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**CEMETERIES AND COLUMBARIA, MEMORIALS AND MAUSOLEUMS:
NARRATIVE AND INTERPRETATION
IN THE STUDY OF DEATHSCAPES IN GEOGRAPHY**

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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, as a graduate student in London, I confronted the decision of what dissertation I wanted to write. Interested as I was in the area of religion, one option was to go where few geographers had dared to tread – deathscapes beckoned as an under-researched but potentially revelatory landscape for the intrepid researcher. I decided against it. Little could entice me to go traipsing around cemeteries and columbaria, memorials and mausoleums. I have remained faithful to my fears (which in itself suggests an entry point for exploring one’s constructions of deathscapes – as landscapes of pollution? Of sacredness? Of politics? Of memory?). Still, I am grateful that others have ventured forth, for deathscapes, as other neglected ‘-scapes’ (sound, smell, body – see Porteous, 1985; 1990), embody myriad meanings and values wrapped up in multiple narratives, inviting interpretation.

Two recent articles on this topic in an earlier volume of this journal (Hartig and Dunn, 1998; Teather, 1998) seemed to signal a recent disproportionate surge in interest in deathscapes. A search of the main geographical journals, however, reveals that there have only been about as many papers as there are years in the last decade. Nevertheless, these papers together raise several issues which situate the study of deathscapes squarely within the field of cultural geography, particularly as it has been retheorised in the last decade. At the same time, a survey of the literature in neighbouring disciplines suggests that geographers will find resonance among and rapprochement with many other researchers in the issues and perspectives that have drawn their attention. In these ways, death has been a “leveller”, bringing together various disciplines in shared interests and perspectives.

That this journal has given space to two articles on deathscapes in one issue, following soon after the devotion of most of an entire issue to cultural geography (1997, vol. 35(1)) indicates, in a way, the burgeoning sub-discipline of cultural geography in Australia (Dunn, 1997). While I am reviewing the specific work on deathscapes in this paper, the issues addressed reflect many of the concerns in the larger field of cultural geography, such as the social constructedness of race, class, gender, nation and nature, the ideological underpinnings of landscapes, the contestation of space, the centrality of place, and the multiplicity of meanings. This discussion of deathscapes is therefore a

“microscopic” analysis and stock-taking which is indicative of more “macrocosmic” cultural geographical research interests and trends.

RETHEORISED CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

It will be useful at the outset to outline some of the “new” directions in cultural geography, so as to frame my subsequent discussion of recent research on deathscapes. In this, I take Cosgrove and Jackson’s (1987) oft-cited paper as a starting point. Their most significant contribution is their attempt to retheorise “culture” and “landscape”. In Cosgrove and Jackson’s estimation, culture’s retheorisation should take into consideration, *inter alia*, contestations between groups, evident, for example, in the appropriation and transformation of artifacts and significations from the dominant culture by subordinate groups as forms of resistance. In other words, cultures, they argue, are politically contested, and cultural geography should pay explicit attention to processes of domination, hegemony and resistance, particularly as played out in the landscape. These power relations and production and consumption of political meanings can be examined in relation to gender, class, race, religious and other social-cultural groups.

Alongside the bid to retheorise culture, Cosgrove and Jackson (1987:96) also argued for a more complex concept of landscape, recognising it as a cultural construction, a “particular way of composing, structuring and giving meaning to an external world whose history has to be understood in relation to the material appropriation of land”. One important consequence of this approach is the insistence on landscape as a construction and the need to acknowledge the centrality of “symbolic landscapes” which “produce and sustain social meaning” (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987:96).

