues and I recently moved to a new campus building, we shared that experience of being simultaneously forced to re-invent some of our daily routines, transforming a mere building again into a particular place as a common point of reference.

Lowenthal concludes that we are all tourists now and that the landscape is increasingly valued as a *foreign* country. Whatever the new senses of place we will come up with, they will always be ‘provisional’ and – in a certain way – far more superficial than we would like them to be. Any new sense of connectedness to the land will always be accompanied by a profound sense of estrangement. This means that the traditionalist place ideal has become problematic; we cannot cling to it just like that. Although we all *like* to feel connected to a place in the deepest sense every now and then, and conceive ourselves “as a resident[s] for whom the signs and the narratives of the land are food for his spirit”, most of us can no longer pretend to have a primordial bond with the land. We use cultures of place – like (reinvented?) folklore (‘fakelore,’ cf. Dorson 1977, p. 4), local history, and “information pavilions, signposting, treasure hunts along tree species and ponds with half domesticated otter” (cf. Van Toorn) – to provide us with a temporary feeling of meaning, but in the end most of us will indeed remain (to some degree at least) strangers, visitors, aliens to the landscape.

What is more, our desire for belonging in a place should not keep us from recognizing who we also are. According to Augé’s diagnosis, non-places are not accidental, circumstantial erosions of place, but a result of a particular historical development. Non-places mirror how our whole mode of existence has changed in supermodernity. If we would neglect the deeper causes behind the changes in our experience of place, our longing for a restored place attachment would merely come down to wishful thinking, and would eventually lead to an untruthfulness – a masquerade.

If Augé’s diagnosis has some credibility, then clinging to the ideal of ‘good old’ place attachment could eventually only result in the creation of artificial ‘landscapes of memory’, that is: museum pieces, ironical look-alikes of places long gone.³² Instead of ‘grounding’ our identity in place, we would actually draw back into a would-be identity and as a result project our desires onto a landscape and thus create non-places ourselves – landscapes that solely reflect our inability to come to terms with our actual predicament. This way, the opposition against the erosion of place would just produce another symptom of the crisis of place.

³² Note that many of the environmental groups that supposedly adhere to Higgs’s version of ‘good restoration’ (Van der Heijden 2005), are often being accused by the local inhabitants of ‘musealizing’ of the landscape.

7. New Wilderness as an Effort to Emplace our Homelessness?

Augé's diagnosis of supermodernity challenges our present-day nostalgia for a new place attachment. But it can also foster a new, more positive interpretation of what new nature reserves means for our relationship with place. Instead of blaming nature developers of a "light-hearted kind of post-modern thinking" (as Willem van Toorn does), we should be susceptible to new, and more positive interpretations of our new encounters with the land.

Following Augé, we should start with the observation that many of today's landscapes do not suffer from a shortage, but – on the contrary – from an overabundance of ascribed meanings (the signposts and information pavilions, treasure hunts and cycling trails). A truthful way to deal with such a landscape would be *not* to yearn the return of some traditional form of connectedness with a particular place and project old meaning onto the land again, but, on the contrary, to acknowledge, or even further radicalize the actual 'detached' or 'alienated' relation we have with the land.

Could it be possible to interpret the new nature development movement as a *post-modern*³³ attempt to invest meaning in the landscape in a way that mirrors our contemporary position in time and space? Is it possible to combine two aspects that seem to contradict each other: the attempt to 'inscribe' our present identity onto the land, with a simultaneous recognition of our present-day alienation of the land? Can nature development be seen as a post-nostalgic attempt to leave behind supermodernity with its meaningless non-places and mirror our present-day post-modern identity in the landscape again, similar to what our predecessors did?

There is a case for this interpretation. In new restoration projects along the rivers, 'inhuman' places are being created where one can truly feel 'out of place.' But, in a sense, that mirrors who we are ourselves! In that way, we can experience ourselves in these places as beings that are, in some sense at least, out of place. In these places we can be the 'natural aliens' that we truly are (Cf. Evernden 2003, and Casey 1993, p. 234). Paradoxically, with such an interpretation the empty void takes a new meaning again!³⁴

Some restorationists seem to have something like this in mind. Wouter Helmer once used the phrase "insane oasis" (Helmer 1996) to designate the meaning of these 'new wildernesses':

³³ I use the term postmodernism merely as a short-hand term to refer to the era in which modernity has become self-reflexive. For more extensive discussion on postmodern environmental ethics, cf. Cheney 1989 and Oelschlaeger 1995.

