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# The Perspective of Place and Landscape

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Cultures of American Modernism

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Dr. Vogel

***The Perspective of Place and Landscape***

One can think about the idea of “place” as an important word, an important idea within the topic of travel, society, and the world as we know it. As specific as it may be, it can also be put down and seen from a new perspective at a different angle. This idea was brought about from a work by Nicholas Entrikin from his book: “The Betweenness of Place,” where he speaks of place through its two forms: the subjective and the objective view (pg. 6). After sitting and digesting this idea, one can begin to question it. Exactly how much of either view is put into our own perspective of our landscape?

To answer this question, the answer can be put into a starting point. To put simply, “place” affects who we are as people. Entrikin uses the example of a neighborhood in his book. From the Objective view, a neighborhood is a place in society in which a community of people live and dwell in that is a smaller part of a bigger portion or region of land. Looking through the Subjective view, a neighborhood is a place where people and their families thrive, grow, share memories, and while people can come and go through these places, it will always be a place to call home that will hold emotional ties to these people (pg. 7). This objective idea of a neighborhood and the subjective idea of a home resonates through a character in John Steinbeck’s, *The Grapes of Wrath* named Muley Graves, who was a childhood friend of Tom Joad and his family when they were living in Oklahoma prior to Tom Joad’s incarceration. When

Tom was released, he decided to go back home only to find that all his family and hometown had left due to the eviction of the local banks and landowners that were going to tear down all the property for more money. Joad found nobody there except an ex-pastor named Jim Casy and his old friend, Muley Graves. This action by the owners did not sway Muley Graves. In fact, it drove him to adamantly stay on the land because there was so much sentimental weight in this place through his memories that he wanted to hold onto, like the first time he ever laid with a woman as well as when he saw his father bleed out and die in his arms (pgs. 40-52). Objectively, he could've left and found a new place to live or he could've stayed and had nothing. Subjectively, he stayed to hold onto his memories rather than abandoning them. Something so objective and physical such as a house can be built, redone, rebuilt or destroyed. But something so subjective as a community or one's memories cannot be erased as easily as the original landscape that it was created in.

As a segue further on this idea, the previous example of place along with these two views refers to the original definition of Landscape and how it was initially used by artists & painters as a pictorial noun when it came to how they would depict nature and the rest of the world into their own work (Jackson, *The Word Itself*, pg. 299). On the topic of art, this is already subjective because creation is the artist's own interpretation of what they saw as Landscape. However, this application later evolved in an objective manner when it started to be viewed as a factorial and necessary element in architectural design. While there is style and artistic room in architectural design (subjective), it still retains a level of objectivity in its foundation of creating gardens, buildings and cities through mathematics, physics and dimensions (Jackson, *The Word Itself*, pg. 300). This is another way that the two views have their place within the realm of "place" and its creation.

In Barry Lopez's *Landscape and Narrative*, this platform of Subjectivity and Objectivity is elaborated more through hearing the telling of the stories of the Wolverine along with his experience in Alaska. Lopez was able to come to the realization of this idea of our External landscape, which is comprised of physical manifestations that surround us and how it directly affects our Internal landscape, which is who we are physically and emotionally (pgs. 61-65). From this idea, a correlation can be seen directly through the comparison of the External landscape with Objectivity and our Internal Landscape with Subjectivity. They pair together synonymously! Comparatively, the Architectural design elements pair with the Artistic elements to create a Physical manifestation such as a painting or a modern building, just as the storyteller must pair his internal landscape with his external landscape through the telling of a story to affect the Internal landscape of the person listening to the story. The place affects the storyteller, which then affects the listener, just as the Objective elements of creation affect the Subjective qualities that give the Creation (Conception of Landscape) its artistic value.

This idea of External and Internal Landscape through storytelling can be applied and observed further through John Williams', *This is My Country Too*. Williams is telling of his travels in America and the apparent and sometimes subtle points of racism that are embedded into this time periods view of equality. His External Landscape is comprised of the places he goes with the people he comes across alongside his Internal Landscape, which is his initial reaction that reoccurs through numerous other encounters of people in America, particularly Caucasians. A lot of how he feels is coming from this view of difference from Whites and how African Americans are viewed in the Civil Rights Era within this sense of depleting otherness he seems to feel apprehended with. Take for example when Williams is staying with his friend, John Engels and his Family up in their home in Vermont. While Engels was a respected

colleague of his and a dear friend that he had grown close to and admired for his openness, he implies subtly how this openness was taken offensively by him in an instance involving Engels' young son, David. "We sat around the kitchen table. John reading the newspaper and I, watching the way the sun, coming in through the window, glittered on specks of dust floating in the air" (Pg. 16). While it's understood that Williams, being black but as a guest inside of Engels' home, a family of white people in the North, this speaks positivity of the hate between race that was happening before the Civil Rights movement of this time. It does not, however, justify the fact that Engels did not educate his youngster of the civil state of America during this time when David (Engels' Son) climbs onto Williams' lap and feels his face. "'Why are you so chocolaty?' He pushed firmly against my face and glanced at his hand. I looked at John, who had already lowered his paper. Urgently, he says 'Tell him, John. Now's your chance to explain that you're a Negro and that there are a lot of different people in the world. Go ahead. Go *ahead!*' My first thought was that it was not my job to tell David, but his father's" (pg. 16). From reading this passage, you can obviously see what feeling Williams is conveying within his own Internal Landscape and how it's being affected by his External Landscape. Regarding racial equality during this period as being part of Williams' External Landscape, it's clear that the attitudes enacted towards minorities was objective and part of the External based off monumental points of history in the past such as the Civil Rights Movement as well as Slavery (when it was happening) with the overall attitudes of whites to blacks of these times. What Williams is feeling in his Internal Landscape is the Prejudice from these attitudes and events solely because of his ethnicity, which is seen as the subjective part of this Landscape. You can even see a sliver of this mindset through Engels' word choice when he says to David that Williams' is a "Negro," even though that term is still slander and is fighting to not be socially acceptable to say. These

interpreted ideas of Internal and External Landscape in Williams' story exist in this *place* that is a Pre-Civil Rights America and are ultimately the subjective and objective viewpoints that tie into the Perspective of Place.

