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Using Landscapes to Tell Spatial Stories

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Walking to school each day, I gaze at my neighborhood, studying it for spatial cues. There are a multitude of texts – flyers on lampposts, the frequency of street cleaning, the width and evenness of the sidewalk, the brands of vehicles parked at the curb, the lights for evening movement, surveillance cameras or police, the appearance of people who rarely give notice as we pass – that offer a sense of my neighborhood. I come to understand what it means to fit in or feel excluded. The planned architecture tells me something of the intended sense while the added textual cues, particularly the people and how they move suggest how people perceive and respond to the intended environment. Through these, my neighborhood comes into being as a place, an entity of social construction, ripe with layers of history and differentiated experiences (Schmidt, 2011; Massey, 2005).

The study of places is the foundational work of geography education. As we embody places every day, it is easier to be thoughtful about them. The feelings evoked, the sensations of sight, smell, and sound give nuance to how we react to and why we choose to enter some spaces and remove ourselves from others. Inside the geography classroom, the spatial practices often change. The student and teacher are removed from the “objective” study of places on maps. The abstractness and distance produce a difficulty in producing a robust and critical narrative about these faraway destinations. But the results are no different. The everyday encounters give us stories that we share with others and shape how we and they choose to negotiate the city; the stories we tell about distant places to which we travel in classrooms similarly impact how we respond when we read about them in the news or make vacation decisions. As a geography educator, I seek to help students move between the abstract and concrete in being critical of the spatial stories we tell. This paper considers landscapes as concept for deeply understanding places and our relationships to them.

The Changing “Landscape” of Landscape Geography

The term landscape most commonly deploys a fixed image, likely a painted one hanging on a wall. Landscapes served this role in geography as well (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987). Landscape images appear in geography textbooks through paintings or photographs that capture a specific area and depict its physical traits, artifacts, colors, and textures. People rarely appear as more than background features. A more critical examination of these images has enabled a dynamic engagement with landscapes in contemporary cultural geography. The landscape is not an objective image. It arises from how the photographer or painter gazes at or experiences an area. Where does the viewer stand to study the area and how is the area of study bounded? The answers indicate the intentionality and perspective that need to be examined with landscape (Rose, 2008). Not knowing what is beside the swath of imagery decontextualizes the landscape. A photographer can turn a busy city block into serene green space by capturing the park and not the tall buildings



adjacent to it. After making such broad decisions, the details become increasingly important. The artifacts are cultural symbols. Returning to a potential landscape view of an urban park, particular benches, light fixtures, trees, statues, and animals become the specific symbols of the park. The landscape also has layers; it appears in two dimensions but reveals multiple dimensions. It is important to pay attention to what is foregrounded and what is diminished in the background or how the layers blend together or are differentiated.

Landscapes are used by cultural geographers to put representation and perception into tension with one another. Wylie (2006) writes of landscape: "A crucial point here is that the visual world always transcends its perception. In seeing or touching something I do not assimilate it, or acquire a total grasp of it; instead, it transcends my apprehension. For there to be vision at all the body which sees must be part of the world, and the sensible world must be transcendent in relation to the body that sees." (p. 526). Wylie carefully positions the spectator as producer of meaning. It is precisely in this struggle to perceive that the landscapes we build in geography classrooms become critically important.

Studying Space, Building Landscapes

In my classroom, I begin with the concrete such that we can develop spatial questions and dispositions for encountering abstract places. In the study of city places, I offer students this prompt:

Walking through the world, you encounter a rich curriculum about equity. Although this curriculum is widely available to us, many of us rarely notice it. Who we are in relation to space affects what we notice. The main purposes of this assignment are to learn to collect and use spatial data to examine the world around you and to analyze how equity issues are inscribed in and affect how people access space.

The resultant place-based activities ask them to work in groups over the course of three months to study and restudy the chosen site of inquiry, determine its "boundaries" and decide how to represent it to their peers. They work in groups in hopes that different vantage points and experiences will expand their relationship to and study of the space. In the activities, they conduct demographic and archival research, observe and move within the space, engage with people, talk to "experts" (i.e. local leaders, real estate agents), draw sketch maps, describe their sense(s) of place, talk with group members, and examine their positionality and affective responses. They post observations, reflections, maps, and notes into an online forum where their classmates and I offer questions and suggestions for subsequent activities. Students make multiple visits to their location to deepen their observations using prompts I give, class readings, experiences across the city, group discussions, and feedback from the online forums. They are encouraged to observe the space, seated or moving, simultaneously but independently and discuss their observations. They use cameras and audio recorders, interview people, take notes, and collect artifacts. At the end, they build a product that reflects their learning and share it publicly. In examining the products, supposed about the city, we actually learn far more about the participants and the lenses they use to gaze at the space and its inhabitants. The best products do not reach resolution about a singular meaning of or experience in the locale, but consider how and why experiences differ.



