**W3. Response paper: Phenomenological approaches**

In this response paper I will consider two aspects I found to be insufficiently developed in the readings this week. First, I will look at how uncritical Basso is of how relationships of power and authority may affect the creation of place-names. Second, I will argue that De Certeau’s account would have benefitted from a less homogenous description of the hegemonic makers of the strategy of space.

In his book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso accounts for how the Apache Native Americans use the naming of places as a mental map consisting of topographic descriptions, and more importantly to communicate ancestral wisdom (1996). His work makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how place can be created socially and culturally. The experience of place, what he calls our sense of place, is not created solely by individual imagination, nor as a model imposed from above by the hegemonic powers within the society (143-144). Basso seems to think that he is describing the making of place-names as a democratic process, but I would argue that he fails to provide enough evidence for this argument to be fully convincing. He claims that place-making is ‘history without authorities’ (32) and that anyone who ‘has the inclination’ can be a place-maker (3). In recounting the history behind the clan and place-name ‘Juniper Tree Stands Alone’, his Apache informant Charles says that ‘the people spoke among themselves and agreed with what their leaders had said’ (21).

Basso makes few attempts to investigate the potential power relationships behind the naming of places. Given that he argues that place-making is an essential aspect of being human (building on Heidegger’s notion of dwelling) and of creating a shared group identity (146), it is important to identify the sources that are considered legitimate creators of this identity. However, he does not question the fact that the project he is partaking in is mapping place-names based on the account of one individual, an older Apache man. As if a slip of the tongue, he does at times indicate that the power of place-making is privileged certain people, such as when he refers to ‘those who work to produce it [place-world]’ (32). Basso writes that the makers of place-worlds construct these based on subjective experiences, and that all versions are considered valid as long as they ‘seem plausible’ (ibid.). Who defines plausibility? And who are these place-makers? I find Basso’s account to be romanticising and lacking in investigation of the power structures behind place making. Unequal power distribution can be found in an array of places, it is not a unique quality of urban, capitalist space.

De Certeau introduces two particularly useful concepts for thinking about how urban space is created, strategy and tactics, and accounts for the different methods available to the ordinary individual versus the authorities within a bounded place (1984). This bipolar model does however create an exaggerated distinction between the spheres of action of the general population and the hegemony, and fails to address the heterogeneity within power structures. The population can for example have an impact on the making of space by affecting the strategy of the powerful, and the “ordinary man” is not left with tactics as the only option to evade an already existing strategy. When 75% of Oxford students voted to keep the subfusc in 2015, the student population had a direct impact on setting the parameters of action for a given place, which is part of De Certeau’s definition of strategy (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011: 108).

De Certeau’s contrast between strategy as unified and tactics as a multiple array of actions is also visible in the use of the singular and plural nouns – he refers to one strategy, many tactics. This is not to say that the strategies of the authorities (e.g. the state, the leaders of a company, parents) are as diverse as the tactics of the general population (e.g. inhabitants, employees, children). However, when we apply De Certeau’s strategy-tactics concepts, we should bare in mind that the hegemonic power often consists of a range of institutions with some measure of power each, and rarely is completely unified in decision-making and the creation of space (ibid.: 111). How many times haven’t children used this knowledge to their advantage? A “no” from dad, doesn’t necessarily mean a “no” from mum… (Or the other way around! Wouldn’t want to underpin any gender stereotypes…)

**Bibliography**

Basso, K. (1996). Chapters 1 & 4: ‘Quoting the Ancestors’ and ‘Wisdom Sits in Places,’ *Wisdom Sits in Place*, UNM Press

De Certeau, M. (1984). ‘Chapter 7: Walking in the City’, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Hubbard,P. and Kitchin, R. (2011). *Key Thinkes in Space and Place*, Sage