

# Power in the Spatialization of the American Landscape: INCLUSION & EXCLUSION

Kelly Carragee

The “expedition” is an event which reveals the extent to which the development of scientific disciplines, particularly geographical and anthropological modes of representation which developed during the so-called “Age of Exploration”, was a corollary of such projects of domination as European imperialism and later American expansionism. In this paper I describe the process by which the American West was construed as a “natural” space.

The exploration of the West was a military project of domination overlaid with a veneer of scientific discovery. The project of science itself posits the scientific observer as rational and impartial. It masks its function as the servant of the dominant ideology – while simultaneously obscuring the mechanisms by which that domination is extended. Scientists, however, were not the only interpreters of “discovered” land and phenomena, although their accounts were privileged over those of “amateurs” such as travel writers, who had only their subjectivity to recommend them. Western expeditions consisted of several different strata of informers – the heroic leader, the native guides, mythologizers such as newspaper reporters, and creators of imagery, including photographers. Thus, there were two narratives generated by the expedition – the scientific and the heroic. Both work to the same ends: to portray a country which is rich in exploitable resources, vast, and empty, and thus open to conquest. The moral imperative of the “advanced” society to transform space from useless and worthless, populated by natives and sagebrush, to a capital resource which will further the advancement of civilization is, I believe, the way in which a “natural” space is created.

The relatively recent intellectual phenomenon variously called the “sociology of space,”<sup>1</sup> cultural or human geography, attempts to place human activity in its spatial context, from which, according to Henri Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space*, was artificially separated during the Enlightenment; the human as both subject and object was removed from his/her environment, which, then served as a mere background against which human actions take place. Contemporary studies of modern forms of spatialization, the process by which the physical environment is created and imbued with meaning, is precisely an attempt to rectify the rationalized separation of self from environment (which denies awareness of the social processes that simultaneously give rise to and are modified by the human-modified physical world). Two of the most influential models of the philosophy of spatial production have been those of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. In some ways, Foucault’s history of space is a natural extension of his history of the body. The body is the cellular unit of production; therefore, the extension of the capitalist system necessitated accumulation of bodies, and new means of subjection of those bodies, achieved under capital not through “traditional, ritual, violent, costly” means,<sup>2</sup> but through the technology of power: power as exercised on the body for purposes of subjection and maximum productive efficiency. The generation of new spatial forms and practices is one form of this technology of power – the grid of power and knowledge within which the human body is explored, broken down and rearranged.<sup>3</sup> Thus a study of the spatialization process would reveal the underlying order of generative discursive practices.

A second model of spatialization, expostulated by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, is in some measure a critique of Foucault’s model: Foucault’s theory of space could be read as somewhat deterministic, abnegating as it does a “reality” of space in the Cartesian sense and positing “space” as merely an arena with no meaning outside of the structuralization of discursive practice. Lefebvre perceives that Foucault has created an artificial schism between discursive practice as generative factor and the social space in which discursive formations become actualized.<sup>4</sup>

Lefebvre, on the other hand, posits a *triplicité* – a threefold dialectic of space – consisting of spatial practice (or territorialization – division of the land into units of property); discursive representations of space, cultural images or ideologies which generate the physical manifestation; and, “spaces of representation” – the structuring of space as it exists in the popular imagination. Historical analysis, therefore, instead of dealing exclusively with temporal phenomena, should ideally consist in charting the relationship of changing modes of production to space as a *commodity* – both a product in itself and a reflection of a given society’s system of ordering and of accruing value to “nature” – that which is not yet useful to humans (a relation which has varied throughout history). Lefebvre’s vision of the science of space, therefore, is one which is simultaneously able to represent the political use of knowledge, to reveal the ideology designed to conceal that use, and therefore to provide for the possibility for change by belying the appearance of inevitability which the spatial exercise of power relies upon for its continued existence.



