

Unlearning 'Landscape'

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Perhaps like many others, it was 'landscape' that drew us both to study and practice Geography, or at least a preoccupation with the physical and cultural manifestations of landscapes, their workings and their aesthetics. Landscape is, and has always been, one of Geography's key concepts, one that resides at the heart of our discipline. As most geographers well know by now, it is a complex, multi-layered concept that defies a single, coherent definition. And as we might expect in such a diverse discipline, definitions of landscape abound within Geography, varying markedly within its sub-disciplines. Within the domain of physical geography, for example, the landscape is a discrete unit often strictly spatially bounded by the phenomenon or process of interest. A geomorphological landscape may be defined as an organized assemblage of interconnected landforms that are shaped by particular processes and geomorphological histories; a landscape ecologist may define landscape as a spatial pattern or configuration of different ecosystems, and the connections between them; a hydrologist may define it as a function of hydrological connectivity, bounded spatially by discrete physical units such as the watershed. A coastal geomorphologist may define landscape as the area that influences the thin coastal margin, including the wider terrestrial and marine zones connected to it. And this is not to mention whether the implicit terrestrial bias in the term "landscape" adequately represents coastal geography and oceanography at all. In human geography too there is a rich tradition of landscape enquiry: the Berkeley School's concern to empirically document the material composition of cultural landscapes, historical geographical excavations of landscapes thought as palimpsests, the focus on vernacular and ordinary landscapes, through to new cultural geographical approaches to landscapes as 'ways of seeing', and more recent non- and more-than-representational responses that urge us to return to the materiality and experience of landscape as

ground. All of these physical and human geography definitions and conceptualizations require the inclusion of connectivity, interactions and processes to varying degrees. Thus, they change our working definitions of landscape from a purely spatial and static concept, to a multi-dimensional one that requires some sort of temporal axis; a theory of landscape change.

The etymology of the word 'landscape' immediately suggests its complexity beyond a pure description of the physical environment with which human and physical geography try to grapple. "Land" in Germanic languages means 'a *definite* portion of the earth *owned* by an individual', and 'scape', means 'to shape or form'. So a landscape is a strictly delineated space that is physically, or more likely culturally shaped and defined by those who own it, physically or conceptually. But in material, managerial, imaginative and not least conceptual terms, *who* does own and shape the landscape? In this essay we propose that landscape conceived as a description of space bounds the concept to a specific spatiality; a spatiality that we suggest might in certain contexts need to be reconsidered, or as we argue unlearned in order to include the views of other stakeholders, users and communities. We use two examples from our own fieldworking experiences across the tropics where, as we show, our bounded definitions of landscape work to actually exclude or obscure other kinds of geographies, other claims and other spatial experiences and intuitions. By doing so, what we want to suggest in this essay is simply that landscape is itself a narrative, one that is spatially and taxonomically partial, exclusive and duplicitous.

Before doing this, however, it is worth stressing that this essay is not the first to appear in the Annals, or elsewhere, to critically engage the landscape concept, nor indeed to point to the term's duplicity. Landscape is a concept that has been heavily debated and discussed in geography, and its lures and frustrations are perhaps too familiar amongst human geographers in particular. But a discussion about landscape remains important beyond the walls of academic geography in ways that we think geographers, both human and physical, should take seriously.

But why should we take this seriously? One reason is because the management and policy realms we are consistently moving towards handle physical, environmental and economic systems on a 'landscape scale' or using a 'landscape approach'. The landscape approach and Integrated Landscape Management are an emerging set of tools and concepts to manage the land and reconcile multiple environmental, social and economic objectives in order to promote sustainable development. It requires management to move beyond a site, project or sectoral focus, to a large scale, multidisciplinary viewpoint that is cognizant of varied stakeholders, and facilitates knowledge exchange and dialogue between them. The landscape approach underpins a huge and still expanding discourse in conservation and environmental management, and it is an approach that strongly brings together physical and human geography to balance environment and development tradeoffs, tackle 'wicked' sustainable development issues, and to involve and empower people as key agents of environmental change. These agents are the stakeholders in the landscape; the people who use the landscape and the people who are responsible for shaping it. These agents are a key component of people-centered landscapes.

