

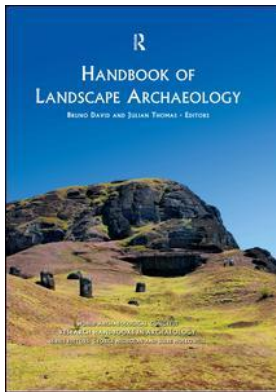
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UNCOMMON GROUND: LANDSCAPE AS SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

Veronica Strang

Emerging Theoretical Landscapes

This chapter is concerned with multiple notions of, and engagements in, place. It centers on “cultural landscapes,” which provide a useful bridge between anthropology and archaeology, bringing together social and material worlds and acknowledging the processual nature of both.

The concept of a “cultural landscape” has been generated by some key theoretical developments in the social sciences. Its deepest etymological roots, which go back to early agricultural history in Europe, lie in the idea that a landscape is a humanized, acted-on, and defined space, as Jackson points out: “A landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space, a man-made system functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community” (1986: 68).

In more recent history, reflecting the emergence of an increasingly detached and distanced vision of the environment, the term *landscape* has been used to describe a particular view or vista, most often in representational forms such as literature and landscape painting (see Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels 1993). These core meanings remain embedded in contemporary ideas about “cultural landscapes,” which retain both subjective and objective ideas about landscape as something

acted on and lived within, as well as something that can be viewed and considered in more abstract terms.

In anthropology and archaeology, analyses of landscape have gone through several important shifts. Initially, physical landscapes and local ecologies appeared primarily as a backdrop to a focus on human economic endeavors. However, this led to an acknowledgment that the landscape itself was changed in the process, materially reflecting a history of human engagement (Hoskins 1955; also Aston 1997; Crouch and Ward 1988; Lowenthal 1985, 1991) and becoming what Sauer (1962) called a “palimpsest”—a layered and inscribed record of human activity in temporal and spatial terms: “We cannot form an idea of landscape except in terms of its time relations as well as its space relations. It is in continuous process of development or of dissolution and replacement (Sauer 1962: 333).

Researchers began to consider how this material transformation or “morphogenesis,” as Prince called it (1971), provided insights into cultural ideas and practices, leading Meinig (1979, cited in Crang 1998: 2)¹ to observe that “if we want to understand ourselves, we would do well to take a searching look at our landscapes.”

There was also a growing acknowledgment that social relations were materialized in spatial

relationships (Bourdieu 1971), and that unequal power relations were similarly expressed in spatial terms (Foucault 1970; see also Bender 1993, 1998, 1999; Bender and Winer 2001; Hamnett 1996; Jackson and Penrose 1993).

Perhaps the most influential theoretical shift in landscape theory came with the advent—heavily influenced by philosophy—of a phenomenological perspective: a much more fluid and dynamic view of human-environmental interaction, which focused on human experiences of “being-in-the-world” (Bachelard 1994; Casey 1993, 1996; Hegel 1979; Malpas 1999; Merleau-Ponty 1962). In accord with Heidegger’s vision of people as “existential insiders” (1971, 1977), Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (1977) presented a vision of human actors positioned within a social and material cultural context. Researchers began to consider how this was experienced at a sensory level, inculcated, and “embodied” (see Antze and Lambek 1996; Csordas 1994; Feld and Basso 1996; Kratz 1994; Nast and Pile 1998). There was a florescence of writing about how people create “place” from abstract “space” (see Douglas 1975; Penning-Roswell and Lowenthal 1986; Rival 1998; Strang 2004; Tuan 1974, 1977), in both imaginative and practical terms, encoding meaning in their material surroundings.²

There was also a new interest in the environment itself and its role in providing ecological opportunities and constraints (Reed 1988) to which people made cultural adaptations over time (Morphy 1998a [1993]). There emerged a clearer vision of human-environmental interaction as a dynamic and recursive relationship, in which societies created and interacted with particular landscapes as collective “works in progress,” thus maintaining a continual process of cultural reproduction (Morphy 1995). This perspective also highlighted the importance of the material landscape as a repository of memory and history (Kuchler 1993; Read 1996; Schama 1996; Stewart and Strathern 2003) and as a theater for the expression of cultural identity (see Anderson and Faye 1992; Kearns and Philo 1993; Keith and Pile 1993; Strang 2001).