These strands in retheorised cultural geography have found their way into the agendas of cultural geographers researching in varied substantive areas, from religion to literature to popular culture to art. While strongest perhaps in Britain (see, for example, Cosgrove, 1989, 1990; Philo, 1991; Matless, 1995), such retheorisations have also infused recent research elsewhere, particularly in Canada, the U.S. and Australia (see, for example, Ley and Olds, 1988; Duncan, 1990; Anderson and Gale, 1992; Duncan and Ley, 1993; Ley, 1996; Jacobs, 1996; Anderson and Jacobs, 1997; Dunn, 1997). These retheorised perspectives have informed and invigorated the types of research questions asked in cultural geography (Kong, 1990, 1997): How do the political and the cultural interact to give rise to consensus over the allocation of meanings to particular places? How are power relations to be

drawn into an understanding of place creation and the allocation of meanings to places? What kind of “geography of resistance” (Jackson, 1988) may be analysed? Together with other geographers, Hartig and Dunn (1998) and Teather (1998) illustrate how these questions and perspectives have infused the study of deathscapes.

SPACE AS CONTESTED DOMAIN: THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

Nowhere is the notion of space as contested domain clearer than in Teather’s (1998) paper, which deals with the tensions between the individual and the state, and the cultural/religious and the secular, through an analysis of space for cemeteries and columbaria in Hong Kong. On the one hand, in land-scarce Hong Kong, some Chinese have been converted to the practice of cremation from that of burial. This has been achieved through the persuasion and control of the state, which is guided by secular concerns of planning and efficient land use guidelines. On the other hand, Chinese cemeteries are still symbolic places for individuals who desire *fengshui* (geomantic) considerations to be fully incorporated in burial. This reflects similar arguments by Yeoh (1991) and Yeoh and Tan (1995) who examine state discourse in Singapore from 1880 to 1930 and in the 1950s and 1960s respectively. They show how the colonial state adopted a utilitarian view of burial space, highlighting the insanitary nature of burial grounds and its consumption of space that could/should be better deployed for developmental purposes. At the same time, they examine conflicting Chinese discourses and practices of geomancy and ancestor worship. This examination of the conflicts between different value systems as played out through graves and graveyards is also reflected in the work of anthropologists such as Bollig (1997). He illustrates how ancestral Himba graves in Namibia are contested places because state developmental plans dictate that a hydroelectric dam be constructed while local society emphasises the symbolic and religious meanings of the graves as focal points of identity, expressions of relationships with the land and crucial to the practice of religious beliefs and rituals. In all these instances then, deathscapes provide a handle on understanding how space is a contested resource in social life. While the focus in all these papers has primarily been the conflicts between the sacred and the secular in deathscapes, this line of analysis in fact suggests other avenues for exploration, some of which have been pursued, such as contestations between races, classes and genders (see below), but also some of which have not been explored, for example, the contestations between different constructions of sacredness (for example, between different religious systems and beliefs).

Hartig and Dunn (1998), on the other hand, provide a useful counter perspective of how potential conflicts in the meanings ascribed to, and potential contestation of space involving, deathscapes, are obviated. In focusing on roadside memorials to commemorate people killed in motor vehicle accidents in Newcastle, Australia, they argue that the usual intolerance of private incursions into public spaces are accepted in the case of private memorials at accident sites for various reasons. First, it reveals an acknowledgement that the artefacts of death possess a reverence. This has come about because the state and its bureaucratic arms ameliorate their ideologies governing the use of public space, for example, the ideology of public hygiene and cleanliness, and emphasise instead sacred meanings and values. Second, policy makers also hope that these memorials may serve as warnings to careless drivers. In short, divergent meanings that could potentially have been invested in public spaces and private memorials by the state and individuals have not led to inevitable conflict because the insistence on public hygiene and order has been suppressed.