Before our academic definitions and understandings of landscape can be truly useful for all stakeholders involved in the landscape approach however, we argue that they need to be unmoored a little; unlearned in order to better represent and include a diverse set of perspectives, communities and people who fundamentally use and depend on these spaces in question. We explain this proposition via a series of examples from the field that demonstrate how academic definitions of landscape may, first, exclude such stakeholders, and second, actively obscure other kinds of spatial experiences and intuitions.

One of us, Dan, has spent a number of years conducting repeated research in a small fishing hamlet in Trang Province, on the southwest coast of Thailand. The village derives multiple ecosystem services, such as fish provision, construction materials and coastal protection, from a neighbouring coastal mangrove forest and the wider estuary. Every few months we visit and measure the long-term geomorphological

evolution of the mangrove forest using a long-established monitoring network of Rod Surface Elevation Tables, to understand sediment inputs and dynamics, and predict whether the forest can keep pace with sea level rise and continue to provide these ecosystem services into the future. It is a study focused on the intricacies of geomorphological-ecological processes and thresholds at multiple scales (or ‘landscapes’ of interest), from the site-scale, to the regional scale that encompasses large-scale fluvial and marine sediment sources. In essence, this research is trying to provide a series of correct (and of course publishable!) scientific descriptions of the geomorphological processes contributing to the evolution of the landscape, through the particular lens of sea level rise that we are most interested in.

We do not conduct this research in academic isolation, but within a village setting with multiple stakeholders with whom we interact with for extended periods of time. We sleep in a homestay in the village owned by Mae (= “mother” in Thai), we rent a boat from the boatman to travel to the field site (Figure 1), while conducting our measurements in the forest we meet with fishermen, crab collectors and other villagers utilizing non-timber forest products from the mangrove, in the evenings we drink beer and rice wine with the son of the boatman and other fishermen.

Insert Figure 1 here

Discussing our research informally in poorly translated Thai/English with these stakeholders during one such field visit (over the aforementioned rice wine), it didn’t seem that long-term geomorphological evolution and sea level rise were such relevant lenses to them through which to describe the landscape, nor were the broad temporal and spatial scales which we used to delineate the landscape as relevant to them as they were to us. While the stakeholders understood sea level rise and its threats, sea level rise

and associated factors are long-term processes that influence over a huge spatial extent, at scales that render it an abstract lens to many. (Which is one reason why some are skeptical of global climate change, or at least do not see the immediacy in addressing it). To the mangrove resource users of this small fishing village in southwest Thailand, shorter time scales and smaller spatial scales were more relevant, and a definition of landscape that related to natural resource extraction and livelihoods was more relevant: knowing exactly where the fishing grounds are, where to catch this type of crab, where to find that type of wood, additional landscapes of markets, distribution networks and jobs that are connected to the mangrove forest. The resource users have a complex understanding of the landscape through a lens that is of interest for different reasons, and at such a high resolution of understanding that we could never dream of capturing. This dichotomy is created by the fact that we are trying to produce an ostensibly correct description of the landscape, which differs markedly from the descriptions used by those who are humanly *producing* the landscape on their terms.

The point here is that our focused attempts to describe the long-term *story* of the landscape through our scientific, peer-reviewed and clearly defined geomorphological research excludes other relevant descriptions, though these alternative descriptions are equally valid, robust and as such can be an alternative lens through which to describe and analyse different, or even the same processes. This is because our definitions, while they describe the landscape at different scales and from different viewpoints and motivations, also coincide. The impact of sea level rise on mangrove forests centres on the physiological tolerance of vegetation to a gradual increase in flooding over time. These are processes that the community knows about; mangrove users know why some species are found in some parts of the forest and not others, why some species are more tolerant to flooding than others. So, we both have definitions of the landscape that focus on the same process, just at different scales and through different lenses. Our lens – a scientific model over large, abstract scales – is of less relevance to, and potentially excludes, alternative correct narratives and spatial understandings of stakeholders using the landscape. If

we are to best communicate our research contributions to a broader range of stakeholders, this in turn demands that scientists be prepared to provisionally unlearn what we think we know about landscape systems so as to begin the process of listening to, and potentially incorporating other correct landscape narratives.