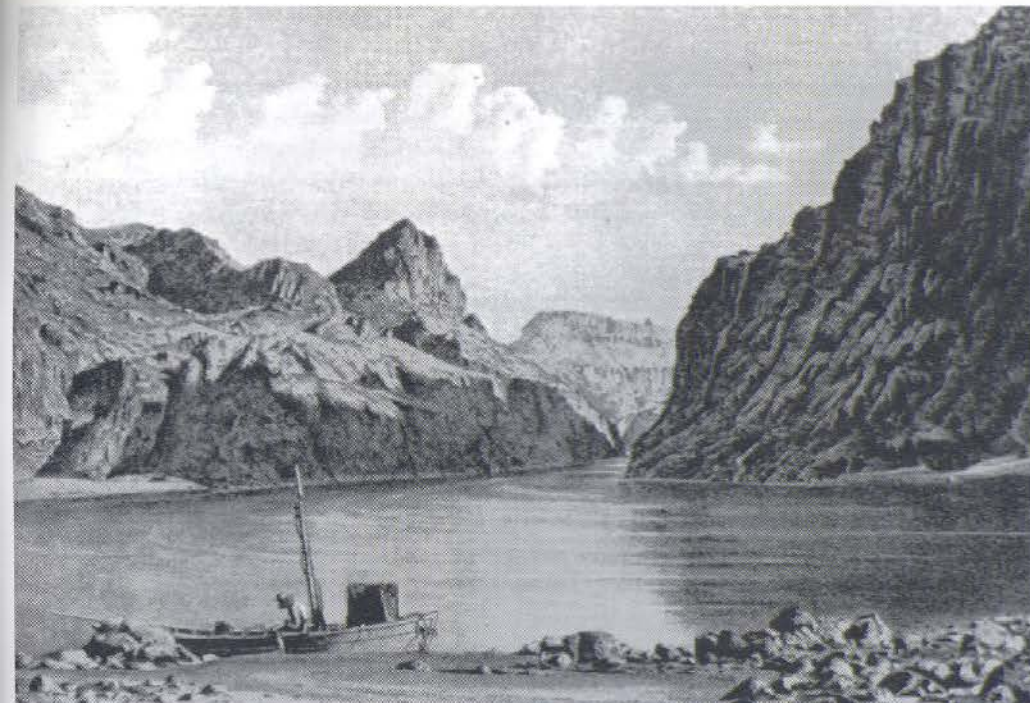


Fig. 1: "Black Cañon, Colorado River, from Camp 8, Looking Above", vol. I, *Geographical Report of the Wheeler Expedition* (1858), after a photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan.

The process of spatializing social relationships depends on making them seem as if they could not possibly be otherwise – by manifesting them physically, they become absolutized. The exercise of power itself consists not only of the political/legislative decision-making process which generates these relationships but in the fact that certain contingencies are prevented from being actualized, "whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices or through individuals' decisions."<sup>5</sup> According to Steven Lukes, this form of exclusion is the result of the latent conflict between those who exercise power and those whom they exclude: "latent" because the excluded and disenfranchised are in most cases precluded from awareness of their status and of their "real" interests.<sup>6</sup>

In the spatialization process of the American West, this apparent inevitability of the exercise of power is most obvious in the doctrine of "manifest destiny," or the ideological imperative of the American "people," or rather, American state, to extend control laterally, from east to west (and potentially south, and arguably north), over the Americas. According to Richard Poulson, manifest destiny is not quantifiable as an historical concept, because "[i]t is not a *thing* existing in time, but a projection into spaces which are clearly transcendent."<sup>7</sup> Attempts to grapple with the concept historically are elusive because it is an inherently political and ideological will to motion; description becomes propaganda:

it is [...] only within the context of a history, the past *for*, and not *of*, a group, that propagandizing is possible, that nationalism, politics, desacralized religion, and technology determine the thrust and meaning of past events.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of being a historical veracity, manifest destiny is a spatial projection map of a dominant ideology, one which drew from scientific, religious, national and popular discourses to legitimate itself.

The concept of a national destiny – that of subduing the entire continent – gained validity from Alexander von Humboldt's concept of the "isothermic zodiac" – a geological condition inherent in the northern hemisphere which, he claimed, favored the expansion of American capital industrialism. This corresponds to what Poulson describes as the myth of Buenaventura – the great river which supposedly flowed from the inland West to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>9</sup> The cultural imagining of this river, which by identifying the unknown Western lands as a fertile drainage basin, politicized and accrued economic value to this heretofore "empty" space. The symbolism surrounding this river was so powerful that it was literally mapped into the popular spatial imagination, despite expeditions which failed to prove its existence.

