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DISINTERMENT AND THE MAGICALLY REAL

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ABSTRACT: *Although delineating and characterizing regions and areas has been an enduring preoccupation of geographers and is part of the tradition of the discipline, this delineation and characterization has often neglected aspects of the geographic imagination and assumed that cause-and-effect relationships were always linear and explicit. I offer here an alternative approach to the understanding of region based on subjective and fluid relationships with the soil and, specifically, the imperatives of disinterment that are powerfully evident in Mexico and Central America. This essay both refers to and borrows from the literary forms of magical realism.*

Keywords: *Disinterment, Magical realism, Latin America*

INTRODUCTION

Delineating regions and areas has been an enduring preoccupation of geographers and part of the "tradition" of the discipline (Richardson, 1992, p. 47). However, in their preoccupation with form and functional components, geographers have been guilty of choosing the most obvious approach to regional studies: assessing the strategic fit of regions relative to centers of power such as the United States (Miyoshi and Harootunian, 2002; see also Barnes and Farish, 2006) using a spurious empiricism bordering on determinism (Johnston, 1997) that saw the task of regional understanding largely in terms of information and data retrieval by specialists (Chow, 2002).

Derek Gregory observed long ago that "[e]ver since regional geography was declared to be dead…geographers, to their credit, have kept trying to revive it…" (1978, pp. 171-172). In response to this observation, I can only say, "me, too." This essay attempts to delineate region as expressed through imagination, memory, hope, and desire. These seem to be points of reference distinctly at variance with those used in traditional approaches to region and area, but that is not the case. We can, for example, look back to the work of Hartshorne in the 1930s and his belief that distinct combinations of facts, phenomena, and causal relations formed regions into "entities only in our thoughts" (Hartshorne, 1939, p. 275) but possessing an objective foundation of "elements and complexes of elements" (p. 282). In this short essay, I am suggesting that the parameters of those thoughts, phenomena, and relationships be understood more expansively and illustrate some ways of achieving this.

We all use past and future to fix our understanding of the present but it requires imagination, the creation of a mental picture, to do that (Cosgrove, 1994). To those who have argued a place for regional geography based on dialectic versus naturalistic explanation, imagination, memory, and desire take us to the very foundations of human agency where we find a "mediatrix" between place and body (Casey, 2001, p. 687). This is not radical work in geography, but it is important work left unfinished by humanistic geographers who, since the 1980s, have effectively challenged the usefulness of meta-theory in helping us understand place and region (Young, 2001). The point made by Nigel Thrift in 2004 about the narrow range of skills deployed by cultural geographers and the range of sensate life they overlook in their reach for data, sounds curiously dated, but is essentially correct. In the closing paragraph of *Geographical Imaginations*, Derek Gregory (1994, p. 416) concludes that the proper work of geographical imagination is to recognize the "corporeality of vision…" and to the extent he means that imagination is bodily situated, I agree. A certain material earthiness about the world around us serves as a medium for self-expression and creativity.

REGION AND THE MAGICALLY REAL

In this essay, I am guilty of muddling the concepts of region and place. To the extent that place connotes spatial containment (Buell, 2005) I am resistant to applying the term, but to the extent places are "centers of felt value" (Tuan, 1977, p. 4) the

concept fits, but only as part of the broader idea of a region over and within which those felt values are evident. There is a certain inevitability to this muddling since the work draws from personal experience from many visits to Latin America (most recently on an NEH fellowship); a part of the world where scale has different meanings than mainstream geographers may be accustomed to. There, concepts of space, place, and region flex and merge as do relationships between the personal and the general, actuality, and possibility. I cannot fully explain this differing sense of scale and relationship found there, but I suspect it is linked to the role of the subjunctive tense or mood in the Spanish language. This class of verb forms is used in reference to potential or hypothetical events and, as a mode of looking at the world, stands in contrast to the indicative tense, which presents information as objective fact. I try to incorporate this flexing and merging of geographical understandings in this essay and I fully understand the difficulties this poses for the reader as the familiar patterns of an academic essay are set aside. Bear with me.

