

Chapter 1

New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice

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Although the word is seldom so used, it is proper and important to think of cultural landscape as nearly everything that we can see when we go outdoors. Such common workaday landscape has very little to do with the skilled work of landscape architects, but it has a great deal to say about the United States as a country and Americans as a people.

— Geographer Peirce Lewis, 1979

I think the landscape is everything outside the building footprint. It is the moment you walk out of the house and enter the world.... The asphalt is our landscape. The streets are our landscape. The landscape is everything out there, and it looks like hell. The United States is getting uglier and uglier. We are sprawling out, and so little value is given to our landscape.

— Landscape Architect Martha Schwartz, 2004

It has been more than 25 years since Peirce Lewis (1979) laid out his “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene.” Lewis’s axioms were designed to help us better see how, as he put it (complete with italics), “*all human landscape has cultural meaning*, no matter how ordinary that landscape might be” (p. 12). The axioms, Lewis suggested, “seem basic and self-evident,” even if “what seems self-evident was not obvious to me a few years ago” (p. 15). By restating what he took to be obvious, Lewis’s sought to provide a set of simple guidelines for understanding the meaning of the cultural landscape, and for using that meaning – gleaned from “reading” the landscape (that is, careful observation and inductive reasoning) – to come to some conclusions about American culture. For him, aesthetic judgments about the landscape were secondary. Primary was the question of why the landscape looked the way it did. What clues did the landscape itself present as to its own making?

To answer that question, Lewis suggested seven axioms:

- Landscape is a clue to culture. It “provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming” (p. 15). By reading the landscape we could glean important insights into “who we are.” As a corollary, Lewis argued, if landscapes looked different, it was because there were significantly different cultures at work. If they were growing more similar, it was because cultures were growing more similar. Moreover, both the diffusion of landscape items across space and local cultural “tastes” were central in giving landscape its particular look and feel.

- Nearly every item in the landscape “reflect[s] culture in some way” (p. 18). We need to pay attention even to what at first glance might seem commonplace, trivial, or just plain haphazard and ugly. At the same time we need to make judgments about when an item really just is the idiosyncratic whim of an individual and thus truly is unique.
- Landscapes are difficult to study “by conventional academic means” (p. 19). Rather, scholars need to turn to “nonacademic literature” (like trade journals, journalism, promotional literature, and advertisements). Most of all we need to train ourselves to “learn by looking” (as Lewis 1983, put it in a different piece): we need to train ourselves to pay attention to the visual evidence. (Lewis gives little idea of what constitutes “conventional academic means” but the sense is that it is limited to reading scholarly books).
- History matters to the structure and look of a landscape. We inherit a landscape which forms the basis for any changes or developments we subsequently make. Change itself is uneven (historically “lumpy” [p. 23]). Both technological and cultural change comes in great leaps forward, perhaps more so than as gradual evolution.
- Location matters too: “Elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e., locational) context.” Indeed, “[t]o a large degree cultures dictate that certain activities should occur in certain places, and only those places” (p. 24). Thus “context matters” (p. 25).
- So does physical environment, since “conquering geography” is often a very expensive business.” Physical geography may not determine, but it does establish the limits of possibility and the costs of exceeding those limits.
- Finally, while all items in the landscape convey meaning, they do not do so readily: meaning can be obscure. Even so “chances are” any disagreement over meaning “can be cleared up by visual evidence” (p. 27).

How the visual evidence, which is “obscure” as to its meanings, can clear things up is never explained. Even so, Lewis’s faith in “reading” has been infectious, attracting adherents not only in geography, but in landscape architecture and other fields as well. Following not only Lewis, but also landscape pioneers like J.B. Jackson, many were swayed by Lewis’s argument that “One can … quite literally teach oneself how to see, and that is something that most Americans have not done and should do” (p. 27).

And yet, even as Lewis’s axioms were being codified, their “self-evident” nature was being undermined by other trends in landscape studies,¹ trends that took a decidedly more critical – and historical – approach to understanding what the landscape was, and what it meant. Radical geographers like Denis Cosgrove (1984, 1985, 1993) and Stephen Daniels (1989, 1993; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988), inspired by developments in art history and incipient cultural studies, began to

¹Even if, oddly, their rather chaotic and contradictory nature has rarely been criticized. It is amazing how little has been said about Lewis’s odd notion that obscure meanings, if looked at hard enough, will reveal answers to even the thorniest scholastic questions.

explore not just how landscape had cultural meaning, but how it had *ideological* meaning (see also Duncan 1990). Even as early as 1962, geographers like Marvin Mikesell had warned that the history of the landscape idea in Western society was as important to understanding landscape form as was the physical evidence of the landscape itself. And by the mid-1980s, among critical historians, art historians, and geographers, a regular landscape industry developed, aiming at uncovering how landscape (both physical and representational) was central to maintaining and reproducing class relations and elite power (Barrell 1980; Bender 1993; Berger 1972; Bermingham 1984; Williams 1973). By the early 1990s a general consensus had developed, particularly in art history, about how landscape representation (including representation in the bricks and mortar of the built landscape) was a form of power: a power to determine what is and what is not seen. People often worked hard to make some aspects of the landscape “obscure” and others “obvious” (see, e.g., WJT Mitchell 1994c; Olwig 2003). “Visual evidence” was undoubtedly crucial, but such evidence did not so much explain (as Lewis would have it), but was itself in need of explanation. And, crucially, “culture” was too crude an explanation for much of anything, since any culture, as cultural studies was making it its business to show, was shot through with struggle, conflict, difference – in short the exercise of power (Duncan 1980; Eagleton 2000; Jackson 1989; D. Mitchell 1995; Williams 1958, 1977, 1980, 1982).

