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Cultural Geography as a Tool for the Analysis of Landscape and Society

A SHORT ESSAY IN TWO PARTS

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PART ONE

An Afternoon in the Wine Country;

Observations of Landscape, Place and Iconography

Earlier this year, I spent a day in the Castello di Amorosa, in Napa Valley, California. Some observations I made during that afternoon started to make more sense after being introduced to cultural geography, and some of its main concepts, particularly the inner workings of *landscape* production, meanings of *place* and the use of *iconography* to shape and perpetuate ideologies.

On landscape and the invisibility of its agents

The California theorized by Mitchell is all the more visible in the Wine Country of the Bay Area. Sauer and his Berkeley school would look at the pristine agricultural land and explain that this is a landscape that reflects the culture that has inhabited the region for generations; if decoded correctly, – by relying heavily on iconography and the materiality of the landscape - this cultural landscape can explain much about those who built it. While there is truth to that, this conceptualizations of landscape neglect the importance of struggles of class, contestations of meaning and resistance as agents of transformation of landscapes like the one found in Napa Valley.

Mitchell, meets in the middle, acknowledging the importance of both materiality and social struggles in the construction of landscape. Understanding *what* landscape really is, *how* it's produced, and explaining the processes in which it *functions* in society helps us better understand and appreciate landscape, and all it seeks to naturalize.

Dining at a winery located in a region that not long ago was Mexican territory, gazing at a landscape notoriously known for being worked by a class of undocumented, underpaid Latino immigrants, I could somehow appreciate that. Above all, it was the absence of any Latinos in the dining room – except for the all-Latino kitchen staff one can sometimes see through the swinging doors of the kitchen – that was striking to me.

Here, a specific class is meant to enjoy the landscape, while another is meant to almost exclusively work it without ever being visible, or truly appreciate the product of that work; in different ways, both are responsible for its production, and that landscape works back on them, shaping their identities in a mutually transformative process.

One space, many places

The way that a wealthy Anglo-American perceives a place like Castello di Amorosa is very different than that of the undocumented migrant worker. Notions of proprietorship, sense of belonging and embodied experiences shape a single space into many different "stages," depending on one's positionality; what could mean heritage, culture and leisure to one, might very well mean labor, injustice and sorrow to another.

Agnew's definition of place, or as he puts, "meaningful location," carries three components; a *location* hosts a *locale,* and a *sense of place*. Castello di Amorosa has a specific location on the globe, – which is unique - a locale with a certain arrangement of buildings, architecture and topography - which might be similar to that of the Italian Tuscany, for example - and a sense of place, with all the meanings it carries - which varies tremendously depending on ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality or lived experience, for example.

Acknowledging these three aspects helps us perceive a location as meaningful place. Creswell argues that this is crucial for a better understanding of the world, and appreciating differences, interconnections, experiences and meanings; seeing *places* instead of *locations*, is looking at the world with an enhanced lens.

Iconography; "constructing culture"

The symbolism that Castello di Amorosa carries must not be overlooked. Built in the 2000's, its architecture emulates that of a castle from the 12th century – including a replica torture room, with a real 300-year-old Iron maiden brought from Italy. The intent here is to suggest heritage, evoking a past that does not exist; it seeks to validate winemaking and nobility as "traditional" to that region, in an almost feudalist fashion. This selective portrayal of symbols and icons is carefully constructed, and invariably erases/conceals the pre-existent ones – that of native Americans, and Mexicans.

As Mitchell cites on his observations of Johnstown, Chinatown and the Sacré-Cœur, iconography like the one found at Castello is a powerful device of naturalization of values and ideologies. Subtly but effectively, monuments and landscapes like these perpetuate meanings, social relations, ideologies – thus, creating culture, and establishing who are the "others".

As I walked to the car, leaving the winery, I walked past a group of Latinos underdressed for the place, conversing in Spanish and gazing at the castle. Concluding that they didn't belong there, they decided that it would be a better idea to look for a "more Latino welcoming place" to hang out, laughing timidly. There were no signs outside suggesting they were not welcome in the winery. Yet, they were able to read the message very clearly.

Castello di Amorosa in Napa Valley, California. Though built in the 2000's, the castle evokes an air of feudalism.

PART TWO

Imaginary Borders

The Role of Culture in Nation Building and Imperialism

Nations and nationalism are ideological to the core. They are constructed on the basis of shared culture and history, serving as instruments of the state to coordinate collective efforts of people. Considering then, that culture is not natural, but rather a sustained set of ideologies, nations are as Benedict Anderson puts, "imagined communities." Therefore, nothing is really "natural" about them, much less their borders. Like culture, nations are socially constructed; borders are imaginary.

However, nationalism sparks a great deal of passion and conflict, and is somehow naturalized and materialized by a general consensus that one must belong to a nation, and be associated with a culture; nationalism is therefore, tightly connected with identity formation, and as Mitchell puts it (2010), culture often carries the very meaning of citizenship.

Imperialism as perceived cultural superiority

Along with strong sentiments of nationalism, arises imperialism. The idea that one's culture is superior to others is the foundation of imperialism. Nations then seek control over others, coercing those which they consider inferior to them, and imposing slavery, colonialism, assimilation and destruction. Ultimately, the imperialist nation seizes territory and/or imposes its culture over others, perpetuating an unequal relationship in which one nation has power over another.

These notions of superiority and promotion of "otherness" are tied to normative conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, race and certain cultural values – often religion. These are used to reference those who are to be subjugated, and also to justify it. At the same time, they build a "national identity," that serves to exclude others in a very subtle way. Those who belong to a nation and don't comply with the norms are cast aside, if unwilling to abide. The state constantly patrols the behaviors and even bodies of its nationals, to insure that the desired image is being embodied properly.