This reoccurring connection of Subjective and Objective can also be tied -or "bridged"- together into the category of Mobility in America through the construction of highways and how they were perfected for the modern culture and preservation of the natural landscape. From William Brewster Snow's book, *The Highway and the Landscape*, the creation of highways over the natural landscape is discussed and how it was meant to be a more convenient way of traveling for America. It is stated in Snow's book how roads bent and wound around tricky obstacles in nature such as mountains, lakes, Quarries and many other large natural plots of land. This made traveling tedious and even dangerous for the modern individual. Bringing in architecture and bridge builders, highways were created. Through trial and error of finding the perfect height, angles and dimensions in which to root these huge bridges into the ground, the landscape was left suffering with huge gashes and scars of land tampered with, leaving the Earth altered and bruised for the convenience of the ongoing travelers (pgs. 6-7).

Because of this outcome, this chronological progression of the highway could be seen objectively through the formation of the right kinds of architectural choices in their construction. The Subjective aspects of this time came later when the action of "Highway Beautification" was enacted by the states of Michigan, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania to build the earth back to what it used to be before the violent uptearing of the Highway Construction. They did this through having trees and plants that looked good to cover up all the moved earth. After the first layout of plants and trees to ornament the highways and surrounding lands were put down, they died out almost immediately from the lack of upkeep they received, along with the fact that these

plants were not native to the current location of these highways. This was the biggest contributor to this initial failure. It was Frank A. Tutley who utilized this discovery and objectively fixing this issue by planting plants and trees along these highways that were native to the location, thus creating the highways beauty as well as preserving the beauty of its surrounding nature. As this problem and resolution was clearly objective in action, you could look at the decision making in this matter as equally subjective. One would say that the decision to “Beautify” the highways can be viewed subjectively through the design as how it was stated before with the purpose behind the positioning of each plant. It could serve a task such as to compliment an aesthetic view of a part of the landscape or even cover up a part of it that’s too ugly to see the light of day again. As Tetley says in Snow’s work: “It is a task of both artist and engineer” (pgs. 7-8)

This passage by Snow strikingly mirrors the actions and drives of the main antagonist in John G. Neihardt’s, *Black Elk Speaks*. From the beginning of this story, there is a conflict between the Washichus (White Settlers) and Black Elk’s tribe, the Ogalala tribe. Essentially, the Washichus wanted to lay down roads through the tribe’s land so that they can have easier access to mine for gold (or “yellow metal” that “makes the Washichus crazy,”). Black Elk sees this and refuses for these roads to be created because they believe that it would herd the Bison away from the tribe and the land, which is a species that the Ogalala believed to be tied to their Landscape. Not only that, but the roads would bring in more of the Washichus to their land which would breed more conflict between the two groups (pg. 6). It’s fair to say that what the Washichus want is entirely objective and shows a conflict in values compared to the Ogalala tribe, which was a preservation of their land, culture and spiritual connection. This mirrors what Snow was talking about with the highway builders tearing apart the land to build highways that would make travel

easier for the Modern American. This proves that the desire for the Washichus to build the roads to pursue the gold they wanted is a direct parallel of Objectivity in these different Landscapes.

On the other hand, the subjective aspect of both these topics seems to become a little complicated once you compare the two. While the resolution of planting native agriculture on the highways, you saw how Tutley wanted to utilize the positioning of these plants in ways to create a more beautiful landscape than it already was (Snow, *The Highway and the Landscape*, pg. 8). That is where the subjective view lies. However, In Black Elk's case, the main contributor to the conflict was the Gold. The European Settlers saw the Gold as immensely valuable whereas the Ogalala people saw no value in the gold whatsoever. Since the value of gold was the Washichus' goal, they settled in Black Elk's land and brought about conflict within this Landscape. Looking at these motives of the Washichus in comparison to Black Elk and the Ogalala tribe, the desire brought about by the Washichus is *Subjective* but only through this *Objective* idea, brought about by the Washichus, that Gold is valuable. Through this conclusion, the reader has an intriguing analysis of Subjective and Objective in the sense that these two views overlap, rather than seeing them as two sides of a coin, which you would never think they'd be seen that way. By two sides of a coin, I mean that the coin is the Landscape that has been viewed having only two views (two sides) that were exclusively Objective and Subjective. In the case of Black Elk Speaks, these two sides act as a vessel. A means to an end where one view creates the other in a progression rather than simultaneous aspects of *place*.

In Conclusion, the levels between Subjectivity and Objectivity can vary and stretch in many ways that we don't see at first glance. In most cases, these two ideas can be presented on the same topic and are equally represented through a physical plain such as "place" as stated previously through examples of buildings, places & personal feelings. Going even deeper

through storytelling as explained through Lopez's interpretation of Internal and External Landscape and how they are necessary in the art of storytelling, these two views are ever present and of equal value in depicting and effecting the conception of "Landscape." Even further in depth into how the story is told, the views of Subjectivity and Objectivity can overlap in instances analyzing the actions and desires such as the point of conflict in Neihart's "Black Elk Speaks." But one thing that is clear across the board: one view cannot exist without the other. It is in this sense that they seem to define each other's place in unpredictable ways.

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