The most recent class produced six products from different areas of New York City – South Bronx, Central Harlem, Spanish Harlem, Marble Hill, Washington Heights, and Prospect Park South. As a landscape, the project foregrounded these neighborhoods as evidence of change due to gentrification. The result was increased racial segregation and inequity. They took pictures for their products that foregrounded symbols of gentrification. For example, a photograph of 125th Street in Central Harlem positioned the photographer such that the Gap and Starbucks were bold in the front with the old landmark, Apollo Theater lurking in the backdrop. Throughout the photos were taken to document the changing material forms that invited new business and clientele into the areas and potentially displaced others. They used data in their products to support the photos they took. Their data compared the decline of local businesses and rise of chain stores, evidenced escalating property costs, the razing of unsightly buildings to make way for new condos, the changing demographics of the school population, etc. Across each project, a concerted effort was made to elevate the theme that gentrification was a socially unjust practice.

The borders of study and the evidence to support the representation were as much about the space as the worldview of the students. They had a number of opportunities to discuss themselves in relation to the dominant sense of place they sought to produce in their landscape projects. First, they were enrolled in a class about social inequality and likely felt pressure from the instructor to document the themes of inequality in everyday practice. The prompt for the assignment positioned them to take the view of the city. Second, the students were in the class because they wanted to learn about social inequality. This was an elective course. The decision to be present reflected a shared political position. Further, many students voiced criticism of racial injustice and neoliberalism in response to other class readings. Finally, the students were outsiders to their spaces of study. None of the students lived in the neighborhood they studied. They chose areas based on an existing assumption that they would encounter difference and inequitable conditions. They positioned themselves to see this inequality and to notice difference from more privileged areas where they lived. In listening to the primary stories of place, we must hear this voice and think about their line of vision. It allows us in subsequent discussion to ask what was missed and what might have arisen if they were to try to walk the same neighborhood with a different gaze. Is it possible to wear different shoes and see a different world?

Even with this dominant gaze and attention to gentrification, the products were not one-dimensional. This is an important element of the landscape. In seeing the multiple dimensions, we presume from the outset that the symbols and claims at the forefront are not universal stories of the space. The very nature of thinking through landscape asks for a contemplation of a more complex story. While the photography mentioned above centered the new, it still contained the old. The product about central Harlem featured a rich African American history. Even beneath this new cultural flow, another culture thrived. It may be in the background now, but it is there. Many people still went to this area in search of that culture. Similarly, in front of Starbucks were African vendors peddling goods from the sidewalk. While the chain stores may tempt White and middle class customers, the street culture indicated the presence and flow of African immigrants alongside them. The projects also featured evidence of surveillance and commented about the specific location of where cameras and police cars were stationed. They noted that cameras were positioned to produce the sensation of safety or fear depending on one's race or class. In seeing



the different layers and experiences in the space, the students also noted their different experiences. They had to talk about where they felt secure and familiar and accept what produced discomfort. They had to think about the adjectives they used to describes smells and sounds. What were the consequences of depicting the unfamiliar aroma of Senegalese restaurant as unpleasant? They saw their power in writing the story of the space and its symbols in particular ways.

Any class that takes up this or a similar prompt and exercise will reach different conclusions specific to the local context and the students' worldviews. The purpose of providing the overview from my classroom is to demonstrate the layers, decisions, and interactions used to produce a landscape as a way of writing a complex and personal story of space. With each class of mine, new stories appear. The exercise is about the stories that do arise, how they are reached, whether they are allowed to be layered and how others in the class respond to them.

The Value of Landscape

In geography classrooms, the places we study are not typically ones young people can embody physically. The lessons of this assignment in the city can be used to examine both the far and near. As an assignment in a geography classroom, the activities with the city spaces have equivalencies, particularly given the media available today. A contemporary example might involve a spatial understanding of Turkish border areas in conjunction with the Syrian refugee "crisis". They might begin with offering a position statement about the Middle East and refugee movement and prior knowledge about Syria and Turkey. Unable to visit the areas, students can look online for a variety of pictures and videos from different peoples across a period of time and document their emotions as they encounter them. They will have access to many sites of data about peoples and where they are located. They can reach out to organizations and town officials to acquire multiple perspectives from area experts. They can read news and create their own maps to represent how they understand spatial depictions therein. And finally they can build an interactive and multilayered "landscape" map of a selected area. In the process of presentation, they are asked to discuss their relationship to it and how they came to tell the stories they did. The process of narrowing down the borders of depiction, the decision about how to gaze at the data, the choice of images and artifacts to use as symbols, and what is fore-fronted and placed in the background are the aspects of cultural geography making their way onto a landscape that become available to other spectators.

The C3 Social Studies Framework (2013) asks that geography become a more complex discipline studied through interactions and representations. The study of place through landscape produces geographic tools and skills that encourage young people to explore interactions and their power and to think seriously about representation. These tools allow for an active and critical experience with abstract places akin to everyday encounters with lived spaces. The student becomes part of the spatial encounter. S/he must discuss how existing worldviews shape what is seen and how the decision about what story to tell affect how others will come to know the place. The viewing of images and documenting of reactions allows for an affective discussion of how we perceive spaces. The layered and discussion of different perspectives on and experiences in the place allow young people to discuss and understand the complexity of space. Geographers



recognize that we struggle to define space and have contested claims over it but geography education too often allows for the stability of place. Landscapes and the discussion around them are one means of thinking about interaction, representation, complexity, and intention. How we tell stories about places has consequence; I encourage us to give serious attention to how we prepare young people to take seriously the spatial decisions (Soja, 2010).

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