Our first point then is to stress that much of what we know about landscape can, and arguably should, be unlearned via our research encounters in order to include other voices; other voices that can contribute to forming and defining the landscape, but might otherwise be excluded. Our second point is simply to stress the relationships between 'landscape', as both noun and process, and *geography*. For geography is, of course, a word that comes from the Greek *geo-graphia*, which literally translated means 'earth writing'. As professional geographers therefore, we are earth writers. But what does that mean? We want to suggest that there are two ways of understanding earth writing: First, earth writing can mean description. That has, for hundreds of years, been the geographer's art; the true description of the earth's properties and characteristics. And when we participate in interpretive landscape geography – however it is theoretically situated – that is one of our main tasks. Whether it is research that explores the geomorphological evolution of mangrove forests, or work on the politics of landscape aesthetics in Sri Lankan tropical modern architecture (which we discuss in more depth below), there is an essential descriptive component. We aim to describe characteristics and landscape processes as best as possible, making them legible and available for scrutiny, primarily to other researchers. And that is precisely why we have just urged the kind of viewpoint that actively provincializes our preconceptions about landscapes via a kind of learning by unlearning. Our descriptions need to be plural and democratic, attuned to the facts of landscape from a variety of perspectives.

Second, however, we can also think about earth writing by stressing that writing, like any form of representation, is also productive. In other words, the very process of writing helps to constitute that

which we describe. Writing, in other words, never stands outside the objects about which we write; it does not exist at a secondary remove from reality. For example, the science we produce about mangrove forests constitutes one particular meaning of those mangrove landscapes in a very real way. As we stressed above, Dan's research on sea level rise aims at trying to tell the long-term *story* of the landscape: earth writing in this sense is not just description, it is also storytelling, it is a productive process through which we make the earth legible, or indeed sometimes illegible, through forms of writing, representation and knowledge production. Writing is itself worldly in this sense, borrowing from the literary critic Edward Said, who offered so much to cultural geography, this notion of earth writing suggests a closeness of the world's body to the text's body, and indeed it is precisely that closeness between text and world that necessitates we take both into consideration.

To be clear, we do not suggest that these two notions of earth writing are in any sense mutually exclusive. Far from it. What we are suggesting is that geography is always caught in this double bind between so-called correct description, and descriptions that also produce the world, at least descriptions that produce our understandings of the world and hence the meaning of space. And that, of course, is precisely why we have argued for a kind of learning about landscapes that eschews dogmatic reassertions of what we confidently think we know about those spaces in the first place. But, if geography is about the production of meaningful space as much as it is about description, then the word 'landscape' itself must be seen as something of a story. When we mobilize the term 'landscape' to refer to a given spatiality, we at once produce that spatiality *as* landscape, we write landscapes into existence through our own analytical gaze, through our insistence that landscape *is* an actually existing given portion of the earth's surface, that which we can imagine, visualize, analyze, read or even walk across.

As geographers we believe we *should* worry about the ideological effects of 'landscape'; we believe we should worry about the way the term itself produces spaces *as* landscapes. Analytically there is of course