In the mapping of Buenaventura and other spatial constructs, one can see the way value was assigned to this land through several channels. First, the geological theories of Humboldt theorized that minerals and other natural resources were deposited in the

land through the process of geological cataclysm, which, he further speculated, created the natural beauty and sublimity of the West.

Second, value was accrued to the West through its potentiality as a conduit for greater wealth: the legendary "passage to India" – which, of course, was Columbus' goal – could finally be achieved through the railroad, which would channel goods from the wealthy ports of the Far East to the financial establishment on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

In addition, the imagined fertility of the West held potential wealth, as agricultural production would fuel industrial expansion. This dream of agricultural wealth by Eastern capitalists has been mythically linked to what Poulson describes as the common man's search for "food, children, elbowroom" – space which the landless were regularly denied in Europe. This myth, of course, is just that. Instead, Poulson argues that the immigrant-cum-pioneer was seeking not *more* space, but a redefinition of space; in the myth, "elbowroom" was transmuted into "the vast space of ownership" in which the illusion of freedom was created: the landscape became a manifestation of god-given rights – the right to reproduce, to accumulate land, and to transform the production of that land into wealth.<sup>10</sup>

This corresponds to Leo Marx' description of the way in which the pastoral model of expansion – here, Thomas Jefferson's "yeoman farmer" – is coopted by the process of accruing capital value to the land. This was a process understood by Jefferson himself. In Query 22 of "Notes on the State of Virginia," he writes:

The cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent of citizens. But the actual habits of our countrymen attach themselves to commerce. They will exercise for themselves. [...] Wars then must sometimes be our lot.<sup>11</sup>

Not only does the figure of the yeoman become both signifier and signified of "America" in this image of the pastoral. But at the same time, the pastoral is translated into a doctrine of progress, in which nature's prime, if not sole, purpose is to serve humankind. "According to the social, political and economic ideology of capitalism the land is only valuable insofar as it can be incorporated into the economy."<sup>12</sup> This is clearly evident in the after-effects of the Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1862 (both based roughly on Jefferson's model), in which speculators and yeomen alike



bought up the land, "improved" it or let it sit, sold it at a profit and moved on. The intrinsic value of the land was not as a locus of human habitation and cultivation but as a commodity.

The act of surveying the West and generating a spatial projection of the land set up a nexus of power and hegemony by way of a generative spatial projection of the land. Predicated on forms of mimetic representation, these surveying practices assumed that both modes of projection (like photography) and images themselves were transparent representations of "the land," without conditions of history. This belied the cultural and historical contingency of, and the effects of power invested in, such practices of representation.

The responsibility for the generation of images of the West was itself the object of a battle for hegemony. There were four major land surveys during the period 1867-1879 – two directly under the aegis of the War Department (the Wheeler and King surveys), while the other two – the U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey of Territories, under the direction of Ferdinand V. Hayden, and the survey of the Rocky Mountains, directed by John Wesley Powell, also a geologist – were directly funded by Congress.

After the Civil War, the U.S. Army sought exclusive access to Congressional surveying funds. The Wheeler expedition to the Colorado River (1871-73) was, for instance, as much an effort to get Congress to fund military surveys over civilian surveys. This mapping project functioned as a reconnaissance mission to gain information which would both aid the Army in exterminating the Indians and prove the navigability of the Colorado River, which had not previously been navigated. Photography taken by Timothy O'Sullivan, a member of the expedition and a noted photographer, showed a calm river with natural landings. In actuality, the river was an extremely turbulent and difficult watercourse. But the images were blatantly manipulated through overexposure in order to make it appear to be a river suitable for transport of people and goods.<sup>13</sup> The image shown here is from the Wheeler expedition report – a graphic reproduction of the O'Sullivan photo, which creates a double distortion [Fig. 1].