Such arguments were not only influential in art history and cultural studies – and were not limited to landscape representation. Geographers and others began to reconsider the basic suppositions that provided the foundation for Lewis’s axioms about the built, physical landscape. Rooted in Carl Sauer’s (1963 [1925]) reformulation of the German landscape morphology tradition, these suppositions argued that any morphological landscape was an expression of the local culture that made it. Change in landscape was attributed to the introduction of a new, “alien” culture (as Sauer put it) or the local adoption of some diffusing trait. The main assumption was one of cultural and morphological stability (even when made more complex by the adoption of something like an organic “life cycle” model that understood that cultures were born, developed and eventually died). The roots of reaction to this model, clear in the work of Cosgrove (1984), Kenneth Olwig (1984, 1993, 1996, 2003, 2005), and others (e.g., Duncan 1990; Jackson 1989; D. Mitchell 1996; Rose 1993) were complex, but revolved around what could be called a “modernization” of landscape theory – modernization in the sense that Sauer’s emphasis on past, often archaic cultures allowed for rather simple arguments about the nature of culture and the stability of landscape that simply were not tenable in any contemporary (or even most historical) societies, even if these assumptions were often smuggled, without comment, into landscape theories like Lewis’s (cf. Duncan 1980). A modern theory of *capitalist* landscape required a theory of culture, as well as a theory of morphology, that was at least as supple and complex as the world it wished to describe (Cosgrove 1984). The shape and structure – the morphology, the visual evidence – of manor houses built in early-capitalist England, for example, might say something important about English culture, but *only* when set within a theory, and especially a historical analysis, of changing property relations, new legal

innovations (like vagrancy laws), transformations in the nature of political power, the growth of industrial towns and cities and the crucial role of colonialism (Cosgrove 1984; Daniels 1993; Helsinger 1994; Olwig 1996, 2003; Said 1993) – all things about which the local landscape, in fact, offered very little direct evidence. Indeed, evidence of such transformation that made the landscape possible had to be sought out by those “conventional academic means” that Lewis eschewed: careful archival research (see Holdsworth 1990), analysis of changing social structures and laws, ethnographic or other similar methods, and even “theory.”

Or consider, as I have done, the production of the California agricultural landscape (D. Mitchell 1996, 2001, 2003). Consider a photograph I have of a lone blue port-a-potty at the meeting point of four greenfields in the San Joaquin Delta (Figure 1). Taken from a levee, pear and peach orchards can be spied in the distance. The field at the time the picture was taken was empty: just new green shoots rising out of the flat earth and the toilet in the middle. This is as ordinary, as “commonplace,” a landscape as there is in California and the toilet is, seemingly, about as trivial a landscape “item” as can be imagined. But just looking at it tells us absolutely nothing about why it is there or in fact what it means. For it is mute about the more than 50 years of often violent social struggle that finally led, in 1914, to a new law governing sanitary conditions in agriculture, as well as to the subsequent six decades in which the law was almost never enforced (at least not without the inducement of violent strikes and walkouts), and to how once it was enforced, to some degree in the 1970s, agribusiness went back on the offensive against agricultural labor, finding allies in the governor’s office all through the 1980s and 1990s so that by now such a toilet is in fact once again quite a rare site in the fields. The toilet in the field *in and of itself*, that is to say, provides very little evidence about the long history of struggle, often violent, between different factions of capital, between capital and the state, between capital and labor, and among laborers themselves, that give rise to the specific form of the landscape (and in which the landscape has always been such a crucial player), as well as specific items in the landscape. Nor, by the same token, do the cabins, washhouses, and pickup trucks in a contemporary county-run labor camp, or the dollar stores, fast-food joints, bars, and cheap apartments along Charter Way in Stockton, clearly say much at all about how they got there – and why.

There is, however, a huge amount of evidence to explain this toilet in the field (or the labor camps, bars, and apartments) and its history in archives, in government investigation records, in muckraking journalism, and in the remembrances and oral testimony of farm workers and activists, and, of course, in the scholarly books that have been written about California (e.g., Alamillo 2006; Daniel 1981; Galarza 1977; Garcia 2001; Henderson 1998; Majka and Majka 1983; McWilliams 1999 [1939]; Pincetl 1999; Stein 1973; Stoll 1998; Walker 2004).

To explain the morphology of the California landscape – the toilet in the field – no less than to explain the form of any other landscape, requires careful observation – learning to ask the right questions by looking in specific ways, as Lewis advocates – but it requires a lot more. As a capitalist agricultural landscape it requires theories of capital and labor circulation (Henderson 1998), attention to the ways capital and



Figure 1 San Joaquin Delta California, 1990 (dm)

labor flow *differently* in different eras (Walker 2004), and particularly close attention to what struggle in and over the landscape is *about*. It requires different means of analysis than those advocated by Lewis.

Perhaps it needs a different set of axioms.

Any new set of axioms for understanding – “reading” – the landscape will be anything but “self-evident.” This is because, in fact, the landscape itself is anything but self-evident. In the generation since Lewis published his axioms, the explosion of critical landscape research, for all its diversity, has shown not that landscape exists in obscurity, but rather that landscape *obscures*. As W.J.T. Mitchell (1994a, 5) put it in one of his nine “Theses on Landscape:” “Like money, landscape is a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions, and conventionalizing its nature.” But this thesis does little more than name the problem. So, as Marx showed with his analysis of the real basis of value in capitalist society, if we are to make that which is never self-evident at least evident, if we are to begin to see *how* and *why* landscapes exist and to uncover their real basis, we need to turn from a focus on meaning and toward a focus on production. And, as with the analysis of capital, this focus on production needs to be set within a broader theory of circulation. The following new axioms of landscape are designed to codify a theoretical and methodological basis for doing so. But they are also designed to do something else: they are designed to form an analytical and normative basis, by providing a historical and materialist methodological foundation for what the landscape *is* and *does*, and for what a more just landscape might *be*.²

²Though all the examples from the following are from the USA, designed to provide an empirical foundation to the Axioms, the Axioms themselves are conceptualized more broadly so as to be applicable to any landscape in the capitalist world (which is to say all of it).