immense value to the landscape concept. Landscape's conceptual characteristics, the likes of which we have raised above, enable particular kinds of spatial analyses. They can, for example, facilitate our ability to study delimited spatial ecologies; understand hydrological and geomorphological processes, or ecological change over time; reveal the social exclusions inherent in prospect, proprietorship and the visual mastery of space; demonstrate spatialized national or regional symbolisms; or reveal the qualities of bodily experience across legible spatial coordinates. At the same time, however, we rarely stop to think about what kinds of spatialities and forms of subjectivity 'landscape' – as a word, as a concept – also obscures. What kinds of spatial and social difference are made harder to discern as we turn the world into a series of landscapes? To put that question differently, when we write space *as* landscape, what different kinds of spatialities and ways of being do we simultaneously dissimulate, or hide from view? In what follows, we illustrate this by sketching two moments from Tariq's fieldwork in southern Sri Lanka, where he has been exploring the politics of aesthetics in tropical modern architecture and landscape architecture.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2 is a photograph taken at the home and former estate of Sri Lanka's foremost modernist architect, the late Geoffrey Bawa. The estate is called *Lunuganga*, and it is located on Sri Lanka's south west coast. The view was one of Bawa's favourite, one he spent years choreographing and perfecting through his considerable landscaping and architectural efforts at *Lunuganga*. The perspective in the photo is from the back of Bawa's old house, where looking across the lawn and up the gentle hill slope, one's view is framed by trees on either side, and in the middle distance, on the crest of the Hill, a lone tree looms over a large pot. What you cannot see from this photo is the gleaming white dome of the Katukuliya temple, a Buddhist dagoba nestled into a background hill separated from the estate by a lake.

Bawa was meticulous about this view. With the single-mindedness characteristic of many architectural modernists, he paid the monks, the *sangha*, living at the Katakuliya temple to prune foliage and paint their dagoba white, such that it would be clearly visible all year round from his house. Furthermore, the horizontal row of shrubs in the foreground of the view conceal an access road that Bawa's ground staff painstakingly lowered by just a few metres, enough such that any traffic or gravel would be concealed to the eye. It was clear that he wanted to create a vista, a landscape, *in* which elements of the picturesque comingled with Buddhist structures of feeling. There is no accident to this landscape. It is purposeful, intentional, written very deliberately.

That said, the language of landscape is also in some senses inadequate to evoke the Buddhist structures of feeling that inhere in this same physical space. A few years ago, I (Tariq) shadowed two architectural interns working on some renovations here. We stayed in a small bungalow on the hill, which in figure 2 is hidden from view by the trees on the right hand side of the frame. One evening, as we sat by candlelight outside, sounds of the distant jungle all around, I asked one of the interns how he felt being in a place like this. He paused, then asked his friend a question in Sinhalese. "*Infinity*" she replied. He thought a while, then said, "*I feel like my mind keeps making these connections, one after another, to infinity. It's difficult to explain, words can't really explain it. Actually in Buddhism there's a good explanation for this.*" He then told me a story about the Lord Buddha, his disciple and monk, Ananda, and their conversations about the search for the sphere of the infinity of consciousness. Again, he stressed, "*I feel like my mind is growing and forging connections with something beyond myself.*" Finally, he stressed that he thought only in this type of place could this happen.

It is not that there are no words to explain his experience. It is that there are no words *in English*. He tells us that in Buddhist philosophy there is a good explanation for the way he is constituted there and then. The ethnographic challenge therefore is to join the dots between that space and his experience, to

immerse ourselves into this *particular* kind of spatiality. And the rub of our argument is that 'landscape' precludes our ability to do that. 'Landscape' is a term that immerses us into a space not spoken of in this encounter, because the infinity mobilized here gestures toward Buddhist biorhythms that persistently undo any logical opposition between the natural and the cultural. In essence, a Buddhist metaphysics begins with a notion of the universe composed of dharmas, something like energy or forces. This is a premise that conceives of knowledge of landscape-objects, or any object for that matter, as but a projection. Buddhist selves and objective biophysical worlds are better understood as the illusory materialization into objective existence of these dharmas, of these energies. Dharma then – a significant dimension of Buddhist realism – cannot be known through a subject's knowledge of object fields, like a subject's visual or bodily perception of a landscape. Dharma, this building block of the Buddhist universe, can only be felt and known intuitively as the self unravels. That is the infinite spatial experience alluded to in this moment; an experience made from the intuitive undoing of this subject's self, his momentary grasp of unfeeling, of dharma.

To be clear, our aim here is not to romanticize this Buddhist aesthetics. On the contrary, given the close relationship between Buddhism and a majoritarian Sinhala ethnos in Sri Lanka, these are aesthetics that actually colonize the social in alarming ways. They become structures of feeling that instantiate Sinhala-Buddhist power and exclusivity in the national polity. But it is clear that in this putative landscape, there is another kind of spatiality at work, one which the very word 'landscape' obscures, and one in which a politics resides.