"All nationalism is gendered"

At the center of political and cultural struggles in the Republic of Ireland in the 90's, was the feminine body. Values linked to religion, purity and national identity are more than just ideological, as women tend to carry burdens in very material ways. Angela Martin's *Death of a Nation* explores how ideologies revolving around normative notions of family, women's rights and the fears of deterritorialization made the state impose severe restrictions over women's rights to work outside the house and even travel when pregnant. The pressure coming from the then emergent E.U threatened the catholic-oriented values promoted by a state largely religious, particularly in regards to abortion. The normative nuclear family here emerges symbolically, and yet very materially; the state being the man, and the woman the wife, whose struggle, body and emotions are treated as secondary and subjective, for the future of the nation - symbolized by the unborn baby - is at stake.

The use of women as a symbol of something to be nurtured and protected and as the bearer of the future is a constant in nationalist propaganda, and so is the masculinization of the state. The article by Morin et al. regarding notions of nationhood in New Zealand confirms that and sheds another light on the issue of gender and imperialism. In New Zealand, mountaineering

was perceived as a civilized way of displaying masculinity, and to a certain extent, a way of assuring national superiority over other nations; a form of imperialism indeed. Here, the powerful, strong men of New Zealand demonstrated to the world the value of their nation by climbing impossible mountains. But when women revealed themselves capable of climbing these same mountains, they lose their value and they become "feminized." This notion that "if a woman can do it, then men must do better" shows how nationalism as McClintok argues, always has a gender; and that gender is undoubtedly masculine.

Imperialism and the colonial gaze

Ideologies regarding race have perhaps been the most prevalent in justifying colonialism and other forms of imperialism. The concept of "us vs. them" was heavily promoted by white European settlers and their imperialist nations, who seen natives of the lands they colonized through the past 500 years as inferiors, imposing violence and slavery upon them. Years after the period of extensive European colonization, much residual racism towards darker bodies persists.

Rothenberg explores these dynamics when looking at the *National Geographic Magazine,* questioning the supposed neutrality and innocence of the publication. Looking at a different kind of imperialism, Rothenberg deconstructs the notions behind what makes a picture of a naked Polynesian girl acceptable to be published in a large scale publication, while the bare breasts of an Anglo-American woman were considered indecent.

This subtle, silent form of imperialism has much to do with ethnocentric ideologies and white centric perceptions of nature. Ideas such as those promoted by George Perkins Marsh, of "men above nature, and stewards of nature" - in which men can be read as white, Germanic and educated – have perpetuated imperialism in the US, in the form of nationalism. In his

Understories (2006) Jake Kosek examines the role of eugenics and the promotion of the white race as superior and separated from nature, while other races were merely part of it;

"Those who claimed some knowledge of or control over nature demonstrated, by their own logic, their superiority over those who did not. Thus, while the "lesser races" were subject to nature's whims, the "higher races" were able to bend nature and its subjects to their will. for their own good". (162)

For the National Geographic and its audience, the reason why darker bodies were allowed to be shown nude was because they were "part of nature." Depicted in the wild, these bodies are perceived much like the trees, animals and other resources found in nature; they can be used, explored and commodified by those who see themselves superior.

Though British imperialism over the country had been extinguished, American nationalism during the 19th and 20th century, rooted in racist ideologies justified and materialized its own form of imperialism through the oppression and exploitation of darker bodies, within and beyond its borders. The imperial voyeurism that Rothenberg exposes is just one example.

Reflections on the weakening of borders, the rise of the global citizen and the new imperialism

While national boundaries remain a subject of heated debate in many parts of the world, ideologically they're eroding. Scotland voted to remain in the E.U in 2014, communications and transportation shortened distances to a dimension never seen before, and a poll conducted for BBC World Service released in April 2016 (GlobeScan) revealed that about half of 20,000 people interviewed across 14 different countries identified themselves more as "global citizens" than as nationals of their respective countries. Could it be, that humanity is moving towards a boundless world? Would that mean the end of imperialism?

People are more mobile than ever, and culture is shared across the world, via YouTube videos and cable TV. Social media has connected people – at least, those who have access to internet and hardware technology. However, behind all this are a handful of corporations, largely deregulated, often acting independent from the state, who control the airwaves, the internet, satellites, a large portion of the market of goods and services and who commodifies and controls much of the culture being produced and consumed across the globe.

Corporative imperialism has risen. Large corporations outsource their labor, exploiting people from less developed nations. Often working in subhuman conditions to produce in large scale and at low prices products that are sold globally, there is little difference between their situation and slavery. The digital divide excludes billions from the "democratic" virtual spaces that the internet has created. Tech companies expand to all corners of the globe, monopolizing services worldwide. The new imperialism does not seem to be concerned with borders; it has outgrown them. Money and data are the new territory it seizes.

In this new and subtle kind of borderless imperialism, humanity has found itself at an absurd level of inequality and cultural confusion. Brazilian kids living in slums kill for American Nike shoes made by kids in Cambodia. Starbucks alters the dynamics of entire communities in South Africa by selling Italian coffee drinks (Sanchez, 2016). Google sees and knows everything.

Culture is at the center of all this; commodified, packed and shipped around the world, it enables an unprecedented level of inequality. In a world where people increasingly feel that borders are weakening and culture is shared by more people than ever before, the borders now are defined in terms of capital. And as imaginary as they are, they're also very much material.

Citations

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