Axiom 1: *The landscape is produced; it is actively made: it is a physical intervention into the world and thus is not so much our “unwitting autobiography” (as Lewis put it) as an act of will.* This will might be social more than individual will (it might indeed have little to do with “the skilled work of landscape architects”), and it might be shaped, transformed, even thwarted by any number of contrary social processes (zoning laws, the conventions of architectural or artistic language, riots, eminent domain, organized pressure groups, and so forth). But it is an act of will nonetheless. This is no less true of the built landscape – the landscape we live in – than it is of the painted or photographed landscape. The key issue at stake, therefore, is always the *relations* of production. If we are to understand what a landscape is, what it does, and why it looks the way it does, we need to pay attention to both the broad (societal) and the narrow (e.g., at a particular locality, within a particular firm, in the offices of a design studio) relations of production, relations that are, of course, always historically and technologically conditioned, and always and everywhere struggled over. The blue toilet in the California field, seen through the prism of relations of production, is both a *result* of struggle and a means to *end* struggle (Parker 1919): a result of struggle because people fought for the provision of toilets, clean water, and safer tools even as many farmers and agribusinesses fought actively against these (because of cost, because oppression was a means of labor control, because of racism, or some combination of these), and so the toilet in the field marks something of a victory, minor as it may seem and minor as it was; an end to struggle because state agencies required, with all the force of law and sometimes police power to back that up, that toilets be built precisely as a means of staving off labor unrest (D. Mitchell 1996).³

More generally, it matters deeply if the landscape (as a totality or as items in it) is produced as a commodity – if landscape production is commodity production, as it primarily is under capitalism – or through some other set of relations of production. Even within capitalism there remains room for community and collective state production, and, of course, individual or corporate property owners have a great deal of freedom in how they arrange landscapes, but these are never fully removed from the sphere of commodity production. What is possible and what is not – literally what can be produced in the landscape – is a function of what is produced elsewhere to be sold for profit. And, typically, what cannot be produced for profit fades out of existence. Relations of production, that is, run deep and are determinate. Social need, the context within which landscapes are produced, is vetted by the power of commodities – right down to the last bolt and washer. The analysis of the production of landscape, therefore, requires the analysis of networks of production (and the relations of production that sustain them).

³Of course the toilet in the field is produced in another way too: it is a *technical* achievement. In its early years the California Commission of Immigration and Housing produced several technical manuals on labor camp sanitation, complete with architectural drawings for toilets considered to be significant technical advances on previous models, and which were the result of years of research and experimentation (Mitchell 1993).

Axiom 2: *Any landscape is (or was) functional.* As produced spaces, landscapes have a role to play in social life: they exist for a reason (even if, as in Axiom 1, the explicit purposes for which a landscape is originally built are shaped, transformed, and sometimes thwarted by all manner of social forces and processes). In capitalist society, the first, if not always obviously foremost, function of landscape is either to directly realize value (make money), or to establish the conditions under which value can be realized. Besides the impact this has on relations of production, there are two additional aspects worth discussing.

First, landscape is a (highly complex) site of investment. The built landscape, as Harvey (1982, 233–234) has put it:

[H]as to be regarded ... as a geographically ordered, complex, composite commodity. The production, ordering, maintenance, renewal and transformation of such a commodity pose serious dilemmas. The production of individual elements – houses, factories, shops, schools, roads, etc. – has to be coordinated, both in time and space, in such a way as to allow the composite commodity to assume an appropriate configuration. Land markets ... serve to allocate land to uses, but finance capital and the state (primarily through the agency of land use regulation and planning) also act as coordinators. Problems also arise because the different elements have different physical lifetimes and wear out at different rates. ... The built environment as a whole is part public good and part private, and markets for individual elements reflect the complex interactions between different kinds of markets.

All that is to say, landscape is produced through investment in it, investment that is coordinated through complex financial market arrangements and state intervention.⁴ But because it is an investment in anticipation of future profits, no capital invested in the landscape is ever guaranteed. All landscape is speculative: it is a banking of capitalist value in bricks and mortar in hopes of creating the conditions for the realization of even more capitalist value. The first sense in which landscape is functional, then, is as (potential) *exchange value*. Fields, factories, roads, houses, offices, even parks, each perhaps possessed of differing use values, are nonetheless sites for the *realization* (if not always the direct production) of exchange value. Under capitalism, “all aspects of the production and use of the built environment are brought within the orbit of the circulation of capital” (Harvey 1982, 234).⁵ Just as importantly, one of the important use values of the material landscape is not only that it is a *site* for the investment of circulating capital, but that it is also the *means* – the very physical conditions – for the circulation of capital. Capital – whether in the form of goods or electronic impulses – can circulate only if the physical infrastructure (roads, ports, satellite dishes, high-tension wires, offices full of cubicles and computers, routing stations, mobile telephone towers, shopping malls, factories, and so forth) is in place that allows for that circulation (Rosati 2005). In other words, capital can only freely

⁴ See chapter 7 in this volume by Babcock-Lumish and Clark on financial institutions and decisions.

⁵ For a brilliant discussion of the contradictions that arise from the relation between circulating capital and relatively fixed landscape, see Henderson (1998). Henderson’s focus is on the peculiarities of the California agricultural landscape but his argument is easily generalizable to other settings.

circulate if some capital is frozen in place in the built landscape.⁶ Therefore, as Harvey (1982, 233) suggests, “[a]t any one moment the built environment appears as a palimpsest of landscapes fashioned according to the dictates of different modes of production at different stages of their historical development.”

The second way in which the landscape establishes the conditions necessary for the realization of value (the second way in which it is functional) resides in the fact that landscape is a *lived* space and thus is crucial to the reproduction of labor power. This is an aspect of landscape that has too often been overlooked, especially since it can only be understood to the degree that we understand the close relationship that must exist between landscape as a built space (as I have just been talking about it) and landscape as an ideologically represented space (as much contemporary landscape theory understands it) (see Mitchell D 2004). We all live in landscape, but we do not live in the same landscape. Landscape thus both expresses and naturalizes difference. Ideologically it is a means of saying: *this is how they live; this is what they need*. If the configuration of landscape requires motorized transport to get to work, then the cost of that has to be figured into the reproduction costs of labor. If, in the historical development of a place, piped in fresh-drinking water and a separate room for each family member are normal conditions of living, then these too must be accounted for in the cost of reproducing labor power.

