

Practicing Egypt: Exodus and the Deceit of Imperial Sedentarist Metaphysics*

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Spatiality is a discourse of power which must be inhabited. How it is inhabited becomes the question of how power itself is inhabited.¹
--Paul Ashcroft

Introduction

Cultural geographer, Tim Cresswell amplifies Ashcroft's insight in saying that "[t]he geographical setting of actions plays a central role in defining our judgment of whether actions are good or bad." And by extension, whether the actors themselves are good or bad.² Mobility and stasis, as geographical referents, have an interesting history of moral interpretation. In the days before the postmodern turn mobility was often associated with deviance. Tramps and hobos, for instance, were perceived as dangerous, in part, because they could not be placed.³ After postmodernity, fluidity, movement, play, and boundary- crossing constituted the preferred hermeneutical landscape. "Fixity, we learned was an illusion"⁴ and a different set of values developed around the valorization of movement. Either way, spatiality is a discourse of power (usually unacknowledged) that influences judgments that ground policies and practices determining the appropriate places for ourselves and for others.

My purpose in this paper is to expose the spatial morality and its deceptions of mobility from which two Western nations construct citizenship and immigration policies. The examples I draw on are largely from France and its policies and practices related to the immigration and citizenship of "Muslims", but France becomes a trope for the U.S. in its own struggles with Latin American and Mexican immigration practices and policies.

The spatial morality at work in French and U.S. policies is based in part on what I call here a sedentarist metaphysic after

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anthropologist Liisa Mallke.⁵ A “sedentarist metaphysic” values staying in and simultaneously putting others in appropriate places. The view of the world supporting a sedentarist metaphysic, from which Western nations judge the movement of others across ideological and geographical boundaries, is the perspective from empire. The first deceit of mobility which supports imperial sedentarism is the failure to acknowledge that imperial sedentarism, itself, is only possible because the conditions of imperial emplacement, i.e. the secure and comfortable conditions that allow us to value staying put and not sharing the goods of place with others, is possible because of the very mobility of some. For instance, cheap North African labor built the very infrastructure of the French economy and social structure from which the North African French are now being excluded.

The second deceit of mobility at work in imperial sedentarism relies on what geographer J. M. Blaut has called ‘the colonizer’s model of the world.’⁶ In the colonizer’s model of the world, the mobility of others that empires force, mobility which allows us to stay put, ideologically and geographically, begins with Empire’s first venturing outside its own appropriate place under the flag of diffusing the values of civilization. Mobility as being out of place, it turns out, is fine for some and not for others. Dividing the world into a collection of centers and peripheries, in the colonizer’s model of the world movement from center to periphery is benevolent but from periphery to center is threatening.⁷

With a hermeneutics of place from postmodern geography, I use postmodern biblical scholarship on the Exodus story to describe the ways in which the dynamics of movement in Exodus, serves as a critique of western, imperial sedentarism, when read with the U.S. and France as Egypt and Latin American immigrants and the North African French as Israel. I end with some thoughts linking postmodern geography with Laurel Dykstra’s suggestion that “... each of us, in the Exodus story is both Israel and Egypt” and ask about what might be morally dangerous (and potentially liberating) for us in the physically dangerous crossings of Latin Americans into the U.S. and the North African French into the streets of Paris.

II. Practicing Place

Cultural geographers argue that places, including nation-states, are created and sustained by a complex interplay of ideology, practices and the built environment. This interplay is self-reinforcing to the extent that the processes making place becomes naturalized as “the way things are.” This dynamism establishes the “self-evident” meaning of places.

Lefebvre describes this naturalization process in the following passage:

...a space that is apparently ‘neutral,’ ‘objective,’ fixed, transparent, innocent or indifferent implies more than the convenient establishment of an inoperative system of knowledge, more than an error that can be avoided by invoking the ‘environment, ecology, nature and anti-nature, culture, and so forth. Rather it is a whole set of errors, a complex of illusions, which can even cause us to forget completely that there is a total subject which acts continually to maintain and reproduce its own conditions of existence....’⁸

As an example, in a library patrons attempt to move quietly. We have learned that a library is “the kind of place” that requires quiet behavior. Our quiet behavior re-infuses the library with that particular meaning and re-establishes it as “this kind of place.” Further, the functioning ideology of what a library should be informs its construction. Acoustics, insulation, the internal and external traffic patterns are determined and implemented based on the idea that libraries should be quiet places. Ideology thus informs both social and building practices which, in turn reinforce ideology.⁹ It is in this interplay that human decisions about appropriateness construct the meaning of this place.