GENDER, CLASS AND RACE

Apart from the examination of spaces as domains contested by the sacred and the secular, the concerns with gender, class and race that have pervaded so much of contemporary geographical research have also clearly invaded the geographical study of deathscapes. Hartig and Dunn (1998) examine roadside memorials to commemorate people killed in motor vehicle accidents in Newcastle, Australia, and through these memorials, illustrate the narratives surrounding gender roles and class relations in Newcastle. Specifically, they argue that the memorials elicit responses from road users which reveal a hegemonic construction of masculinity: young males are characterised as ‘taking risks’, ‘speeding’, and as ‘drivers of fast cars’, interpreted as heroic aggression, disregard for personal safety and egocentrism. Such a construction is reinforced by the working class culture in Newcastle, an argument that Connell (1991, cited by Hartig and Dunn, 1998) propounds, for the response to economic powerlessness for men is to engage in behaviour such as violence, drug/alcohol abuse, motorbike-riding and speeding – a sort of hyper-masculinity. In some ways, the roadside memorials reproduce, legitimate and naturalise such a construction. Yet, Hartig and Dunn (1998:19) argue, the real need is to read these roadside memorials as symbolic of societal flaws, particularly as a “hegemonic and damaging version of masculinity”.

Hartig and Dunn’s arguments about the gendered nature of these memorial landscapes in fact offers a unique angle into the realm of gendered spaces. Other geographical and non-

geographical works have adopted somewhat different arguments. Morris' (1997) excellent paper on First World War British garden cemeteries, illustrates this best. The gendered nature of cemeteries is evident in various ways. First, she illustrates how there is little by way of monuments to women who died in active service. Although most of the casualties were of course male, there were thousands of women who also served; yet few distinct monuments exist to commemorate such women (Morris, 1997: 414; see also Monk, 1992). Second, the War Graves Commission, whose role was to locate, mark and register graves, to help find missing bodies, and to supervise the building and planning of cemeteries and design of memorials, further reinforced the subordinate position of women by disallowing them on the design team and on the Commission, despite calls for representation. Third, Morris also read the garden cemeteries as complex symbols of gendered landscapes. On the one hand, flowers and flower gardens are powerfully associated with women and femininities. On the other hand, gardens are also spaces of masculinities, with men dominating as horticulturalists, designers and gardeners. Morris argues that garden cemeteries therefore feminised the landscapes of war while upholding a military ideal of male community, comradeship and common sacrifice.

Morris' lines of arguments are paralleled in the works in other disciplines to the extent that it is sometimes impossible to draw a line between geographical and non-geographical work in this area. For example, Speck (1996), writing in the tradition of feminist studies, argues that women are not commemorated, and when they are, are represented as the stoic woman to symbolise the community's sacrifice, or as mother figures (transformed from nurses), who are essentially passive, private and respectable citizens. This, she terms as representation of their maternal citizenship – they expressed their commitment as citizens in ways that were open to them primarily as wives and mothers. Like Morris, she also argues that the marginalisation of women is similarly evident in the principal rituals and ceremonies of commemoration, and in the memorial-making process (women sculptors, for example, have been awarded few major memorial commissions). While writing as an art historian, Levinger's (1995) examination of war memorials in Israel lends further credence to the various arguments about the "genderedness" of these landscapes. She examines the types of memorials that women sculptors do erect when they are given the opportunity, discussing, *inter alia*, the choice of style and material, arguing that women never built high towers that dominate the landscape nor war machines in their memorial sites, and usually avoided steel, iron and cement for more traditional materials like stone. The themes of mourning and death are also more common in the memorials erected by women.

Hartig and Dunn's (1998) reference to class culture remains fairly singular, unlike the body of works that have developed around gendered deathscapes. Theirs, and Morris' (1997) secondary reference to the issue of class point to the possibilities for expanded exploration in this direction. For example, Morris' (1997) discussion of how the British War Graves Commission instituted a policy of uniformity for memorials so that wealthier families could not overshadow "what was seen to be the equal sacrifice of men from poorer social groups" (Morris, 1997:419; see also Heffernan, 1995) opens up questions about how far death is a "leveller" of class and social status. This may be extended to the issue of race, as Christopher (1995) illustrates in his study of racial segregation in cemeteries in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He showed how, prior to 1948, this segregation was apparent within cemeteries, while after 1948, it became apparent through the establishment of completely separate cemeteries. Such segregation is significant because it preceded even residential segregation. He argues that this was because the political desires of the dominant community could be expressed in the graveyards before they could in the urban fabric. Such studies illustrate the myriad possibilities for analyses of the intersections between class, gender, race and religion in the social life of any one locality, as expressed in their deathscapes.