Region, I believe, is best delineated and explained in ways than push the limits of reality. In literature, particularly Latin American literature, the term "magical realism" has been applied to stories that interweave dream and reality and it is that form of story-telling that could be of help in exploring new approaches to region. The term "magical realism" defies easy definition, but basically refers to the intermixing of the credible with the fantastic into a narrative that seems realistic and plausible. Essentially, the boundaries between reality and fantasy are merged into a hybrid form that involves, as Durix (1998, p. 146) observes, "...a strange treatment of time, space, characters or what many people...take as the rules of the physical world." This smacks of the surreal, and indeed that term recurs in critical discussions of magical realism (see Schroeder, 2004) and has also been applied to aspects of ethnographic research (see Clifford, 1988). Authors associated with the genre include Gabriel García Márquez and Miguel Angel Asturias.

To geographers--dealers in worldly facts--merging the real and its other(s) can be a scary prospect since it suggests that the tangible world is less than actual and incorporates what James Clifford (1988, p. 10) calls "serious fictions." However, Clifford goes on to define surreal in way that a good number of humanistic geographers could live with when he describes it as "…an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions-that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities…" (p. 118). By exploring those extraordinary realities, we can construct a more meaningful geography of region as an assemblage of people and actions and performances from past and present.

The region I speak of in this essay is a land where imperatives of disinterment rule; where dreams and desires are principally expressed through digging, excavating, revealing the previously covered, restoring to the light of day, making accessible that which was buried. "Here," writes Miguel Asturias (1997, p. 14) in *Portico*, one of his tales based on Mayan myths and legends, "the imagination reels. [t]he art of turning stone, the vapor of dreams. All juxtaposed. Idioms. Cadences. Constant mineral sedimentation." I write of a region where dreams of disinterment order waking lives and rework landscape. It is true that soil is not sentient, but it is also surely true that the act of disinterment, the process of moving ourselves through soil, is purposeful; we envisage outcome. This being the case, the soil-- the medium of interment--is the medium of our plans and we-shape that medium as we pursue those plans.

The jumble of coincidences and fragments that make up the serious fiction of a region poses challenges, both for writers and readers. For the former, the challenge is not so much to model that jumble as to allow the fragments to form their own juxtaposition and natural rhetorical form. I attempt this through three vignettes or "takes." The people involved in the mediatrix between self and place within these takes range from the recognized and celebrated to the anonymous. In the former category, we can place the 20th Century visual artist Robert Smithson and the 19th Century travel writer, John Lloyd Stephens, author of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Yucatan and Chiapas* (Stephens, 1949). I am by no means the first to link the expeditions of Smithson and Stephens. Smithson himself signaled the connection by using the term "incidents of…travel" and deliberately induced a reflection across time between the two centuries. In the research literature, the associations have been well explored by Roberts (2004) and Reynolds (2003). Both Roberts and Reynolds were concerned with Smithson's mapped conceptions of time and time-travel, however, and not with his contribution to regional identity or tropes of disinterment. The polar opposite of Smithson and Stephens are the Maya dead of Guatemala in their mass graves prior to the reclaiming of the remains (if they can be reclaimed) by neighbors and kin. The 35-year Guatemalan civil war, propelled by government fears of leftist insurgency and claims to land, came to an end in the 1990s and since then the physical process of disinterment and identification has become a potent

part of the peace process and the coming to terms with the past.

These three vignettes have been chosen to show how wide-ranging and varied is the preoccupation with the soil and with disinterment. As with the literary form of magical realism, the three vignettes cross-reference from one to another and are punctuated by the tangential and the non-linear.

TAKE 1

By his own account, the art of Robert Smithson stemmed from "a dialectical position that deals with...whether or not something exists or doesn't exist" (in Alberro and Norvell, 2001) and a belief in entropy as a defining geographical condition where the "Earth as a map undergoing disruption leads the artist to the realization that nothing is certain or formal" (in Boettger, 2005). In the spring of 1969, Smithson traveled to the Yucatán peninsula and positioned, at nine different locations, sets of one-foot square mirrors in the earth, thereby combining two components he most favored in his sculptures: mirrors and earth. Mirrors, as Boettger, (2005) reminds us, are tools of both realist and magicians.

Smithson's 1969 essay in *Artforum*, Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan (reprinted in Smithson, 1979), documents his project and contains nine brief sections corresponding to each of the displacements. In the second of these, he writes:

> In a suburb of Uxmal, which is to say nowhere, the second displacement was deployed. What appeared to be a shallow quarry was dug into the ground to a depth of four to five feet, exposing a bright red clay mixed with white limestone fragments. Near a small cliff the twelve mirrors were stuck into clods of earth. It was photographed from the top of the cliff. Again Tezcatlipoca spoke, "that camera is a portable tomb, you must remember that."

