HOW CULTURAL POLITICS SHAPES SPACE AND RELATIONS

A discussion in two parts

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Cultural Politics and the Shaping of Landscapes

The materiality of ideologies

Cultural politics entail the construction and contestation of meanings and values, or put another way, the "codification" of just about everything in the public sphere of society – and arguably, in the private sphere as well. This invariably leads to assumptions of what a society collectively perceives as normative, and ascribes roles of dominance and subordination, shaping its political culture. Not only the outcome, but also the very process of establishing cultural politics involves power relations. Inevitably, cultural politics outgrows the realm of ideology, becoming material and observable.

The materialization of cultural politics on landscape

The landscape of a place can tell much about its cultural politics, and reveal to the careful observer what sorts of values and meanings are most prevalent, thus revealing much about its power structure and how these meanings and values are perpetuated and/or contested.

Mike Davis' *Fortress L.A* (1992) describes a landscape of a city at war with itself. Davis' Los Angeles is the stage of a war of classes, materialized in the form of a militarized, aggressive police, and most of all, by its architecture.

From the design of streets and parking lots to the architecture of public libraries, the values and meanings here have to do with fear and alienation of the *other*, who as Davis suggests, are among others, poor minorities and homeless people (p. 226). The physical segregation described is the materialization of the cultural politics of the Los Angeles of the 1990's, in which the rich entrench themselves in fortress like structures surrounded by cameras and security personnel, while the poor find themselves in chaotic spaces, battling themselves and

the police. The result is “privatized public” spaces, such as malls, city parks and certain commercial streets that cater to a selective few, and where any attempts of contestation are met with strict rules, brute force and carefully engineered architectural features that are meant to maintain and remind the power dynamics in place.

Duncan and Duncan’s (1984) analysis of communities in Canada and New York also finds a materialization of cultural politics in the local landscape. Here the richer members of these communities manipulate power relations through the use of culture and landscape, to affirm and exclude memberships. By altering the political culture, using zoning ordinances, historic preservation acts and opposition to new developments, they reproduce and perpetuate values that regard old rural English architecture as a representation of their own heritage and ancestry, - which is itself, artificially constructed – in order to separate themselves from the emergent *nouveau riche.* When the latter group emerges and contests the values in place by altering the landscape, the “old money” members of these communities feel threatened, as they perceived these alterations as a threat to their own identity and dominance.

The materialization of cultural politics in lived experiences

When Byrne (2012) examined the “cultural politics of nature” regarding public parks in Los Angeles, he found that it was not race itself that defined park use or non-use, and sentiments regarding parks, but the cultural politics *regarding races and their interaction with nature.* Latinos would avoid visiting certain parks fearing blacks and whites because of the values and meanings constructed around all of the races involved; the black as “dangerous”, the white as “wealthy” and “xenophobic”, the Latinos themselves as “undesirables.”

But perhaps the most shocking materialization of cultural politics in lived experiences can be found in the Waverly neighborhood of East Jackson, Ohio, where residents are labeled – and label themselves – black, regardless of their actual ethnicity or skin color. Cultural politics rooted in a long history of segregation and racism towards the residents of that community have perpetuated it as an enclave of blacks, altering the perception of those who share these values to an unusual extent. East Jackson is thus, because of its local cultural politics sustained over time, a *place that makes race.*

Conclusions on culture, politics and incongruences with reality

Looking back at the first required reading of this course, after all the material has been presented and studied, Mitchell's (2000) argument that culture falls short to explain society, but must itself be explained first, makes complete sense.

Contrary to theories of superorganicism, empirical observations suggest that culture is after all, simply a set of artificial, socially created values and meanings that are sustained over time, and very place specific. These values tend to influence the political culture of its society, consequently reproducing them materially, and affecting its members directly, as seen in the incongruences of East Jackson's perception of race, and the military-like architecture and policing of Los Angeles.

Thus, though cultural politics is just the domain where it all takes place, empirical evidence have shown that these sets of ideologies and expectations, as well as the power relations that create them, always manifest themselves materially somehow.

