20160201\_SPP\_Week3\_Mauldin\_Reflection

I was struck by the beauty of the Apache name-place narratives as described by Keith Basso in *Wisdom Sits in Place*. It was only after reading Basso’s piece that Michel de Certeau’s effort to “create a sense of place as actively constructed” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* finally resonated with me (Hubbard & Kitchin, 110). The process of Charles Henry narrating his ancestors’ approach to naming places seems to parallel the transformation of urban space by walkers – whose movement “is a spatial acting-out of the place” (de Certeau, 98). Both accounts, Basso’s and de Certeau’s, demonstrate that it is important to understand what people make of their places – for it reveals “what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth” and it gives insight into spatial and signifying practices of places (Basso, 7; de Certeau, 105). But I also felt uncomfortable by some things that came up in the theorizing of space and place that Basso, de Certeau, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch engaged in. This includes the problem of romanticizing a way of life or a past way of being, the limitations of our use of language, and the danger of making universal claims.

In all three pieces, there is a dangerous nostalgia for some past or a hearkening to some unfulfillable ideal – either a way of life as led by one’s ancestors, an aura that existed around certain products or ways of life before modern transportation connected remote regions to the centre, or of an idealized walking populous of a city. In Basso’s description of Western Apache place naming, the codification of social norms through the narration of place-names is left mostly unchallenged. Strict adherence to social norms may have benefited the survival and perpetuation of the community as it was understood, but it could be stultifying to members of the community who did not feel that their community prescribed role matched their understanding of what they brought to the community. Who gets to participate in the narrative process also presents opportunities for exclusion and the smothering of some experiences and histories that are not considered part of the normed narrative. Schivelbusch’s description of the loss of “aura” of goods once they were more globally commoditized failed to acknowledge that the “aura” was constructed and destroyed anyway at ever smaller and smaller levels by the people who engaged in the production and trading of goods on more local levels. de Certeau’s romanticization of the walker belies the fact that walking is often a means of surviving – and not an explicit piece of resistance (and even if it is interpreted as resistance, what the walkers are resisting is much more complex and embedded in multiple levels of humans and institutions than de Certeau suggests).

The difficulties in de Certeau’s and Basso’s pieces of the translation of various space/place names (even of the concepts place and space from French to English) highlight how beholden to language we are in this endeavor of understanding space/place. This is something de Certeau is acutely aware of: “as in the ship of fools, we are embarked, without the possibility of an aerial view or any sort of totalization” (11). Theories of space can be salvaged only if accompanied by an acknowledgement of our limitations with language. A final aspect of some of the pieces that bothered me was a tendency to make universalizing claims. The arrogance of de Certeau’s title – *The Practice of Everyday Life* – was alienating and denied validity to other interpretations of everyday life.

Nevertheless, what can salvage all of these is that the place narratives these three authors espouse are flexible – and capable of incorporating these critiques into a more nuanced understanding of space/place.

(As a post script to last week’s class, I was struck by the similarity of the problem of scale inherent in ethnographies with the problem of induction that philosophers of science have wrestled with for centuries. The presumption that observations about human nature at the scale of ethnographies can be somehow extrapolated to more general insight on human behavior.)