Over 100 years before, in 1839, hired hands from Copán (in present-day Honduras) cut back vegetation to expose architectural details and hieroglyphs to the camera lucida of Frederick Catherwood, the artist accompanying the travel writer, John Lloyd Stephens. The image passed to the drawing board via eye-piece, prism, mirror, and hand. "In regard to the age of this desolate city," said Stephens (p. 124), "I shall not at present offer any conjecture. Some idea might perhaps be formed from the accumulations of earth and the gigantic trees growing on the top of the ruined structures, but it would be uncertain and unsatisfactory." Despite this void in understanding and the inability to visually interpret his surroundings, the artist sighted through his instrument and commenced to draw the projected image formed from reflected and refracted light. To the extent that explanation of Copán as a place eluded interpretation, writer and artist were both displaced.

Writes Smithson of his surroundings (1979, p. 94), "…it is an enchanted region where down is up. Space can be approached, but time is far away. Time is devoid of objects when one displaces all destinations." Smithson pocketed his mirrors and took them back to New York. He writes (p. 103) "If you visit the sites (a doubtful possibility) you will find nothing but memory-traces." To Smithson, the ephemeral reflections were as real as one could get in a region where down was up and where existence was, simultaneously, non-existence; place was fixed by coincidences ("incidents" essentially), not coordinates. All actions and events no matter how consequential had to be considered together to adequately describe place. For Stephens and Catherwood the ephemeral nature of appearance and random chance were made clear when, in 1842, many of the drawings and collected antiquities (a "collection of curiosities" as a newspaper of the time described it) were destroyed by fire in New York City. The camera lucida had been focused only on those antiquities that could not be transported (Evans, 2004), and now they were "nothing but memory-traces." Tracings of stonework became smoke that drifted over the tenements of the city and in some form, somewhere, back to earth.

TAKE 2

To find and loot a Mayan tomb you find the cardinal points that conform to the Maya cosmology of the "Axis Mundi" and burrow either east or north. To the Maya of antiquity east was the direction of the reborn sun, while north was associated with the celestial realm. Rulers were often interred to the north of the plazas, together with objects made of jade and finely crafted pottery.

Those that do the looting are known as *huecheros*, named after "*hueches*" or burrowing animals ("*huech*" is a Maya word for armadillo). The *huecheros* work to supplement often meager earning as farmers or *chicleros* (collectors of gum from chicozapoate trees for incorporation into chewing gum) and often operate as wholesalers to traffickers in stolen antiquities. Geographic ironies abound in this occupation for they explore the celestial realm above as envisaged by the ancient Maya by digging

trenches (s*aques*) below. Where the diggers are also *chicleros* and their vantage points in the treetops enabled then to spot the overgrown ruins on the landscape, they participate in a double irony since their subterranean dreams begin in the treetops from which they then descend to inscribe those dreams in the earth. Occasionally they dig too far, too fast and when the final barrier between *huechero* and riches is breached, there is only sunlight and the sounds of howler monkeys. Writes Asturias:

> …we find ourselves slashing and chopping, ripping and tearing through this zone of fiery colors, straining to reach the sweet inmost core of the delicate stone which juts from the jungle floor, hewn in a thousand shapes of cities, towers, gods and monsters, gleaming with the hardness of obsidian, sparkling with the perfect green of the jade-shards…(1997, p. 13).

This is wholesome work to the *huecheros* and a form of labor not unrelated to the growing of crops on their *milpas*. It is shifting agriculture to the extent they move from ruin to ruin (Matsuda, 2005). To them, the soil is a resource to be used, and what are interred remains from the 8th or 9th centuries if not soil? Is it so very different from pocketing the shards of terracotta that freely reveal themselves in the plowed fields after a rain? But they are routinely branded as criminal and part of an illicit *huechería* web of which the burrowing of the *huecheros* themselves forms just a part (Sharer, 1994). Archaeologists value the artifacts as witnesses to a past that demands interrogation and it has to be an on-the-spot interrogation for when artifacts are moved, their context is less able to be determined. Large stone or stucco remains may be cut-up for transportation to dealers, forming fragments and displacements of history that would have appealed to Smithson, the saw cutting through the stone just being the latest in a string of coincidences. Regarding his fourth mirror displacement, Smithson asks, "when does a displacement become a misplacement?"