Mine is bigger than yours

Hegemonic masculinity and other male anxieties

Hegemonic masculinity is the socially constructed ideal of male behavior and traits, that serves to explain and perpetuate men as dominant, and women as subordinate. The ideal man, is able bodied, muscular, powerful, dominant, mature, heroic, aggressive and shows no emotions. Like many other – perhaps all? – social constructions, it is heavily dependent on place; specific places demand specific behaviors and qualities, and not behaving accordingly, or even the mere presence of men in some places might be threatening to their masculinity.

Race and masculinity; the right amount of this, the right amount of that

When Peter Jackson (1994) examined the Lucozade advertisement campaign, he carefully considered what constructions of the ideal male were being represented, regarding race; more specifically, the qualities and undesirable traits commonly associated with black men.

Evoking the intersectionality of gender, sexuality and race, he argues that the favorable repositioning of the soda in the market had to do with using stereotypical assumptions of black men; by using black athletes in their advertisements, Lucozade promoters sold the idea of powerful bodies, masculinity and even sexual prowess. They carefully removed negative general assumptions that black men are threatening and rapacious, by including in the campaign men who had certain traits, such as being non-threating, but not goofy – which is incompatible with most discourses of masculinity – and mature.

By deliberately constructing an ideal image of a man around stereotypical views of black males, Lucozade advertisers were able to boost sales of their product, appealing to a large

audience that transcended race, by selling traits and behaviors that men in general desire, and in this case, as suggested by Jackson, particularly traits that white men supposedly envy about men of color.

I like you and I need you, but that's close enough

The case of the Big Brothers institution brings to light the interesting conundrum in which men find themselves, regarding the needing of other men, but always afraid of being framed as homosexual, which they perceive as something that threats their dominance status.

Hopkins (2012) looks at an institution concerned with providing young boys who grow up with no male figures around with male models to serve as inspiration and support. First, Hopkins offers a deep reading of symbolisms imbued in the advertisement campaigns that Big Brothers used to recruit new big brothers; that of the "hero", the "warrior", the "magician", the "buddy," all drenching with idealized roles of male dominance.

Then, he goes on to examine the strange place in which the whole campaign places men; suddenly, men find themselves in a threatening position of either needing another man, or being the object of affection of another man. This dynamic contradicts hegemonic masculinity, by placing men in the delicate position of showing and sharing emotions, while also potentially getting male bodies dangerously close, and openly expressing feelings for each other, getting close to grey lines that might suggest homosexuality. The majority of images used in these ads portrays men and boys outside, or in public places, for the privacy of a room or too much contact would enhance the suspicious regarding homosexuality.

Representations vs. reality

Bell (2000) looked at how the city and rural areas are associated with very different representations of men. Suggesting that public discourse expects men from urban settings to be more feminine than their rural counterparts, he also writes about how city and countryside evoke specific ideals and behaviors.

While the countryside is naturalized as a place to be and become a man, as it is a "natural" setting, where men are supposed to behave based on instincts, like an animal, and where sex is simply sex, orifices are to be penetrated, with no preoccupation regarding gender. Therefore, an interesting dynamic where masculinity is unaffected by homosexual sex in a natural setting is observed, suggesting that homosexuality is actuality closer to "natural" than constructions of hegemonic masculinity.

But though representations of rural men portrayed in movies and other forms of media - created by and for city audiences - help perpetuate these stereotypes, gay men in rural settings are often forced to behave in a more normative way, for tolerance to homosexuality is sometimes inexistent. Many end up moving to the city, where the perception of a more "gay friendly" atmosphere promises acceptance and a chance to reproduce themselves according to their sexuality.

Conclusion

Hegemonic masculinity is a set of values used by men to ensure male dominance in society. It is highly geographically referenced; place is crucial in defining what is normatively expected from men.

Race is important, as it always carries a gender connotation, with its own set of stereotypical assumptions; a black male is perceived in a very different way than a white man.

Finally, hegemonic masculinity often contradicts the lived experiences of the same very men who perpetuate it. When men find themselves in situations where the way they feel is incompatible to the way they "should" behave, these values are internally contested.

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