Obviously labor power exists in differing qualities (difference of this sort is a sine qua non of capitalism) and these differing qualities, embodied as they are in differently positioned people, must be reproduced through differing levels of state and private investment (in, e.g., specialized training, advanced degrees, and so forth). High-value labor power – highly skilled or in-demand workers – can *command* landscapes commensurate with their status and needs; while easily reproducible (or interchangeable) labor power – low-skilled, often racially, or ethnically marginalized workers – are able to command far less. Even so, their needs must be met – a landscape must be produced for them too in which goods and services are made available. These days that is often a landscape of dollar stores, food pantries, low-overhead markets (with little fresh food), acres of parking, all on the edges of town (or in declining inner suburbs). Exactly the sort of landscapes that Martha Schwartz bemoans as ugly are also deeply functional for American capitalism.⁷

⁶ As should be evident from this list, the necessary physical infrastructure for the circulation of capital is historically and socially variable, and is itself constructed *through* the investment of capital in particular places at particular times. This is what is meant by the slogan that in order for some capital to circulate freely other capital must be fixed in place. It is also the root of the contradiction of circulating capital, since capital is defined as “value in motion,” and yet value can only be in motion if other value (other capital) is not. That value not in motion is always subject to obsolescence, depreciation, and so forth.

⁷ They are functional in several ways: as a site for the reproduction of labor power, as a means of realizing at least some of the value wrapped up in commodities rejected in higher-end locales (the so-called secondary circulation of commodities), as a site for social services squeezed out of other sites, and, increasingly, as a ghettoization of low class functions as the upper and middle classes (who can command a landscape of reproduction of a very different sort) sequester themselves in gated communities, high-end malls, and gentrified city cores and wish to erase all evidence in the landscape of the classed nature of the society we live in.

To put that another way, one of the preeminent landscape struggles through which we all constantly live is the struggle over what is right and what is good for different classes of people.⁸ It is not only racist to say, as did one California agriculturalist in the 1920s that “The Mexican likes the sunshine against an adobe wall and a few tortillas, and in the off time he drifts across the border where he may have these things” (quoted in McWilliams 1968, 190). It is not only racist to suggest, as did agricultural camp inspectors for the California Commission of Immigration and Housing in 1926, that cutting “the old Chinese B.H.’s [bunk houses] into about half” would assure that farmers “will have no Chinese there in the coming year” (quoted in D. Mitchell 1996, 99). And it is not only racist to make clear, as did advocates for federal government labor camps in the California fields in the wake of the dust bowl, that such camps were now appropriate because it was now destitute *white* workers populating the agricultural labor markets of the state (Mitchell D. 1996, 178). Rather, in each of these instances (and many more we could choose from other realms, like discussions of urban public housing, the *favelas* of Rio, or the sprawling suburban estates of the managers of the new economy) these were *normative* statements about what the *proper* landscape for a particular class of people was. That is to say, the form of the landscape (the long bunkhouses, the government camps, the 7,500 square foot McMansion) are presented as right and true indications of what is necessary for the reproduction of the class in question. Or to put that in different terms, one of the functions of landscape is to assure that Lewis’s axiom that landscape is a clue to culture is taken to be literally true.⁹

That matters because it is part of the struggle over how labor power (of differing qualities) is to be reproduced and thus what the possibilities for realizing surplus value really are at any particular moment and in any particular place. People strive and struggle for better living and working conditions; under the conditions presented to them, they seek to make a better life, whether that “better” is defined in terms of access to bare necessities (like food and shelter), increased comfort, a faster powerboat (and a place to run it), or even opulent luxury (as with many in the managerial and professional classes). Simultaneously, since the value (and thus the cost) of labor power is the key determinant in how much surplus value can be produced in any economic process, it is in the interests of individual capitals to either directly drive down wages – that is, to lower standards of living (or keep them low) – or to displace the costs of social reproduction onto others. It is the interest of the capitalist *class*, however, to assure that the size of the market continues to grow and its power to purchase expands. Another function of the landscape – and of individual investors’ and the state’s involvement in it – is to mediate that contradiction, to find a *spatial* as well as a social solution to the constant differentiations within classes of both producers and consumers this contradiction requires.

⁸ Quite obviously “class” in this sense necessarily incorporates differences of race, gender, nationality, and so forth. See, generally, Russo and Linkon (2005).

⁹ I develop this argument more fully in D. Mitchell (2001; 2003).

Any lived-in and produced-in landscape, therefore, is a site of struggle. California farmers' long battle to retain the right to have their workers use the debilitating short-handled hoe, for example, was waged in part as a means of insuring control over labor (by beating it down) and thus reducing direct labor costs. Through the 1970s, the fields of California were continually *shaped* by this battle (Mitchell 2001; Jain 2006). Similarly, when the state of California has actively enforced labor camp laws, seeking to improve standards of living for both migratory and settled-out workers, growers have more often than not responded by simply closing the camps and letting workers fend for themselves (by sleeping in caves carved out of hillsides [Wells 1996] or in cardboard shanties in the arroyos [Langerweische 1998] or stacked 20 to a room in farm-town apartments [Rothenberg 1998]). Precisely this kind of class struggle shapes – gives form to – the landscape. The landscape that results is functional in the sense that it functions *within* the struggled over social relations of production and reproduction. The landscape serves a purpose.

But to leave matters there is, literally, myopic: it fails to see the true extent of the landscape, as I will argue in Axiom 3.

Axiom 3: *No landscape is local.* “Context matters,” Lewis argues, and he is absolutely right. But the argument that landscapes “make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e., locational) context” (p. 24) is incomplete. For it is also true that landscapes make little sense, culturally or otherwise, if they are *only* studied in relation to their nearby surroundings.

Tobler’s First Law of Geography – that “everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things” – may or may not be true, but it hardly seems relevant to the complex processes, practices, and decisions that make a landscape. The fruit orchards of Brentwood, California in the 1930s, for example, were products of transient labor from China, Japan, the Northeast of the USA, the Philippines, and eventually Mexico (and thus a result of numerous major and minor events, decisions and disruptions to the landscapes of production and reproduction *there*). Much of the capital planted in the orchards was from Britain. The theories behind the development and management of labor camps came from Berkeley professors (at least one of whom was deeply influenced by Freud [Parker 1919]); the laws that governed laborers and camps were fought out in Sacramento and Washington. The suburban houses that are now replacing these orchards are likewise the products of transient labor (together with local construction workers), building materials from the world over, designs hashed out in contracting firms across the USA and diffused through trade journals, and capital that is global in scope (until the crises of the late 1990s, East Asian capital was quite evident). To understand any produced landscape thus requires tracing out these networks of capital, commodities, and labor, networks that have long extended across the globe. And when one makes such a tracing, starting in a place like agricultural California, there are some startling results.