Underlying these explorations, and heavily influenced by feminist theory in anthropology and the subsequent postmodern movement, was a growing appreciation of the multiplicity of individual and cultural experiences of “being-in-place.” Anthropologists, archaeologists, and human geographers began to consider the particularity of cultural landscape and to make greater efforts to match comparative abstractions with a deeper

It is now well understood that diverse cultural groups create and maintain quite different cultural landscapes, even in the same physical environments (Strang 1997; Trigger and Griffiths 2003). As underlined by Atkinson and associates (2005) and Crumley and colleagues (2001), particular engagements with place rely on a whole spectrum of cultural beliefs and practices. This is an important point: a “cultural landscape” is holistic, incorporating every aspect of culture and its material expression. This includes cosmological understandings of the world; religious beliefs and practices; languages and categories; social and spatial organisation; economic activities; systems of property ownership; political processes; values and their manifestation in laws; history and memory; constructs of social identity; representational forms; material culture; forms of knowledge and their intergenerational transmission; embodied experiences of the environment, and so forth.

The concept of holistic engagement has been heavily influenced by ethnographic research with Indigenous groups.³ In contrast to the more specialized and fragmented visions of human-environmental engagement that tend to dominate in complex industrial societies, Indigenous cultural forms are more commonly seen as embedded in and mediated by the land and thus bound together into a seamless, interrelated whole. Such ethnographies have therefore contributed to landscape archaeology and anthropologies of landscape in a dual sense, both by providing comparative Indigenous perspectives and by strengthening a theoretical appreciation of the need to consider landscapes within the entirety of their particular cultural contexts. Considered systematically, each aspect of culture illuminates particular notions of and engagements with place and allows us to compare very diverse cultural landscapes. With the caveat that this is no more than the briefest of thumbnail sketches, we might, for example, consider the cultural landscapes of Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland and the non-Indigenous European Australians who live and work as pastoralists in the same geographic area.⁴

Uncommon Ground

Cosmological understandings of the world are foundational to cultural beliefs and practices. European-Australian pastoralists’ visions of “how the world works,” like those in other Western industrial societies, are a mix of Christian beliefs involving divine genesis, and scientific expla-

evolutionary and ecological processes. In accord with this cosmological perspective, “nature” is perceived as the opposing other to “culture.” The landscape is described in primarily Cartesian (material) terms, as parcels of property mapped and measured out across “natural” ecosystems, and dotted with places and features named after early explorers and settlers, or reflecting topographical attributes and the presence of economic resources.

In contrast, the Aboriginal cosmos centers on a “Dreamtime” in which ancestral beings—female and male—formed the landscape and remained immanent in it, as sentient forces that continue to generate human spiritual being and ecological resources (see Charlesworth et al. 1984; Hiatt 1978; Morphy 1984; Morton 1987; Rose 1992, 1996; Sharp 1939). The landscape and its ecosystems are therefore suffused with ancestral forces, patterned with their tracks, and known through the sacred sites where their spiritual power is concentrated. Place names refer to these totemic ancestors, and simultaneously to their clans of human descendents (see Alpher 1991; Weiner 1991). In Aboriginal terms, it is as important to maintain the spiritual and social integrity of these sites as it is to manage them as natural resources, there being no perceptual separation between “nature” and “culture.”

With Durkheimian predictability,⁵ the social, spatial, and political organization of each group reflects these cosmological beliefs. Aboriginal clans, and the kin networks of which they are composed, are defined and spatially located through their totemic ancestors. Each clan member has a spiritual home in the landscape from which their “spirit child” emerges and to which it must be returned upon death, and perpetual rights of ownership and use of that place and its associated tracts of land, thus creating an inalienable link between people and place. This system was (and to some extent still is) upheld by egalitarian political structures in which—reflecting the gender complementarity of the ancestral forces—male and female elders provide collective gerontocratic leadership.

Cultural landscapes are also landscapes of knowledge. Through ritual performance and the transmission of traditional knowledge, it is the Aboriginal elders’ task to maintain the reproductive connections among human, spiritual, and material worlds (see Morphy 1995). In material terms, these cultural norms are revealed by many traces of long-term usage of sites: shell middens, domiculture, graveyards, traces of ritual activities,

as a record of the hunting and gathering, which was, for so many millennia, the sole economic mode for Indigenous Australians (Hamilton 1982; Myers 1986; Williams and Hunn 1986). Like other hunter-gatherers, Aboriginal communities in Cape York—though involved in introduced forms of production as well—continue to place great importance on the vast lexicon of local ecological knowledge that was vital to their precolonial livelihoods as hunter-gatherers and that remains integral to ideas about Aboriginal identity. Much of this knowledge, like the social and spatial organization with which it articulates, is encoded in the ancestral stories, which are redolent with details about local flora and fauna, places and ecosystems, and how to make use of these (Morphy 1995; Rose 1996).