Figure 3 here

Although momentary, perhaps fleeting, this moment is by no means esoteric, unusual and hence atypical, which brings us to our second example from Sri Lanka, a painting (Figure 3), bought in Colombo a few years ago, which now hangs on the wall in Tariq's study. And it seems to us now that this image captures well that anti-landscape aesthetic that we have been gesturing toward; it is an image that urges us to think around landscape, beyond it, into its erasures. It is an image of three Buddhist monks, in their saffron robes. There is little by way of discernible foreground and background, and the monochromatic orange of the piece brings to mind that experience of infinite spatiality, the merging of Buddhist self and world narrated at *Lunuganga*. This is, we want to suggest, a remarkably spatial image, one that expresses a form of spatial difference that gets to the heart of 'landscape's' blindspots. For the painting expresses a spatiality that, as we have been suggesting, the 'landscape' concept can easily obscure, dissimulate. The painting cost no more than US\$10 at a roadside market. It was painted by a student artist whose name neither appears on the work, nor was mentioned during the purchase. It was one of 15 or 20 rapidly produced pieces the artist was hawking, presumably to help pay his art school tuition fees. In other words, this is a remarkably ordinary image, it suggests a kind of everydayness, a taken-as-given aesthetic that is nonetheless the signature of a form of radical spatial difference that the word 'landscape' cannot name, but can only disfigure, mistranslate. In its un-thought everydayness, this painting is, in other words, an image of just one of landscape's blindspots.

Concluding this brief essay, a reflection on what landscape excludes and conceals, we have intended to stress that as a discipline, the concept of landscape has become ubiquitous, instinctive, almost second nature to us. Both of us frequently use and take for granted the concept of landscape, and the spaces and processes it may encompass, without pausing to think exactly what the landscape should encompass, and for whom it is being mobilized as a concept. We suspect we are not alone in this. As a foil, here we have shared some of our field experiences that span human and physical geography, and despite how differently we approach our work under the broad disciplinary umbrella of Geography, we hope to have

communicated how we both have experienced how landscape can ultimately frustrate us. But our point is that this frustration is productive. For it is precisely this frustration that makes us aware of the need to constantly redefine our personal and professional definitions of key geographical concepts as we learn more through our research. These evolving definitions reveal as much about us and our perspectives, as they do about the objects they characterize.

This Forum explores the possibilities of 'radical intradisciplinarity' across the broad terrain of Geography. Breaking down sub-disciplinary barriers and making full use of the varied tools and approaches that geographers employ across the sub-disciplines is certainly poised to allow us to more effectively tackle the grand environmental and socioeconomic challenges of the day, all of which require a geographical approach. Certainly we should strive for radical intradisciplinarity within Geography as we engage the concept of landscape, a concept that is crucial to these grand challenges. But we need to go further. If our argument in this essay has been that landscape is a concept, a narrative, a spatial typology that both excludes and obscures, then we arrive at that conclusion only by listening to and learning from the stories that people tell us in our fieldwork encounters. We learn these alternative stories and spatialities only by unlearning what we think we knew about 'landscape'. Radical intradisciplinarity then must not only be attuned to breaking down barriers amongst our own academic sub-disciplines, it must also be attuned to the task and necessity of breaking down barriers between the discipline and other voices. It must be attuned to the task of learning how our world is written in all its multiplicities, in ways that both exceed and contradict that which we think we know as geographers, enabling us to continue unlearning our spatial vocabulary and decentering the knowledge that contributes to that vocabulary. As we have argued in the context of landscape specifically, this sort of approach will facilitate a truly useful and inclusive understanding of what landscape makes both possible and impossible culturally, politically and scientifically.

Fig 1. A diverse group of stakeholders working together in a coastal mangrove forest in Trang Province, southwest Thailand.

Fig 2. The view from the back of Geoffrey Bawa's house at *Lunuganga*, Bentota, Sri Lanka.

Fig 3. Untitled artwork, artist unknown.