³⁴ Certoma points out that "far from demonising modernity and complaining about the loss of authenticity, there is still room for enchantment, materiality and political commitment." (Certoma 2009, p.) [insert page number]

places of freedom, where one can put in perspective the ‘sanity’ of our everyday moral conventions and regulations: places to celebrate human finitude. In this view, the ‘new wildernesses’ are places where we can escape from the overabundance of societal orders and regulations and, one might add, symbolizations of place, and again focus on the not-yet-symbolized place.³⁵

Of course, one could argue that the idea that these places somehow represent the not-yet-symbolized is itself another symbolized meaning, but whether that paradox will prove to be a killing objection is yet an open question. Maybe, the ‘new wildernesses’ along the rivers could be interpreted as sites where we add a new textual layer on top of the existing palimpsest landscape. The crucial difference, however, is that this new text does not ‘root’ us in the land, does not establish a new sense of belonging; on the contrary: this attempt to ‘emplace’ our identity acknowledges our ‘rootlessness.’ In the new wildernesses, humans can be strangers in a strange land; the landscape is valued as an otherness – a place where one is not at home.

If this interpretation has some credibility, we should not simply try to make people feel at home in these new wildernesses by means of folklore and rituals (Cf. Jordan, 2003), information pavilions and treasure hunts. Although it may still be commendable to seek a new partnership with nature and a new ‘symbiotic landscape’, we should also acknowledge that there is a gap between us and nature. The cultural frames that help establish a place-based community also separate us from the land. We should therefore *also* invest in a credible interpretation and cultivation of what it means to be alienated from the earth. The new palimpsest landscapes should not only let us experience a deep connection to the history of a place, but also enable us to realize that we ultimately remain aliens ourselves, inhabitants of a strange world.³⁶

8. Closing Remark

So where does all this leave us? What should be the meaning of place concerns in environmental restoration projects? We have seen that the new restoration practices allow for multiple interpretations, multiple visions of what places could mean to us in our time.

³⁵ Cf. Drenthen 2005 for a possible elaboration of what such a paradoxical stance on nature could entail.

³⁶ In a sense, one could argue that this top-layer of the palimpsest resembles the ‘pre-textual’ bottom layer of soil - the strange places that prehistoric humans encountered as they first entered uninhabited parts of the earth.

We have discussed the dominant river management view; and three alternative views that all imply a vision of the nature of places along a river and also reflect a certain ethical stance on rivers. These perspectives on place raise different questions to landscape and river management, and open different views on what is at stake in the future management of river. And most importantly, they also imply different views on who we are ourselves.

Seen from the dominant river management perspective, the creation of nature in the floodplains appears merely as a powerful management tool to reduce flood risks while increasing landscape quality. Place attachment is considered merely a subjective extra, but considerations of the place should not in themselves play a decisive role in our dealings with the land. In the end, the dominant perspective is mostly a technical one, from which moral or cultural meanings of the land are almost impossible to articulate. The corresponding view of human identity is the highly modern idea that humans are self-invented, autonomous beings who are free to decide what type of relation they have with the places they occupy.

All three alternative visions discussed here, look for a more intrinsic relation between human identity and place. The traditionalist perspective of the legible landscape argues that our landscape management efforts should be strictly confined, so as to prevent the destruction of old legible signs that enable humans to live meaningful ‘placed’ lives. Respect for cultural history should enable people to grow a morally deep and culturally rich connection to the river and let the meanings and traces that make up the land play a part in the way we occupy our places. We should consider ourselves to be dwellers on the land, true residents who always already have to derive a sense of identity from the place they live in. The past should not prevent us from making new traces, however, but guide our efforts to find new appropriate ways to embrace the river. The ‘Room for the river’ plan could be just that, provided that it acknowledges the narrative importance of the embedded meanings that are already present in the land.

The second alternative perspective – ‘regrounding’ the sense of place into a ‘sense of place v.2.0’ – understands the development of new nature along the river as an opportunity to revitalize and deepen our sense of place. In this approach, science is used to disclose a deeper story of the river that can be understood by non-scientists as well. In this vision on place, river ecology presents a moral baseline that urges us to put in perspective our anthropocentric fixation on human needs and meanings, and to acknowledge the river as a source of what is valuable. In this perspective, we see ourselves not merely as cultural but as cultural-ecological beings. We are not merely connected to the land with cultural narratives, but also

by being part of a *bioregion*. The regrounding perspective seeks to re-establish a connection to the land – a new partnership with nature.

We have seen that there are possibilities to reconcile both perspectives in a palimpsest landscape. However, the possibility of such reconciliation should not stop us from seriously questioning the underlying presumption of both former alternatives: that we can and therefore should seek a deeper connection with the traces in the landscape as a source of our place-based identities.

The third alternative point of view, starts by acknowledging our supermodern predicament. New wildernesses along the river can be viewed as new, paradoxical attempts of place-making in which a feeling of estrangement from nature is a key feature. Instead of appropriating the meaning of a river, we let the otherness or wildness of the river enrich our lives again – as a mysterious place where one can be alone and encounter the unruly. In this perspective, we cherish a certain degree of estrangement with nature as part of who we are.

In any particular case, the question will be what is at stake in *this* place. As I have tried to show, what we think of a place reveals something about us as well. Knowing what each place has to say to us, also reveals who *we* really are and want to be in these places.