For example, numerous studies have shown that prevailing wages, throughout the history of California agriculture, have actually been below the value of labor

power (Fuller 1939; Wells 1996; Walker 2004):¹⁰ the California agricultural landscape simply does not support itself. The labor power necessary for the production of the landscape and the realization of profit from it simply cannot be reproduced in California. Instead, labor power is reproduced elsewhere, in other landscapes: China, Japan, Scandinavia, the Northeast USA, India, the Philippines, Mexico, and the Dust Bowl states in the early years; predominantly these days in Mexico and further south in Central America. For all the local struggles that go into shaping the landscape, distant struggles are just as important. Mexican families, communities, and the Mexican state assume the cost of raising and educating children, of nurturing new workers, of providing the minimal level of health care and other necessities that prepares them for employment in the USA. Mexican society frequently assumes the cost of maintaining workers during slack periods (especially as the USA has tightened immigration and welfare laws), and of supporting them in their old age.¹¹ The California agricultural landscape is thus tied into a network of landscapes and it is a reasonable proposition to suggest, for example, that the strawberry fields of Watsonville, California are more closely and directly connected to the landscape of Oaxaca and Chiapas than they are to the wealthy suburban landscapes of Orinda or Moraga, about a hundred miles up the coast (see D. Mitchell 2003).¹²

There is another way in which distant places can be determinative of the shape and nature of landscapes.¹³ In a recent survey of vineyards in Sonoma and Napa Valleys more than a third of growers freely admitted to state agents that they paid below minimum wage (Furillo 2001b). Enforcement of labor laws in the fields of California are at an all time low (Furillo 2001a). Threats to the health and safety of workers are rife. Union density has dropped to levels below where it was when the UFW began campaigning against growers in the 1960s (Furillo 2001c). One reason for this – for the daily violence of the California landscape – can be found not directly in the landscape of fields, vineyards, and orchards itself, but elsewhere: at the border between the USA and Mexico. Since the introduction of Operation

¹⁰The value of labor power is defined in the same way the value of any commodity is defined: as the sum of the value of all the ingredients, including labor, that go into making that commodity. For labor power, these include the values of food, shelter, clothing, necessary entertainment, schooling or training, and so forth. It also includes the value of these for dependents. Value in this sense is social, not individual, and socially determined. And as Marx (1987, 168) put it: “In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labor-power a historical and moral element.” That is, the value of labor power is a product of struggle and development.

¹¹Of course the picture is much more complicated than this because remittances are such an important part of Mexican and Central American economies. But the point is that the processes of labor power reproduction that make one landscape (like the California agricultural landscape) possible, occur in another landscape (like a Zapotec village). Each is shaped by the other.

¹²Then again, in Moraga and Orinda, the lawns and foundation plantings are maintained, the toilets and stoves scrubbed, and even sometimes the children minded, by Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants and migrants. And so it might be that Orinda, Moraga, and Watsonville’s landscapes are closely connected, but they are connected *through* the villages of Mexico and Guatemala.

¹³This paragraph reworks an analysis first presented in Mitchell (2002).

Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994, a stepped up and militarized program of border enforcement and fence building in urban and suburban areas that pushed undocumented border crossers into the mountains and deserts to the east (and increasingly into Arizona), an average of more than one person a day has died making the attempt to enter the USA (Gross 1999; Smith 1999; Ellingwood 2004). As the lockdown on the border has been extended into the desert and especially into semi-urban areas of Arizona, the death toll has continued to increase. Short of death, border crossers are subject to threats of assault, rape, and abandonment by the “coyotes” they pay to shepherd them across the border or of dehydration, hypothermia, and other injuries of exposure, or of attack by vigilantes and bandits (Ellingwood 2004). The cost of crossing the border, in terms of physical safety, has skyrocketed. It has skyrocketed monetarily, too. Coyote-ing is now at least an \$8 billion a year business. Once across the border, debt peonage is rampant; outright slavery is not unheard of (Langerwiesche 1998). Labor is utterly cheapened. Flowers, strawberries, and grapes are picked by workers receiving rock-bottom, below-minimum (and sometimes below survival) wages. Long capitalized on the assumption of cheap labor (Fuller 1939) the California landscape continues to rely on it. The border, and the way it is enforced, has a significant role to play in providing that labor. For workers, even if they escape death, injury, or bondage, remain here illegally and thus almost never report wage, housing, or work condition abuses. Many are even afraid to go to health clinics when injured or seriously ill, knowing that they cannot afford to cross the border again. Stepped up enforcement, while never designed to fully close down the border to economic migrants (Andreas 2000; Nevins 2001), drives down wages and helps maintain the agricultural landscape as a viable location for capital investment even in the face of encroaching suburbanization.¹⁴

To understand Watsonville or Orinda or Moraga – or (to take a different but related example) the landscape of trendy cuisine in Los Angeles, San Francisco or Berkeley¹⁵ – requires looking not there, but south: south to the border, and south to the villages of Mexico and Central America. It requires looking to the University of California at Davis where new strawberries – and new labor management systems – are invented. And it requires looking east to Washington where border policies

¹⁴This was a point never explicitly raised, but certainly always behind, the debates over and eventual passing of a law by the US Congress in 2006 to add another 700 miles of fencing and fortification to the border. While Congress did its best to appear to be assuaging the anti-immigrant sentiment stirred up by the large-scale immigrant-rights protests of that year, it nonetheless was also making sure that it kept the interests of immigrant-using capital always in mind.

¹⁵As regional cuisine develops, for all that is good about it, too few questions are raised about the conditions under which “local” ingredients are produced. While there is little to fault, for example, in Chez Panisse’s Alice Waters’ sourcing of local ingredients, support for community farming, and investment in inner-city school gardening and nutrition programs, few restaurateurs, in what is in fact a highly corporatized and often low-margin business, are as scrupulous, nor (in purely economic terms) can they afford to be. More generally, as Guthman (1998, 2004) has shown, organic farming in California is not immune from the sorts of rapacious labor relations that mark the agricultural industry as a whole.

are determined, and to New York and London (and on to Tokyo) where capital markets are organized (cf. chapter 7 in this volume by Babcock-Lumish and Clark on global capital markets). No landscape is local.