Cultural and postcolonial geographers argue that the dynamics of place making function largely invisibly to us until the boundaries of place are physically transgressed. In the geographic rupture a semiotic rupture occurs; the functioning ideology of place is revealed. For those controlling the meaning of place, two possibilities occur: either the offending action and its enactors are morally rejected and/ or physically ejected from the system as “out of place” and homeostasis returned (although now uneasily, perhaps) or the meaning of place is revised. When an adult shouts without apparent warrant in the library (no fire present), she or he is first met with disdain-- raised eyebrows, perhaps pursed lips and then, should the behavior continue, the offender is physically removed and even barred from returning. He/she is out of place, physically, ideologically and morally—she or he is simultaneously ejected and rejected. Homeostasis is restored and the naturalized meaning of this place protected. But surrounding the time of the perceived transgression the functioning values of place are exposed and become vulnerable to critique, however briefly. Ideological and geographical boundaries can, in the wake of these moments, reform in more liberative and compassionate ways.

Consider Paris in 2005: Night after night the world watched as outraged French youth of North African descent took to the streets in the poorer suburbs of Paris. Their anger, ignited by the deaths of two young Algerians electrocuted as they perceived themselves to be chased by police, had been smoldering most of their short lifetimes, through the histories of their parents and grandparents. French citizens by birth, these young people are nevertheless treated as intruders, denied access to the core conditions for success, suffering under crushing rates of unemployment and a lack of equal access to the elite French educational institutions solely by virtue of having Arabic names or addresses in “Arab” neighborhoods.¹⁰ Demanding equal access to French political and social structures earned them the title “scum” from then Interior Minister and now former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who vowed to “pressure clean” these youth from the Paris suburbs.¹¹ The Paris uprising set into sharp relief the failures of French integration policies, policies which seek to assimilate rather than integrate the children of those whom France held as colonial subjects for 132 years. Rather than using the moral reality brought to life by the physical boundary transgression of North African French youth into the streets of the Paris suburbs to reconsider their citizenship and immigration policies, the French government continues to physically and politically limit the participation of its citizens of North African descent from the centers of French power. From the government’s side the message is clear, you do not belong here—you are out of your right place, first outside of your place in Paris and second outside of your place in the world.

The French youths’ breach of boundaries reveals the first deceit of an imperial sedentarist metaphysics at work; importing Algerian resources and labor to create the French infrastructure has resulted in creating a comfortable place for the powerful from which the colonizers can judge the movement of the transgressors and their moral status.

Clearly the second spatial deceit is at work in this example as well: geographical boundary transgression is appropriate for some and not others. In the colonizer’s model of the world universally liberative values (Enlightenment values by and large) could never have formed in the destitute soils of the peripheries without their delivery (in a variety of bloody forms) by representatives of the centers.¹² The end result of this ideological and geographical blanketing of the earth from the centers to the peripheries has been the increased wealth and stability of the centers. Centers export civilization (democracy, capitalism, Christianity, rationality) and peripheries respond in thanks by returning

material wealth, natural resources and cheap labor, so the imperial story goes.¹³

This spatial system works (for some) until the peripheral ask for or demand equal access to the center through transgressing geographical boundaries, at which point ostensible citizens of the center (but geographically peripheral) become threatening. In the colonizer's model of the world, disease (AIDS, leprosy), terrorism and threats to national identity cross from periphery to core, progress and affluence (now in their neocolonial guises) cross from core to periphery.

Given these spatial dynamics, what can the movement of the Israelites in the Exodus story tell us about the imperial sedentarism informing immigration and citizenship policies in the U.S. and France and our/their deceptions of mobility?

III. Movement in Exodus

Recent readings of Exodus equate Western imperial powers with Egypt. White, middle class North Americans, for instance, cannot read themselves as Israel. In this story, we can only read ourselves as "functionaries in Pharaoh's court"¹⁴ if there are to be any liberative interpretations in it for us. The comparison obtains because Empires, Egypt in Exodus and North America and Western Europe today, can be characterized by a set of damning social/political conditions. Citing Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Laurel Dykstra identifies among those characteristics "slave labor, demonization (Sarkozy's scum), genocide and displacement of indigenous people (Algeria); colonization of distant lands (Algeria, *maquilladores*), cultural arrogance (we are all French, English as the "official language" of border states) and global military power." "The most fundamental similarity between the Egyptians in Exodus and privileged North American readers, Dykstra argues, is that we benefit from empire."¹⁵

Consider: France colonized Algeria and Morocco for approximately 132 years. Algeria was colonized in 1830 and gained liberation in 1962 after a bloody 8-year war that killed between 300,000 to 1,000,000 Algerians. Throughout that time France used the shores of North Africa as a dumping ground for unemployed French and French "trouble makers."