NATION AND NATURE

Other strands of analyses that have captured the imaginations of social and cultural geographers in recent years are the social constructedness of 'nation' (see, for example, Jackson and Penrose, 1993) and 'nature' (see, for example, Evernden, 1992). These perspectives have also come to bear on the analyses of deathscapes. Cemeteries, as Morris (1997) illustrates, are also about constructions of the nation. The British policy that all war dead be buried where they died meant that British war cemeteries in foreign soils represented Britain and the Empire, making tangible British presence. At the same time, in using the emblem of an English garden for the cemeteries, it was tantamount to making all soldiers lie beneath English gardens, negating to an extent the identities and involvement of Commonwealth countries. Yet, at the same time, although the style of English gardens was adopted, the practice of using 'home flowers' for all soldiers' graves of the British Empire was also introduced (thus, blue tree gum and Tasmanian eucalyptus for Australian graves, maidenhair tree for Chinese graves etc). This was symbolic of the desire to create the impression that each of the dead lay within a garden representative of their respective 'homelands' within the British Empire.

Morris (1997:427) also illustrates how the association with nature evident in the garden cemeteries was a means by which a “fictive prewar idyll, ... a pre-industrial past ... supposedly untouched by modernism, urbanism or industrialism” was constructed as a means of offering hope. In so doing, she underscores the social constructedness of nature and the intersections between such a socially constructed ‘nature’ and an equally constructed ‘nation’.

The hegemony of nations and related resistances is the subject of Mythum’s (1994) paper on churchyard headstones of the 18th to 20th century in Pembrokeshire, Britain. Mythum (1994), an archaeologist, develops three arguments. First, the choice of language used on headstones (in this case, either English or Welsh) was a cultural indicator, revealing a commitment to that language, and indicating particular national allegiances. Second, the language and style of the headstones were indicators of social position. Where Welsh is used on headstones even though English is commonly used in everyday life, this is interpreted to be a form of Welsh resistance to the cultural hegemony of the English (language). Yet, use of the English language is recognised as necessary to succeed in many aspects of life, and so, where English is used on a headstone, it is believed to be indicative of a person’s economic success in life. Third, the formulaic nature of memorials is maintained in a lot of headstones regardless of language. Hence, whether it is the layout or typography, there was a certain standardisation in where one would expect to see certain crucial information, such as the name of the deceased, place name, dates of birth and death. As a result, memory at the level of the individual can be perpetuated regardless of how hegemonic relations between nations are played out in language policy and use.

Combining perspectives from his training in architecture, urban planning and sociology, Mayo (1988) also shows strong linkages with the cultural geographical efforts at reading landscapes in his engagement with American memorials as political landscapes which contribute to the construction of a nation’s collective memory. He argues that commemoration is selective and reflects what society wants to remember. Hence, memorials are a visual effort to orchestrate the collective memory of particular wars. This may be to legitimise American action in war, although there may be conflicting readings, reflecting America’s greed and racism.

MULTIPLE LAYERS OF MEANINGS

In many ways, some of the preceding discussions illustrate the production and consumption of multiple meanings of deathscapes. This insistent engagement with multiplicities extends beyond

intersections of gender, race, class, nation and nature to embrace other issues that confront and divide societies. For example, Jeans (1988) writes about First World War memorials in New South Wales, Australia, and illustrates how they serve a function as commemorative structures, but also carry political meanings as well. These memorials divided the community because different factions wished to see different forms of memorials as well as different symbolisms ascribed to the memorials. The divergence in view stemmed from the fact that war was at once glorious and sad, and while one group argued for the memorials to celebrate victory, another emphasised the need to recall loss and mourning. The groups corresponded to those which were split over the issue of conscription during the war. The divergence in meanings ascribed to the memorials thus reflected larger divergences in views about war.