Motivated by the exigencies of industrial capitalism, including the search for new markets and material resources, the U.S. government deployed the military to further the demands and interests of capital. Such exercises of power were performed under the

guise of historical "necessity": it was the destiny of the U.S. to realize the dream of prosperity. Indeed, this was as much a moral mission as it was economic. And the popular press, with its own imaging techniques, was instrumental in portraying such military actions as moral and economic imperatives, mostly through racial rhetoric:

**Shall this garden of beauty be suffered to lie dormant in its wild and useless luxuriance? ...myriads of enterprising Americans would flock to its rich and inviting prairies; the hum of Anglo-American industry would be heard in its valleys; cities would rise up on its plains and sea-coasts, and the wealth of the nation be increased in an incalculable degree.<sup>14</sup>**

The alliance of the state and capital was cemented by the willingness of the government to further the interests of big business, mainly by granting certain charters to corporations, particularly to railroads. Between 1850-57, 25 million acres of public land (acquired through military conquest) was given to railroads, along with millions of dollars in bonds.

The surveys conducted under the aegis of the Interior Department, and later under the War Department, had the express goal of finding sites most suitable for development by these corporations. Once surveying had been completed, the task of the military shifted to clearing the area of Native Americans in order to transform it into something "useful." This was done to insure that the land's transformation occurred in a way which was amenable to the capitalists (as evidenced by the Army's role in quashing the railroad strike of 1877). The action of "discovery" and "transformation" was made to seem not only ideologically inevitable – a matter of American "progress" – but, in fact, the only possible destiny for the land.

As Richard Poulsen explains, the transformation of that which previously existed is necessary in order for a landscape to be understood.<sup>15</sup> The displacement of pre-existing systems, whether of the native peoples or of aspects of ecosystems by the needs of industrial capital was a prerequisite for the creation of a homogeneous land system. Native Americans had no place within this system. Instead, they were thrust into a normative grid of power through which they were configured as objects of knowledge to be, for instance, classified and demarcated by the state, and thus subjected to political and military control.

The process of transformation can be seen in the photographs of William Henry Jackson, particularly his work of 1868 – prior to his joining the Hayden surveys. Jackson was one of the primary generators of images of the West; beginning as a portrait photographer in the East, he became acquainted with Ferdinand Hayden, who had been appointed Director of the U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey in 1867. His 1868 photos of Native Americans were "practice" photos taken while waiting to join the survey. Here, the native landscape is rendered as "occupied," and its inhabitants' images transformed and commodified.

In the imaginary frameworks through which the events of exploration were detailed, photography would play a central role. Geography, geology, anthropology, botany – all were means of accruing meaning to unknown phenomena in order to fit them into hierarchical scientific taxonomies. The encounter with previously unknown forms – animal, vegetable, or mineral – created a need for new descriptive languages. This positing of the scientific observer as mediator between the physical world and language was dependent on the assumption of the rationality of vision itself – a belief which stemmed from the Renaissance "invention" of linear perspective, an attempt to create a systematic means of producing a mimetic representation of the material world. Photography offers a perfect example of an apparently "objective" craft that could claim to be scientific and therefore able to access the "truths" of nature. It is a participant within, if not productive of, apparatuses of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, photographic representations employed in expedition missions powerfully articulated and consolidated the capabilities of the U.S. government and various scientific disciplines (including geography) to order and control the land. Natural purpose was seen to conform to man's purpose.

Hayden's stated goal was to accumulate knowledge which would be valuable to Easterners. His party did not include a topographer, but a sixth of the party were visual artists. Hayden sought to visually create order within the context of the "beautiful plan of the physical growth of our continent." The visual images of the land were to portray its suitability for exploitation. Those areas not directly usable for industry were useful in other ways – the tourist industry, for example. As Peter Hales has noted, "In this scheme, all rivers were scenic, waterbearing or navigable; Indian



lands' were designated as 'sections [that]... to the agriculturalist [have] comparatively little attraction.'<sup>17</sup>

The transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, also played a critical role in constructions of the natural space of the West. In the practices of representations of U.S. explorers, the railroad marked a fundamental reconfiguration of the land. Indicative of the "progress" of civilization, the railroad bisected Western space, "gridding and demarcating, in a way no trail had previously succeeded in doing."<sup>18</sup> The importance of this event in creating a mental conception of spatial order cannot be underestimated. Instead of untamed wilderness and untapped potentiality, the West became – through land acts, (primarily that of 1862) – parceled into 160-acre homesteads that any American could purchase (if he had \$200), and the value of which was enhanced by proximity to the railroad. In reality, of course, these lots were soon consolidated into huge corporate-owned tracts on which company towns were constructed.