The social, spatial, and political organization of non-Aboriginal society in Australia is very different, emerging primarily from family histories of settlement and the pressures of particular economic practices. In a patriarchal social and political structure, the leasehold cattle stations belong either to the male descendents of early colonial settlers or to individuals or families with sufficient wealth and inclination to purchase them in a competitive property market. Given the low carrying capacity of the land, and the pressure for economic viability, the stations are vast in area (often more than 7,770 km²), which means that small clusters of people—managers, stock teams, and domestic workers—inhabit isolated homesteads. In an increasingly mobile society, they do this for varying lengths of time, with only owner-managers usually remaining for more than a few years. These emergent social and spatial forms are revealed in the material traces of early settlements, in the grid of fence-lines and boundaries inscribed on the landscape, and in the carefully arranged layout of contemporary homesteads, which manifest a range of ideas about social identity, status, gender, and power (Schaffer 1988; Strang 1997). These material forms serve to illustrate key differences between Aboriginal and European systems of property ownership and control (McCorquodale 1987; Reynolds 1987; Strang 2000).

The graziers’ economic practices depend on highly specialized knowledge about animal husbandry, in which the landscape is categorized, assessed, and managed in accord with its feed and water provision, physical access for mustering, distance to market, and suchlike. This professional knowledge, which defines the identity of the pastoralists as a subcultural community,

dependent on some local knowledge but focuses primarily on stock management skills that can readily be applied elsewhere and on the production of non-indigenous animals for a distant market. Reflecting the fragmented nature of information exchange in complex industrial societies, it sits alongside other, specialized areas of knowledge, such as scientific understandings of ecology or technical expertise in land and water management, which are similarly unrelated to the local environment but that had—and continue to have—major implications for the cultural landscapes of Indigenous communities, replacing the authority of the ancestors with Western models of environmental management and control (see Rose and Clarke 1997; Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Stevens 1974).

Just as knowledge provides a basis for identity, so do the respective histories and memories of each group, which, as noted previously, are important components of any cultural landscape. In Aboriginal terms, history and memory divide sharply into that of the precolonial “early days,” whose everyday details of human movement and action are primarily described in oral history, song, ritual, dance, and the other forms of representation, and that of postcontact history (Attwood and Markus 1999; Layton 1989; May 1994; McGrath 1987; Rowse 1998; Schweitzer, Bieseke, and Hitchcock 2000), which is concerned with efforts to defend Aboriginal land and people’s subsequent experiences of colonial domination and cultural change. Though recorded in a range of media, this latter history, like other Aboriginal cultural forms, is also held locally—and specifically—in the land, for example, in the particular places where previous generations fought battles or were taken as prisoners; in the grave sites marking colonial massacres; in the early homestead sites dependent on Aboriginal labor. Despite the pull of new alternate identities (see Povinelli 1999), both periods of history, and the Aboriginal identity they support, thus remain firmly located in the immediate landscape (Beckett 1988; Kapferer 1996; Myers 1986).

Leading a more mobile existence, few of the contemporary graziers know a great deal about local history,⁶ though they are made aware of its traces through landscape features named after early explorers or settlers, marked graves, and site names (such as “Battle Camp”) reflecting colonial conflicts. Their vision of history is more general, learned in the texts and the visual material of State educational systems. It locates them in commensurately general terms, in a wider and much more

Much can be learned about particular cultural landscapes from peoples’ representations of them.⁷ There is a wealth of ethnographic literature on this topic examining how representational forms:

- transmit knowledges and values intergenerationally
- describe histories
- define and sometimes contest (see Bender 1999; Orlove 1991) rights and ownership
- express cultural identities
- depict social, spatial, and topographical relationships (e.g., Kleinert and Neale 2000; Langton 1993; Layton 1997; Morphy 1991, 1998b; Munn 1973; Taylor 1996)

A key point of difference between the representational forms of non-Aboriginal graziers and those of Aboriginal communities echoes a recurring contrast. Although the graziers make use of highly specialized representations of landscape—art, novels, maps, and such—only maps are local in their focus. Aboriginal art, in contrast, is characterized by its local specificity and—perhaps most importantly—by its holistic incorporation of all aspects of indigenous culture. Relying on multivalent images,⁸ it expresses a reality in which these are wholly interdependent and located in the land.