Yet, divergences in meanings need not purely be acrimonious. Indeed, it is in divergent meanings that deathscapes may find a lease of life. Berry (1997) illustrates this well in touching on another theme pertinent to geographers, the question of landscape preservation. He shows how the lack of public funds in New Orleans and the greater need to tackle social problems such as poor public schools and eroding infrastructure have meant that little finance and attention has been given to its historic burial grounds. He then illustrates how a non-profit group has taken up the task of preserving the historical cemeteries by introducing multiple meanings for these cemeteries, turning them into recreation and tourism grounds where visitors can be bussed in for night-time tours. In other words, it is precisely because of the multiple meanings that can be ascribed to deathscapes that these burial grounds can be preserved.

THE CENTRALITY OF PLACE

While a retheorised cultural geography often contrasts with more traditional perspectives, sometimes drawing fairly testy debate (see, for example, Price and Lewis, 1993; and replies from Cosgrove, 1993; Duncan, 1993; and Jackson, 1993), there is perhaps one constant that has unequivocal geographical concern, and that is, the significance of place. This is reflected in several excellent papers. For example, Hartig and Dunn (1998) and Phelps (1998) emphasise the importance of place in locating grief so that bereaved families may focus their mourning. This is evident, for example, in war memorials which provide the locations for people to gather for shared commemoration (Phelps, 1998). But where Hartig and Dunn (1998) focus on death which occurred locally and for which the location of commemoration is undisputed, Phelps argues that this act of

locating grief is open to contestation when death occurs overseas and a place for the tribute has to be found on home territory that is separate from the actual event.

In another vein, Azaryahu (1996) examines the transformation of civic space into memorial place. Specifically, he focuses on the spontaneous ritual process through which Tel Aviv city square is turned into a memorial space with the assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Such a memorial space represents an "authentic articulation of public sentiments", of "mourning and remembrance" (Azaryahu, 1996:501). Azaryahu describes the process of sacralisation that marked the square, which took various forms of ritual mourning (such as the placement of flowers and candles), the placement of stones and objects in the form of holy tablets, and the written messages of grief and rage (including graffiti). He argues that the square became a liminal zone in which the boundaries between the popular and official, and the private and public, became blurred. In effect, Azaryahu illustrates the "making of place", a process of meaning infusion.

OVERVIEW

Numerous reviews of geographical research on religion have identified the sporadic literature on 'deathscapes' from the 1950s to the early 1990s (see, for example, Kong, 1990; Park, 1994). Essentially, such research fell into two major categories. The first treated cemeteries as "space-utilising phenomena" (Price, 1966:201) and traditional concerns were covered, such as factors influencing location, their urban land value, and the demand they impose on space (see for example Pattison, 1955; Hardwick et al., 1971; Darden, 1972; Martin, 1978). This research emphasised spatial ordering and underscored spatial logic, reflecting the principles of analysis in 1950s-1960s urban geography. Indeed, some research in this mould still persists, evident, for example, in Zelinsky's (1994) analysis of how many cemeteries there are in the US, where and why.

The second category of studies focused on cemeteries as cultural features which reflect, like other cultural phenomena, cultural and historical values. For example, Jackson (1967-8) pointed out how the cemetery in America reflected changes in cultural values over time. From a "monument" commemorating the individual, Jackson argued that the grave itself had lost its early significance, and it was the setting that now inspired emotion and offered "a kind of luxuriating in a solemn and picturesque environment". Such changes in cultural values could be fruitfully employed, as Howett (1977) argued, for with such changes, the single-use approach to cemetery design could be

abandoned in favour of the multiple use approach, with urban cemeteries playing a role in providing open space, as a sanctuary for wildlife, or in the provision of human recreation space.