Axiom 4: History does matter. Lewis is right. As alluded to above, California's agricultural landscape has always been capitalized on the assumption of ready supplies of cheap labor (as important as skilled labor might be to it at times [Fuller 1939; Walker 2004]). The size of farms, the intensity of production, the audacious variety of crops (audacious because it has required costly experimentation to figure out how many things can be grown profitably in California): all have, in essence, been subsidized by labor paid at or below its reproduction costs. The history of this capitalization is built into the ground: in patterns of landholdings (Liebman 1983); in the specific packing sheds and canneries of cooperatives and corporations; in the dozens of research buildings and experimental farms around the state run by the University of California; in the toilets and labor camps that sometimes sprout along with the crops in the fields; and in the refrigerated rail cars and trucks that haul produce east or to ports and airports along the coast. This landscape – this configuration of things on the land – at each moment in time provides the structure within or against which new investment must be made. To the degree that it is outmoded, or inefficient (however defined), or unprofitable, it must be destroyed (a costly business) and built anew (Harvey 1976, 1982, 2001, 2003; Walker 2004).

The landscape at any moment is shaped by the current state of technology and so (as Marx showed for capitalist production more generally) is always vulnerable to losing out to innovation as more modern production facilities capture more of the socially available relative surplus value. The invention of mechanized cotton reapers in the 1940s, for example, had a profound effect on the size and intensity of cotton farming in the southern San Joaquin Valley, and on local labor markets (Arax and Wartzman 2003). Among other results has been excessively high structural unemployment throughout the valley, and particularly in traditional cotton towns like Corcoran, California. Such towns, desperate for inward investment and for stable employment opportunities have increasingly sought out state investment in the form of prisons. Corcoran, once vibrant and streaked with a bloody history of class war in the fields is now, for all intents and purposes, a no-longer vibrant (but still bloody) neighborhood of South Central and East Los Angeles, warehousing unemployed black, Latino, and Asian men and providing jobs for (largely white) local guards (Gilmore 2002, 2007).

Both everyday history (the long grind of investment decisions, specific struggles over wages and living conditions, the myriad small and large events and practices of life) and extraordinary events (cataclysmic economic restructuring, wars, natural disasters, major technological innovations, etc.) shape the land, and shape the possibilities for the future. History is lumpy, as Lewis suggests, but it is also a sea of constant change, in which waves of investment, innovation, and struggle of varying periodicity and intensity wash back and forth. Within this sea it is sometimes hard to see that the landscape is not just flow – not just the constant transformation of social relations as some contemporary theory avers – but also stasis, a repository of a great deal of inertia, a storehouse of values that can only be destroyed at great

human and economic cost. Capitalism may advance through the sort of creative destruction Schumpeter (1934) described (see also Berman 1984; Harvey 1989, 2001; Smith 1990), but we should never forget that as creative as this destruction may be, it is also the destruction of real places, real people, real communities, real landscapes. And none of these is easily destroyed; each is a storehouse of not just capitalist value molded into girders, linoleum, sheetrock, and the rest, but also valuable histories, histories people often fight to protect, to maintain, to stabilize. To understand landscape historically requires careful analysis of the dialect of change and stability, and the contradictions to which this dialectic gives rise.

This is a second way history matters. People fight over it and they fight for it. Landscape is a repository of memory, both individual and collective. It is a site of and for identity. Cartographers for Rand McNally or AAA may ignore the Ludlow Monument in Southern Colorado, for example, erasing any mention of it from their maps and atlases, but thousands of union members and labor activists nonetheless make pilgrimages there every year, to leave messages of solidarity and to survey the site of one of the most important labor battles in American history. And the history – the martyrdom – represented by the monument was powerful enough to induce someone to destroy it, to truly try to erase memory from the landscape a couple of years ago (Green 2004). In Youngstown, Ohio, almost all the steel mills that used to stretch 24 miles up and down the Mahoning River have been closed and torn down, the parts sold off and the buildings themselves cut up and sold for scrap, but their memory in the landscape is indelible. But since memory is indelible, the struggles to preserve the landscape that represents it are intense, for while memory may be indelible people are not, and whole traditions, whole ways of knowing and being in the world can fade with the generations (Bruno 1999; Linkon and Russo 2003).

Sometimes it is the *erasure* of history that matters the most.¹⁶ In the 1980s in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, as the steel mills were closing, the city tried to capitalize on the city's history, especially the history of the great flood of 1889, to entice tourist and service economy investment. City leaders sought to mobilize the landscape as a symbol of the city's long history of triumph over adversity, encouraging tourists and potential investors to see in it a story of courage, determination, willing labor, and community. In the process they sought to erase from the landscape visible signs of the labor and racial conflict that was at least as much a part of the city's history. The struggle in Johnstown was one of whose history was to be represented in the landscape, with city officials arguing that allowing the history of strife to remain visible would undermine the city's chances for economic recovery. The city worked hard to mold memory in, and identification with, the landscape in specific ways and to specific ends. The landscape was *given* a specific historical role to play and, to the degree the vision of the economic planners was not countered, it was pushed along a specific historical trajectory (D. Mitchell 1992).

Or, for one final example, try to find anywhere, up and down the length of the state of California, direct, clearly memorialized evidence of the long history of agricultural

¹⁶Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place* (1996) project is immensely important in this regard because it seeks to bring back to the landscape those struggles – by women, people of color, workers – that have been erased in the landscape.

martyrdom that has been so crucial to winning even the most minimal rights for farm workers. Try finding monuments to the workers killed at Wheatland, or Corcoran, or Arvin, or the Chinese burned out of their homes, and camps in the Delta and foothills. Try finding memorials to the Japanese who fought for a better life in California *before* they were incarcerated in concentration camps in World War II. Try finding, even, an accurate depiction of the violence arrayed against Cesár Chavez and the United Farm Workers. You cannot. That is a history that *made* the agricultural landscape, but is very hard to find *in* the California landscape.

All this is to say, the representation of history in landscape (and all that goes with it, including identity and identification, the politics of inclusion and exclusion, the production of “national” landscapes, memorialization, and so forth) is not somehow immanent in the landscape itself (in the bricks and mortar, lawns and shrubs); rather it is a product of struggles over meanings – the meanings that are attached to landscape and the ones that are made to stick (see, generally, Loewen 1999). History matters in this case because landscape as historical representation is obviously an expression of power, which is part of Axiom 5.