References

- Augé, M. 1995. *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (translated by J. Howe). London, New York: Verso.
- Bosteels, B. 2003. 'Nonplaces. An anecdoted topography of contemporary French theory'. *Diacritics* 33(3/4): 117-139.
- Brook, I. 2006. 'Restoring landscapes: the authenticity problem'. *Earth Surface Processes and Landforms*, 31:1600–1605.
- Buijs, A. E. et al. 2004. *Gevoelsrendement van natuurontwikkeling langs de rivieren*. Alterra Rapport 868. Wageningen: Alterra.
- Buijs, A.E. 2009. 'Public support for river restoration. A mixed-method study into local residents' support for and framing of river management and ecological restoration in the Dutch floodplains'. *Journal of Environmental Management*, doi:10.1016/j.jenvman.2009.02.006.
- Casey, E. 1993. *Getting back into place. Towards a renewed understanding of the place-world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Certoma, C. 2009. 'Environmental politics and place authenticity protection'. *Environmental Values* **18**(3) *This issue - insert page numbers*
- Cheney, J. 1989. 'Postmodern environmental ethics: ethics as bioregional *narrative*'. *Environmental Ethics*, **11** (2): 117-34.
- Davenport, M.A. and D.H. Anderson. 2005. 'Getting from sense of place to place-based management: An interpretive investigation of place meanings and perceptions of landscape change'. *Society and Natural Resources*, **18**(7):625–641.
- Dorson, R.M. 1977. *American folklore*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Drenthen, M. 2005. 'Wildness as critical border concept; Nietzsche and the debate on wilderness restoration', *Environmental Values*, **14**(3):317-33
- Elliot, R. 1982. 'Faking nature'. *Inquiry*, **25**: 81-93.
- Evernden, N. 1993. *The natural alien. Humankind and the environment*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Firth, D. 2008. 'Do meaningful relationships with nature contribute to a worthwhile life?' *Environmental Values*, **17**(2): 145-164.
- Helmer, W. 1996. 'Waanzinnige oases', in A. Barendregt, M. Amesz & J. van Middelaar (eds.), *Natuurontwikkeling: zin of waanzin?* (Utrecht: Faculteit Ruimtelijke Wetenschappen Universiteit Utrecht), pp.81-90.
- Helmer, W. and W. Overmars. 1998. 'Genius of place'. *Aarde & Mens* **2**(2): 3-10.
- Higgs, E. 2003. *Nature by design. People, natural process, and ecological restoration*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Howard, P. 2004: 'Spatial planning for landscape: mapping the pitfalls'. *Landscape Research*, **29**(4), 423-434.
- Janz, B. 2009. ' "Thinking like a mountain." Ethics and place as travelling concepts', in M. Drenthen, J. Keulartz and J. Proctor (eds.), *New visions of nature. Complexity and authenticity* (pp. 173-188). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Jordan, W.R. III. 2003. *The sunflower forest. Ecological restoration and the new communion with nature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Light, A. 2003. Ecological restoration and the culture of nature: a pragmatic perspective', in A. Light and H. Rolston III (eds.), *Environmental Ethics*. London: Blackwell, p. 398–411.
- Lowenthal, D. 2007. 'Living with and looking at landscape'. *Landscape Research*, **32** (5): 635-656.
- Lowenthal, D. 2008. 'Authenticities past and present'. *CRM Journal: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, **5**(1): 6-17.

- Martin, D.G. 2003. 'Place-framing as place-making: constituting a neighbourhood for organizing and activism'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, **93**(3): 730-750.
- Oelschlaeger, M. (ed.) 1995. *Postmodern environmental ethics*. Albany: SUNY.
- Pauly, D. 1995. 'Anecdotes and the shifting baseline syndrome of fisheries'. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **10**(10): 430.
- Snow, D.A. and R.D. Benford. 1988. 'Ideology, frame resonance and participant mobilization,' *International Social Movement Research* 1:197-219.
- Snow, D.A. and R.D. Benford. 1992. 'Master frames and cycles of protest.' In: A. D. Morris and C. M. Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 133-155.
- Soulé, M. and G. Lease. 1995. *Reinventing nature? Responses to postmodern deconstruction*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Stephanovic, I. 2000. *Safeguarding our common future. Rethinking sustainable development*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tilley, C. 1994. *A phenomenology of landscape. Places, paths and monuments*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Van der Brugge, R., Rotmans, J. & Loorbach, D. 2005. 'The transition in Dutch water management', *Regional Environmental Change*, **5**, 164-176
- Van der Heijden, H.-A. 2005. 'Ecological restoration, environmentalism and the Dutch politics of "new nature"'. *Environmental Values*, **14**(4): 427-446.
- Van Toorn, W. 1988. *Een leeg landschap*. Amsterdam: Querido.
- Van Toorn, W. 1998. *Leesbaar landschap*. Amsterdam: Querido.
- Van Toorn, W. 1999. *De rivier*. Amsterdam: Querido.
- Vera, F. 2006. 'The Shifting Baseline Syndrome: the pitfall of language in restoration ecology'. Presentation in Zurich, Switzerland on July 10th, 2006 at the conference *Restoring or renaturing? The presence of the past in ecological restoration*.