Similar observations could be made about the material culture produced or used by the respective communities: “traditional” Aboriginal material culture is locally produced, specific, and carries a multivalency of meanings (see Griffiths 1996; Mundine et al. 2000; Strang 1999), whereas that of the graziers is largely introduced, mass produced, and more specialized, with exceptions, such as local craft production, family heirlooms, and historic monuments, that reflect the more localized and affective aspects of their relationships with place (see Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Milton 2002; Strang 2003; Tilley 1991, 1994). In each case, the production of material culture is a vital expression of the values of each group (see Goodey 1986; Strang 1997) and its ability to demonstrate power and agency (see Gell 1998).

Conclusions

Even in this most simple sketch, which plainly omits the complex subtleties and diversities of a proper ethnographic account, two strikingly different cultural landscapes can be glimpsed.⁹

different engagements with the same physical environment and to widely differing experiences of place. Both communities have incorporated massive and complex changes in the last 200 years. Indigenous groups have experienced a traumatic invasion, colonial dominance, the enforced encompassment of new economic modes, knowledges and values, attempts at assimilation, and slow progress toward greater self-determination. They have nevertheless maintained their own cultural beliefs and practices to a considerable extent. The immediate local environment is still densely encoded with cultural meanings and a highly specific history. Sensory experience continues to be informed by long-term social and ecological knowledges and by practices that rely on close “reading” of the environment. The result is a holistic, ideologically permanent and deeply affective relationship with place (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 1996).

The non-Aboriginal pastoralists’ ties to land are more fragmented and impermanent and contain a fundamental conflict between connection and mobility. On the one hand, they are (albeit loosely), rooted in place by the exigencies of their economic, social, and spatial forms and by the layers of colonial history that provides a broad foundation to their identity (see Seddon 1972). Longer-term residents undoubtedly have close ties to particular places. On the other hand, land is alienable in European terms and readily perceived as a commodity. There are also vestiges of ideas that characterized the environmental interactions of the early settlers: an adversarial vision of hostile “Nature” and the need to control it, and a commitment to making the land productive through the imposition of non-indigenous animals and the use of material culture aimed at management, containment, and development (see Strang 2001, 2005). For the graziers, these realities, and the sensory and cognitive experiences they engender, tend to work against the development of affective connections to place.

Within each cultural landscape, people’s engagements with place over time have created a material record that provides potential insights for landscape archaeologists. By examining and interpreting that record holistically, researchers can consider its relationship to contemporary cultural landscapes and, in doing so, strengthen the potential for valid statements about past human behavior.¹⁰ As Clarke observed, archaeology is the “time dimension” of anthropology and ethnology (1968: 13),¹¹ and when disciplines share a model that deals systematically with each

are implicated in a dynamic articulation between social and material worlds, a vision emerges of cultural landscapes transforming over time, providing a useful foundation—an analytic basis of discussion—through which human-environmental relationships can be understood both in the past and in the present.

Notes

1. See also Cresswell 2004; Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995; Layton and Ucko 1999; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003.
2. Commensurately, in a period of increasing social and geographic mobility in many parts of the world, and anxieties about modernity, people also began to consider the converse implications of “placelessness” or, as Berger and colleagues called it, “homelessness” (1973). See also Auge 1995, Relph 1976, Sack 1992.
3. I have argued elsewhere that Indigenous worldviews have had a significant influence on the development of anthropological theory (Strang 2006).
4. This example is based on my own research in Cape York (Strang 1997), as well as drawing on the work of other Australian ethnographers.
5. Durkheim (1961 [1912]) famously argued that the religious beliefs of a society were reflected in the form of its social and political organization.
6. An exception are those who have inherited stations from early colonial settlers, who often have a keen sense of family history and who refer with pride to the documentary records of their tenure.
7. As Appleton observes, art and other forms of representations of landscape have much to offer analytically: “it is in this very kind of material that we may find new insights which the rational, logical language of science cannot evoke” (cited in Penning-Roswell and Lowenthal 1986: 28).
8. That is, those that signify many meanings simultaneously (see Morphy 1991, 1998b).
9. Note that there are major diversities even within groups, between individuals and subgroups, and also in terms of the many different contexts in which action takes place. As Moore observes, the culturally constructed environment is the expression of multiple “decision domains” (2005).
10. As Hardesty and Fowler note: “Archaeology is concerned with the things, relations, processes, and meanings of past sociocultural/environmental totalities and their temporal and spatial

over time and across the world,” and the central question is how to make valid interpretations of past behaviour (2001: 73).

11. There is obviously fruitful potential here for interdisciplinary exchange with other social sciences, too: for example, cultural geographers, historians, and so forth (see Stratford 1999; Wagstaff 1987).

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