Axiom 5: Landscape is power. Landscape is power in many senses. It is an expression of power as argued in Axiom 4, an expression of who has the power to define the meanings that are to be read into and out of the landscape, and, of course, to determine just what will exist in (and as) the landscape. This power operates in many ways and many places, from corporate boardrooms to city halls, from kitchen tables to consultants’ reports, and from the opinion mills of think tanks to streets marked by protest. Decisions about investment, or the setting of rents, or the setting aside of land for a memorial, or the selection of a final design, or, perhaps preeminently, the approval of a land-use plan and the granting of a building permit, all are acts of power that are incorporated in the form of the landscape; and all are acts of power that define the meaning of the landscape. These acts of power are accepted, negotiated, contested, and resisted, which is to say they are acts of *social* power. To read a landscape, in other words, requires fluency in the symbols and languages of social power. It requires close attention to how the landscape is an expression of power and in what ways that power is expressed. It also requires always keeping in mind that the preeminent power that landscape might express is the power to erase history, signs of opposition, alternative readings, and so forth.

Landscape is also power in the sense that it quite literally determines what can and cannot be done. This is a corollary of the argument that the preexisting form of the landscape matters. The landscape’s very materiality shapes individual and social behavior, practices, and processes. The very fact of a building on a lot changes how we can interact on that lot. The construction of a freeway does not just express some sort of “automobile culture;” it quite literally helps to *produce* that culture by opening up some opportunities for travel, social life, commerce, and economic production and closing off others.¹⁷ The shape of the land has the power to shape social life.

¹⁷In his wonderful historical geography of Second Empire Paris, Harvey (2003) makes much of the ways that changed “space relations” both foreclosed old and opened new possibilities for the circulation of capital, the power of the state, and the possibilities for revolutionary action.

As W.J.T. Mitchell makes clear in the introduction to *Landscape and Power* (W. Mitchell 1994b, 1), the important question for landscape analysis is one of what landscape *does*: “how it works as a cultural practice” (see also Matless 1998). Landscape, Mitchell (1994b, 1–2) writes, “does not merely signify power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human interactions.” In particular, Mitchell avers, landscape has all the power of ideology. It has the power to naturalize and make seem inevitable what is really constructed and struggled over. But the key point is this: unlike ideology, which is as transient as words, landscape is solid, physical, the opposite of ephemeral. Landscape is thus ideology made solid: a produced space that does *more* than represent. It guides. So landscape is power in a further sense: it really is just what *is* and it is up to us to make something else of it.

Methodologically, the implications here are clear. It is *never* sufficient to assess landscape only in terms of meanings or identity, or even the kinds of cultural power W.J.T. Mitchell and his collaborators focus on. To understand landscape as power always requires a close attention to form, and (to come full circle) thus on relations of production. For it is these relations that are internalized in landscape.¹⁸ Understanding landscape as power in this sense requires turning Peirce Lewis on his head. If, as Rich Schein (2003, 202) argues, we understand the landscape, with Lewis, to be “the *result* of human activity, material evidence that can be read to make any number of cultural observations,” then we will leave “landscape itself out of social and cultural processing,” too easily regarding it as “inert and exist[ing] as the detritus or spoor of cultural activity.” All that has been argued here, about the production of landscape, about scale, about landscape functionality, and about history, suggest just the opposite. Landscape is active. Or as Alexander Wilson (1991) pithily put it, landscape is activity.

Finally, then, the power of landscape is aesthetic. As an activity, and as so many have made clear (Berger 1972; Cosgrove 1984, 1985; Olwig 1996, 2003; Rose 1993; Williams 1973), landscape is a structured way of seeing, a particular (and of course contested) way of viewing and therefore interacting with the land and built environment. But as a particular, structured way of seeing, landscape has historically been established as *the* way of seeing. Landscape is didactic in that it teaches us to look in certain ways and to value aesthetics (over any number of other ways of knowing) as a means toward understanding the nature, status, and meaning of a place. When Martha Schwartz, who defines landscape much as Peirce Lewis does, condemns the USA for its ugliness, questions concerning, for example, *relations of production, function, extra-local process, history*, and even to some degree *power* are pushed aside. To argue, as Schwartz (2004, 19) does that the blight of strip malls are a function of cheap land and “bottom-line” (that is nonaesthetic) thinking is no doubt correct, but it is also radically understated: strip malls are deeply functional in our current society. Among other things they make the reproduction of the working class *affordable*. Even more, they have been vital in reducing the *value* of labor

¹⁸For a methodological discussion of the importance of “internal relations” and processes of internalization within Marxian historical materialism (which is at the root of my arguments), see Ollman (1991).

power. Strip malls are a powerful intervention into the economy, a solution to problems a long time in the making. The aesthetic function of landscape, however, is to turn our gaze in different directions and to encourage us to ask different kinds of questions (for Schwartz's interviewer, the other kind of question was one of whether developing more stringent planning controls might make us "snobbish" like the Europeans: "But the price for their taste is snobbery"). This is not to say that aesthetics do not matter: they do, and deeply. But it is to say that aesthetics need to be understood within their social context, and that the functionality of aesthetics needs always to be raised (what, for example, would gentrification be without the strong ideological work of aesthetics that does so much to pave its way and justify its displacements). What are needed are questions about what different aesthetic movements, sensibilities, opportunities, and values do, Landscape is *powerful* activity.

Axiom 6: *Landscape is the spatial form that social justice takes.* As a concretization of social relations, and as a foundation for the further development of those relations, landscape literally marks out the spatial extent and limits of social justice. The spatial form of the landscape is both the result of and evidence for, the kind of society we live in. The true degree of spatial equality, environmental equity, affirmative (rather than destructive) possibilities for difference, degrees of autonomy – all these are simply *there* in the landscape. In the long economic boom of the 1990s, for example, inequality grew at as rapid a rate as it ever has. And the landscapes of every metropolitan area in the USA show this: massive tracks of McMansions in manicured lawns lining one new golf course after another sprawled out to the horizon, while inner-city neighborhoods decayed, places of employment were abandoned, houses crumbled, and storefront after storefront was boarded up, even those that used to house free health clinics and other evidence of the struggles for a more just society that marked an earlier generation. Inner-city churches devoted ever more space to soup kitchens and food pantries, in the hopes of providing at least some healthy food in neighborhoods with no near access to fresh fruit and vegetables. At the same time, the rise of community gardens on abandoned lots vied for community attention as means for combating neighborhood decline against more draconian "weed and seed" programs that populate the landscape with police masquerading as social workers. Meanwhile downtown streets bristle with security cameras, metal detectors, and defensive landscape designs geared toward always moving the homeless along by providing them no place to sit and rest, or just to hang out. No better evidence of the state – the on-going state – of social justice in America can be found. There is no truer foundation than this landscape for what social justice in the future possibly can be.