The industry of creating images for popular consumption played a prominent role as disseminator of the ideology of progress embodied by the railroad. The precedent for this had been set as early as 1853, when the daguerreotypist S.N. Carvalho accompanied Col. Robert C. Fremont across the Great Divide. Fremont got the idea to utilize the daguerreotypist from Humboldt. Photography was often manipulated to achieve propagandistic effects to serve the interests of the railroads. Scientific experts and creators of images, such as O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and Thomas Moran – whose sketches and drawings appeared frequently in the popular press back East<sup>19</sup> – were instrumental to the construction of this concept of progress.

The drawn image, in fact, was particularly apt for this kind of ideological work; this is most visible in the work of Thomas Moran, who accompanied the Hayden survey in 1870 and 1871, and worked closely with William Henry Jackson, collaborating on the framing of views and often reproducing and subtly altering Jackson's photos in graphic form. As Moran's rendering of photographic views of scenes of natural beauty show, the photograph was drawn, and often altered, to



elicit a sense of the drama and contrast of the "natural"; according to editorial demands, he would alter the vista accordingly, adding more vivid hues or more clouds to the sky.<sup>20</sup>

Like others, Moran's goal was to "convey to the American public of the 1870s the grandeur of their unspoiled continent. Pure information would not sway or uplift the nation."<sup>21</sup> As is evident, the surveys of the West were multivalent in function, as they conflated scientific and economic discourses with the accumulation of knowledge: the filling-up of the "emptiness" of the West with meaning; the "desire to establish the *truth* about the western terrain."<sup>22</sup> The images which were generated in the course of the surveying of the West were thus a potent force in the ordering of space in the American imagination.

• • • Kelly Carragee is a graduate student in the History of Architecture and Urbanism Department at Cornell University; however, she considers herself untrammelled by disciplinary boundaries. She has a three-year-old son who feels the same. . . . .

#### Notes

1 Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991) 50.

2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan

(New York: Vintage, 1979) 221.

3 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980) 143.

4 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (London: Basil Blackwell, 1994) 4.

Foucault, however, at times acknowledges the hegemonic process; *Discipline and Punish*, 26-27.

5 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974) 24.

6 Which, Lukes says, are empirically identifiable. *Power*, 24-25.

7 Richard Poulsen, *Misbegotten Muses: History and Anti-History* (New York, 1988) 94.

8 *ibid.*, 95.

9 Richard Poulsen, *The Landscape of the Mind* (New York, 1990) 32.

10 Poulsen, *Misbegotten Muses*, 103-104.

11 From *Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, eds., Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 1944) 285.

12 Leo Marx, interviewed by Carrie R. Wilson in *Modulus* 20 (1991):73.

13 Publisher's Notes, *Wheeler's Photographic Survey of the American West, 1871-73* (New York, 1983) vi-vii.

14 *Illinois State Register*, 1846, quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People's*

*History of the United States* (New York: Southend Press, 1980) 152.

15 Poulsen, *Landscape of the Mind*, 36.

16 Although this is not strictly true, as could be deduced from the permissibility of photographs (and now videos) as evidence in a court of law, despite the ease with which images are manipulated and sometimes falsified.

17 Peter Hales, *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988) 69.

18 *ibid.*, 40.

19 The polemic and iconic influence of the images Moran created cannot be understated; in fact, his 1872 painting "The Grand Cañon of Yellowstone" was instrumental in Hayden's successful campaign to have Yellowstone designated a public park in perpetuity, and his "Mount of the Holy Cross" was used in tourist advertising through the twentieth century. See Joni Louise Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

20 This demand for "drama" is directly related to the trend, in "high" art landscape painting of the time, from Europeans such as Caspar David Friedrich to the Americans Albert Bierstadt and Frederic E. Church, towards sublimity – the insistence on terror and awe as necessary elements in the transformative aspects of art. See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: The American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

21 Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, *The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting, 1839-1880* (New York: Garland Press, 1977) 136.

22 *ibid.*, 132. (EMPHASIS MINE)