**Space, place & power – week 3**

**Response paper – Cecilie**

Anthropologists have long been concerned with the dialectical relationship between culture and the body. Mauss (1979) argued that we learn from our culture how to physically act and be in the world, which becomes what he called 'techniques of the body' – a precursor to Bourdieu's *habitus.* Since a sense of self perhaps can be said to begin with the body, not only are our identities shaped by our culture, but our way of interacting with space is also shaped by culture. As Basso (1996:144) points out, an Apache's sense of place is different from a New Yorker's sense of place, because each person's sense of place is informed by his or her history and experiences.

However, Basso's ethnography also points to how cultural differences in how the person is conceived may influence how people interact with space. The Apache people's identities, he argues, are completely interwoven with the landscape, as their cultural traditions teach them to shape their minds according to the wisdom hidden in stories about places in the landscape. In 'Western' (Euro-American) culture, on the other hand, the idea of the self as contained within the limits of the physical body (Low, 2003:10), coupled with a strong ideology of individuality positing the person as an autonomous being by virtue of his or her humanity (La Fontaine, 1985:133) – to say nothing of how actual practice contradicts this ideology – may indicate that Western culture encourages a different relationship to space. It would seem that a sharper distinction between what is contained *in* the body and what lies outside the parameters of the body may lead to experiencing space at more of a remove than the Apache appear to experience it. This 'Western way' (a somewhat dubious term) of experiencing space can be perceived from de Certeau's (1984) *Walking in the city,* where there is a sense of opposition between the urban landscape and the individuals traversing it. Although he argues that the users of the urban space appropriate it and thereby transform it, the human imprint on the landscape is a light one. It is but an invisible layer on top of the concrete space of streets and parks, that only amounts to a 'metaphorical city' (ibid:110), imbued with the many meanings attributed to it by individuals. And while the urban space according to de Certeau shapes human practice by creating possibilities and impossibilities, it does not appear to shape their identity. Rather, as opposed to the profound effect the landscape has on the Apache people and their identities, de Certeau's seems to think it is primarily people and their experiences that affect a more or less passive urban space, so that landmarks, buildings and streets take on the personal meanings of the users. Identity is not derived from the landscape as much as a personal 'rhetoric of walking' (ibid:99) is informed by the individual's style – his or her 'fundamental way of being in the world' (ibid:100) – and use of the landscape. In this sense, the landscape in de Certeau's view is more external to the human, making it a place where personal identity and style is played out, which perhaps reflects his cultural background and bias towards Western notions of personhood.

Of course, this is not to say that Westerners do not have a 'sense of place', as Basso calls it. As he points out, everybody has moments of communion with a place, when a place inspires us to think about ourselves and our place in the social world. One might wonder, however, to what extent modern technology and the concrete jungles of urban spaces transform our sense of place and the way in which we interact with our surroundings. Considering Schivelbusch's (1986) portrayal of how people's relationship to places changed as traveling by railways became common in the 19th century, which separated the subject from the landscape, it is possible that the difference between the Apache relationship to places and de Certeau's view of places are partly due to the different landscapes they are referring to. While any place – urban, or untouched countryside – can take on a new meaning as a result of personal experiences we have had in those places, an urban space has already been conceived and shaped by humans, often with a particular agenda in mind, which may place more restrictions on the possibilities for human practice to transform it. Nature, on the other hand, is often thought to allow better for free flowing contemplation. But this is of course just another idea shaped by culture. Considering the transformative effect the railways had on people's views on the best mode of traveling and enjoying the landscape while traveling, however, we should probably not be surprised if urban spaces come to be seen as more suitable to contemplation than nature.

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