To take students – to take *ourselves* – on a transect of the urban landscape, from gentrified bar/warehouse district, to the black, Latino, and white neighborhoods of deep poverty, through the flatted mansions of the old elite neighborhoods, out into the early postwar suburbs, the extensive tract homes built to accommodate the baby boom, and on to the outer suburbs where those baby boomers now live in larger houses (with fewer kids) may say something about American culture and its changes, but it says even more about the nature of American justice and how we use space – distance as well as design – to separate ourselves from the poverty that our wealth so efficiently produces.

Or, to take another example, take a tour through the old mixed-farming and cattle-raising countryside north and west of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Notice the abandoned farmsteads, the Wal-Mart in Aberdeen, which draws shoppers from 75 miles away as small-town stores and butcher-shops have closed (and provides low-wage work for these same shoppers). Notice how few feedlots there are, how few livestock auctions. This is a landscape radically and rapidly restructured over the last 30 years, one in which the very possibility of living and working is imperiled for more and more residents. School districts are consolidating or closing altogether, requiring children to endure hours-long commutes. Changes in the beef slaughtering industry, in global trade laws, in technology, and in the flows of capital through the countryside have all come together to create a landscape that simply cannot sustain communities of any size, even as they concentrate ever more people in select locations (like Kearney, Nebraska, or even Sioux Falls). A massively uneven and contradictory economic system has created a massively depopulated agricultural landscape (the second depopulation in just over a century, the first being the slaughter and removal of the Lakota). It's not so much that social and political processes and formations "conspire" to create such a landscape, and such conditions of and for social and spatial justice, but rather that social, economic, and political processes and formations *act* to create such landscapes, and that (unevenly and not without much tumult) landscapes are made to be functional within (to align with) changing social, economic, and political processes and formations (Breitbach 2006).

For this reason, George Henderson (2003, 180) urges us to focus our attention on "actually existing social and political formations" as a means of assessing possibilities for progressive social change. For him, such a focus requires close attention to the landscape because the landscape is produced through these social and political formations. And these formations are the antithesis of just. Or, as he puts it, "the study of landscape, that living thing that so often evokes the plane on which normal, everyday life is lived – precisely *because* of the premium it places on the everyday – must stand up to the facts of world in crisis, to the fact that everyday life is, for many people, the interruption or destruction of everyday life" (Henderson 2003, 196). The ugliness of the landscape, to put this in the aesthetic terms of Martha Schwartz, or the ordinariness of it, to put it in Peirce Lewis's terms, signifies something far greater than aesthetics or the banality of culture: it signals the shape and possibility of justice. Therefore, Henderson concludes, "what is ... needed is a concept of landscape that helps point the way to those interventions that can bring about much greater social justice. And what landscape study needs even more is a concept of landscape that will assist the development of the very idea of social justice" (ibid. 196).

In other words, to understand landscape as the spatial form that social justice takes, and to understand that normatively as a means of finding ways to create a more progressively just landscape, requires that we return to landscape's origins – or at least one of them. As Ken Olwig (1996) has shown, one of the meanings of the continental terms that became the English "landscape" was of a place of justice. "A *landskab*," Olwig (1996, 633) writes, "was not just a region, it was a nexus of law and cultural identity" where people "had a greater right to self-determination and to participate in the judicial process and in government" (Olwig 1996, 631, quoting Trap 1864). That is, *landskab* was a place where justice was defined by its

inhabitants and autonomy was a valued property. The history of landscape may since then be a history of progressive alienation and a greater distancing of authority; it may be a history of widening arcs of complexity and contradiction; but it is still the case that landscapes are made (if by other means than by “axe and plow”) and so it must, in some senses still belong to “the people” who have made it (Olwig 1993, 311). The trick for us is to use our analysis, design, and other skills both to show how it does still belong to the people and to counter the heavy weight of alienation that is so much a part of the capitalist production of landscape.

But why landscape? Why put this weight of political economy and social justice on “landscape,” both as a concept (limited as all concepts must be) and as a built form (particular as all built forms are). Landscape is important because it really is *everything* we see when we go outside. But it also is everything that we do not see. Landscape, in other words, is a way into, a foundation for the exploration of all that there is – the social totality within which we live. As a concretization of social relations, landscape properly understood provides a means to analyze – to make visible – the social relations that go into its making, even as one of the functions of landscape is precisely to make those social relations obscure. The fetishizing function of landscape should not be discounted. It really is not possible to directly “read” the landscape in any satisfying sense. But it is possible to analyze it: to search for how it is made, to explore its functions, to examine the other places that are foundational in its production and meaning, to understand its history and trajectory, to uncover how power works in and through it, and *therefore*, to learn what it says about the status of and possibility for a just world in the here and now. All this takes the work not just of looking, but also all those other scholarly tasks Lewis seemed so ready to jettison – archival research, theorizing, ethnographic analysis, and critically reading the scholarly literature. It also takes a commitment to a materialist analysis, for it is only by examining the landscape in its material form – as it really is, rather than as we wish it to be – and only by analyzing the social relations that go into its making, that we can begin to really learn (and learn from) what we are looking at.

In doing so, we ought to be able to learn how better to intervene into the landscape, to make better guesses about the reasons for and impacts of our designs, our solidarity work with activist groups, or just to do a better job of telling the landscape’s story, and through that to gain a better purchase on how the totality of social relations operates in particular places and at particular times. Reading the landscape can raise important questions, but it can rarely answer them. To provide answers, which is always the first step in making change in the landscape, requires a different theory and methodology for understanding what the landscape is and how it operates. These new axioms, I hope, will provide a starting point for this methodology at least as fruitful as Peirce Lewis’s once were.

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