Since World War II, France has absorbed large numbers of immigrants for economic reasons, especially from its former colonies. The 1960s saw a steady influx of more than 100,000 workers a year. This immigration amounted to 3 million foreign workers by 1970 and 6 million in the mid-1990s. Without this cheap source of labor, France could not have

modernized its economy. Today, however, as it makes the transition from an industrial economy to a service economy, France no longer needs unskilled or semi-skilled foreign labor.¹⁶

In its current attempt to reject the very people it first forced into mobility through colonialism in order to build itself, France now makes it extremely difficult to gain the real goods of French citizenship.

Consider: Maria is a thirty-two year- old undocumented worker in a mid-level plastics factory in the small Wisconsin city from which I have just moved. She and her husband Saloman came to learn English from my partner at our house when they could. The plastics factory functions only because of undocumented workers like Maria who works seven days per week. Maria comes to our house with deep burns on her arms from the welding she does. She cannot challenge her working conditions because she does not have papers. She is afraid to seek medical attention for fear of being discovered.

So we are Egypt. In the Exodus story the movement of Israel, Israel's leaving behind Egypt serves as a moral rejection of everything Egypt as empire represents. Dykstra says: "The place that is left is as significant as the leaving. Egypt the place that was left became a shorthand for everything that was rejected and should be left." Citing Michael Walzer: ... "[t]he Exodus is not just a lucky escape from misfortune. Rather the misfortune has a moral character and the escape has world-historical meaning. Egypt is not just left behind it is judged and condemned."¹⁷ Israel's movement is then critique. Israel's migration points behind itself to the conditions that force it out. The necessity of movement is a critique of the emplaced values of Empire—the values that create and sustain Egypt as Empire. Leaving is condemnation.

There is a critical distinction between the movement of Israel and the movement of Latin Americans and Algerians. The movement in Exodus is a fleeing from the conditions of bondage into eventual liberation. This simple movement is no longer possible for the contemporary colonized. In this early model of the world, the imperial reach had not become so thorough that there was not still some wilderness, some "outside" to go into. Dykstra writes, "...into the last century the nation-state was the critical unit of imperialism...but now...[c]orporations have eclipsed countries in their power and influence."¹⁸ In the wake of global market capitalism and the economic colonization of the entire world—there is no place into which to flee.

Thus mobility as boundary transgression is the necessity of crossing from a set of bondage conditions into a new set of bondage conditions. Mobility as boundary crossing from periphery to center whether into the streets or across the wire, is a critique of us as Empire in a 21st century reading of Exodus. Through this lens we must read the mobility of Israel as a call to question the conditions we have imposed that make its boundary transgression necessary. The mobility of others means that we must read *ourselves* as the threat.

If, as Dykstra argues, we are called in the Exodus story both to go from the land of bondage *and* to let the oppressed go free¹⁹ and if boundary transgression in theories of place speak to the possibilities of liberative revisions in the meanings of places and mobility, what then is revealed to us by those thronging the streets or crossing the barbed wire? What is revealed are the deceptions from which we make policies regarding the appropriate places of others--the imperial sedentarist deceptions with which we judge the world and from which we ultimately benefit economically. The physically dangerous crossings of others—tear-gassed and shot at in Paris or dehydrated and hunted in the Sonoran desert are morally dangerous for us as Egypt. In their passages these people have called out our sedentarism. What conditions do we create and sustain that force this kind of movement? What lies do we tell ourselves about the right place for others that is only possible because we are now comfortable and were first (and still are) unwilling to maintain our right place? Lying takes a toll, Dykstra tells us. “At some level we are aware of the destruction that we are party to and it eats away at our souls.”²⁰

Endnotes

1. Paul Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformations* (New York: Routledge, 2001)174.
2. Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 9.
3. ____, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) 14.
4. ____, “Introduction: Theorizing Place,” in Adams, et al., *Textures of Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 15-16
5. ____, “Introduction: Theorizing Place,” in *Tamyris* No. 9 (2002): 11.

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6. J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993) 17.
 7. Blaut. 11-17.
 8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 94.
 9. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 16. This is the amplification of an example suggested by Cresswell.
 10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4412590.stm>;
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4397056.stm>
 11. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4399510.stm>
 12. Blaut, 11-17.
 13. Blaut., 16
 14. Robert McAfee Brown in Laurel Dykstra, *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (New York: Orbis, 2002) 57.
 15. Dykstra, 53
 16. <http://www.meforum.org/338/islam-in-france-the-french-have-themselves-to>
 17. Dykstra, 58
 18. Dykstra, 64.
 19. Dykstra, 53.
 20. Dykstra, 78.