What was beginning to emerge in the second category of works was the insight that deathscapes offer a valuable narrative of social and cultural life, as of political and economic concerns. This has become the staple in more recent works, borrowing from and contributing to retheorised cultural geographical perspectives. Some of this parallels research by those in other disciplines, such as history, architecture, feminist studies, archaeology and sociology. While some purists may protest, arguing that geography thus loses its identity, my view remains that academic boundaries are constructions anyway, and the value of seeking understanding of a phenomenon supersedes the “pernicious anaemia” of turf-definition and protection. It is only in heeding such wisdom that we avoid the narrow strictures of examining deathscapes as a space-utilising phenomenon, as shown above, or in terms of the weathering of tombstones (Meierding, 1993). Only then will we be able to gain insights into the narratives of social, economic and political life embodied in cemeteries and columbaria, memorials and mausoleums.

Whether it is ‘nation’, ‘nature’, ‘gender’, ‘class’, ‘race’ or ‘religion’, research such as that reviewed above indicates how analysis of deathscapes reveals the centrality of social construction theory in contemporary social science inquiry (see Jackson and Penrose, 1993). Clearly, issues of cultural politics (showing how the cultural is political) and relatedly, issues about power relations in the creation and maintenance of place, and the allocation of meanings to places, has infused cultural geographical research into landscapes of the living and the dead. Hartig and Dunn’s and Teather’s (1998) papers in an earlier volume of this journal provide excellent examples of both questions and answers that occupy geographers for whom the ‘cultural turn’ is real.

However, preceding examples do not sufficiently emphasise and pursue various potential lines of inquiry. For example, how are some meanings conspicuous by their absence in landscapes? Which are the groups whose ideas and values do not find translation in landscapes, whether for their living or dead? What are the relations of domination and subordination that submerge the landscapes (and deathscapes) of some groups? How do such groups find alternative expressions for their meanings and what forms do these take? Here, Jacobs’ (1993, 1994) writings on the Aboriginal sacred in Australia offer insights into how analysis may be undertaken of such subordinated and submerged landscapes. Much more work needs to be done though: for example, what about those groups and individuals for which the dispersal of ash remains of their dead in various places or in

rivers and seas leaves no material trace, and therefore affords no material entryway into analysis? What new rituals evolve as means to cope with impositions accompanying conditions of modernity? What transformations in conceptions of sacred place and time are evident? In seeking answers to these questions, I would argue that much more specific and grounded contributions, such as those by Teather, and Hardig and Dunn, are needed, with closely documented detailed empirical observations. This requires the painstaking fieldwork that was the mainstay of traditional cultural geography (see Price and Lewis, 1993), and which contemporary cultural geographers have made strong calls for (see Jackson, 1993). Such diligent data collection is necessary if reconceptualisations about sacred place and time are to be grounded in field observations collected via vigorous and dependable methodologies. If such rigour is followed through theoretically and empirically, and is applied to some of the questions and issues raised above, cultural geographers may also begin to bring their “critically reflexive” and “politically engaged” work into the arena of policy making (Dunn, 1997:1). In studying deathscapes, there is every opportunity to contribute, for example, to an understanding of how “we and others can challenge social oppression” (Chouinard, 1994:5). There is also opportunity for policy-makers and planners to be made aware of the multiplicities of landscape meanings and to take account of such multiplicities in landscape/urban design and planning.

Even while perspectives of retheorised cultural geography offer myriad opportunities for research and analysis, critique and policy influence, we will also do well to recall that more “traditional” perspectives also offer inroads into different narratives which must not be neglected. One example (which was dismissed by Park (1994:213) as irrelevant) is the importance of linking the spread of disease and the distribution of deathscapes through joint research with epidemiologists. Another is the analysis of land values and the location of cemeteries and columbaria, which continue to influence land use planning in urban centres.

The research to date and opportunities that beckon suggest that both traditional and retheorised perspectives have much to offer. In addition, research to date also reminds us that both monumental landscapes of the dead (such as war memorials) as well as everyday, human scale ones (such as roadside memorials) deserve attention, although there has been some tendency to privilege the former. Spate (1966), in another context, proclaimed, “Down with dichotomies!” Clearly, this is a dictum which should have significant meaning for those interested in the analysis of deathscapes.

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