TAKE 3

In August 1982, the Guatemalan army massacred 21 villagers in the small community of Pinares near Cahabón in Alta Verapaz. In Pinares, as in many other villages attacked during the 35-year civil war in Guatemala for supposed communist leanings, victims and perpetrators often lived side-by-side as uneasy neighbors. After the war ended in 1992, efforts were begun to exhume human remains. Over 200,000 were killed or abducted during the conflict but the remains of just 5,000 had been returned to their families for burial by the end of 2005. In the community of Pinares, a forensic team worked for eight days in May, 1996. Unlike the careful scraping of archaeological field workers, forensic digging is fast, sweaty and ill-tempered. No jade here.

Singly and in groups, the bodies of Pinares came to light and the remains were taken to the capital for investigation before being returned to the community for a proper burial. This carrying out and bringing back of the dead was not un-joyous. Was it not the case in times past that the living cohabited with the dead and that the family ossuary would be paraded and re-distributed? And in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is remarked: "[a] person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground" (García Márquez, 1970, p. 14). What memory would a person have of their lost and what last thoughts did the lost have as there stood in dusty heat? "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendá was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (García Márquez, 1970, p. 1).

The soils of Guatemala and those of neighboring El Salvador, a country also caught up in civil war in the 1980s, vary widely in quality. "What is it about this clay," wonders Asturias about the land around Tikal, "which soaks the moisture from the earth, preventing any possibility of life for man, while these forests flourish in a frenzy of abundance?" (1997, p. 14). The Maya have developed a terminology to fit this variability, from *tzekel* ("stony land bad for sowing") to *ekluum* ("black earth") to *kankab-cat* ("potter's red earth") (Hammond 1994, p. 72). The diggers of *tzekel* will have a harder time of it than their counterparts working in the *ekluum*. What does not vary is the ability of the soil and the fast-growing vegetation to illuminate, focus, frame, and instruct. In writing of El Salvador, Joan Didion (1982, p. 20) writes of the body dump at Puerta de Diablo during the early 1980s as being "…framed, a site so romantic and "mystical," so theatrically sacrificial in aspect it might be a cosmic parody of nineteenth-century landscape painting."

CONCLUSION

The intention in this essay has been to suggest the power of relationships with the soil, and the centrality of disinterment in a particular part of the world. That centrality can be used to define region in an alternative form to the usual economic,

demographic or cultural / political perspectives. The concept of disinterment is useful because it has multiple associations, and in Mexico and Central America features in so many varied contexts; the "takes" above barely hint at the variety. The Maya realm, with its rich remains of pre-Columbian artifacts, is territorially contiguous to the United States and has attracted teams of archeologists from U.S. universities for many decades. Unquestionably, this has created an association between disinterment and science: the *lux* of information. But considering the concept of disinterment more expansively takes us well beyond the objectives of science and inwards towards the human imagination: the inner *lux* of thought and desire.

To the extent we associate disinterment with death and exhumation, using the centrality of disinterment to define region seems a morbid undertaking. This is not so, however, for two reasons. Firstly, in Mexico and Central America, death and disappearance is subjunctive, contingent and never final. There is a certain mobility to death that is lacking elsewhere; it is a portable condition (literally so with the ancient Maya who would periodically redistribute and/or parade the remains of ancestors with who they cohabited both in life and death). Secondly, there is the role of exposure, illumination, and revelation that is brought about through disinterment and the peeling away of concealment. To Stephens and Catherwood, light was both index and tool of revelation (the name of the camera lucida drawing aid is thereby derived). To those watching the exhumations in Alta Verapaz, the disinterred bodies brought into the humid sunlight constituted memory in illuminated form. Smithson's mirror fragments could not function without light.

Although disinterment appears an odd concept upon which to hang the idea of region, it is more explanatory than it seems. Increasingly, apparently durable characteristics of place and region are proving unstable as trans-local and global forces bear inwards upon them. The urge to disinter, however, has always been a strategy of response to forces bearing inward from a variety of sources, ranging from the aspirations of archaeologists to the use of the soil to conceal criminal acts. Additionally, using disinterment as a defining concept in tandem with magical realism is in tune with contemporary views that the nature of regions is constantly being created and recreated, fracturing and reconstituting.

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