Reading issues of locality and location within ‘natural’ landscapes

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Central to any discussion of what critical management studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand might look like is how we think about locality and location. Given our individual and collective biographies location is often framed in terms of a relationship between ‘here’ and some ‘other’ location – be that geographical, cultural, economical, empirical or theoretical. Thus, exploring the politics of locality and location becomes an examination of the ways in which ‘the other’ is inscribed in/onto ‘the local’. Landscape presents a highly visible account of these inscriptions of the other onto the local context. Thus, we can read some of the politics of Aotearoa/ New Zealand locality from our landscape. The presence (and absence) of particular trees - the ‘exotic’ apple, pine, poplar, oak and macrocarpa, for example- leave enduring traces of other places on the local landscape. At times these monuments from elsewhere outlive the social organizations that produced them. For example the apple trees that were the result of rail passengers throwing their apple cores out of the train window still line the now absent Central Otago railway track. These trees signal a very important point about how locality and location should be approached from a critical perspective. In short, they represent the complex multiplicity of inscriptions of the other onto the local context. In addressing the complexity and multiplicity of the relationship between here and there, it is important that our critical questioning considers how historical inscriptions of ‘the other’ become embedded into contemporary accounts of ‘here’. For example, the apple trees introduced to Central Otago through the historical railway are a current feature of the Central Otago Rail Trail tourist experience of local landscape. Reading the politics of locality from our landscape therefore, provides us with important access to the complex weaving of particular histories into contemporary organization and identity practices within Aotearoa/ New Zealand. I will support my position through a brief analysis of the politics of location and identity in the Wakatipu Basin development dispute.

Queenstown is a key destination in the tourism imaginary of Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Fundamental to the status of Queenstown as an international tourist destination is the ‘natural’ landscape of the area. The Wakatipu Basin is an area of land adjacent to the urban centre of Queenstown. While this basin is framed with high rocky peaks – including the 1,651 metre high Coronet Peak – it also contains approximately 225
square kms of rolling foothills, flat lands and the river terraces of the Lower Shotover. These foothills and low lands have supported sheep farming -and more latterly viticulture- through the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. In the last ten years however, an increase in visitor numbers to Queenstown and the expansion of the local tourism industry have generated pressure to build housing developments in the Wakatipu Basin. The dispute that has emerged is generally constituted in terms of ‘\textit{how to handle development pressure, while protecting the landscape values of the district}’ (Warwick Goldsmith cited by Williams, 2000). My reason for bringing the Wakatipu Basin to your attention is to illustrate how the very particular histories of landscape mobilized by agents involved in this dispute serve to embed historical colonial inscriptions into the contemporary landscape. In so doing, these monuments from elsewhere become a naturalized feature of the way in which this location is thought about. Before I do this however, I need to define the theoretical framework through which I engage with location, locality and landscape.

My suggestion that landscape offers us valuable access to a critical examination of locality and location in Aotearoa/ New Zealand is premised on a particular theorization of landscape. As stated by Gieryn (2000: 464) ‘\textit{place}’ refers to a ‘\textit{unique spot in the universe}’. In this paper I use landscape to refer to the specific physicality of the place known as Wakatipu Basin. While landscape translates place into a physical entity the meaning ascribed to that entity may be diverse and contested. In this sense I am adopting Doreen Massey’s (1991, 1995, 1996) formulation of the meaning of place and landscape as the outcome of a political process. In other words, ‘\textit{the boundaries which we draw in space, the \textit{places} we define (indeed all spatial definitions)}…rather than being based on some eternal principles, are in fact expressions of, and exercises in, social power’ (Massey, 1996: 117). This social power operates through the way that places are ‘interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined’ (Soja, 1996 cited by Gieryn, 2000: 465).

‘\textit{Nature}’ occupies a central and privileged position in the social imaginary of the Wakatipu Basin. Whether constituted as an economic tourist resource or an aesthetic quality, it is the natural qualities of the Wakatipu Basin landscape that the agents against urban development seek to protect. For example, from a Wakatipu Basin resident:

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I sincerely hope that other landowners join with groups ... And call for sensible planning ... with emphasis on retaining the unspoilt nature of this most beautiful area (Humphrey, 2000).

As Wilson cautions, ‘when our physical surroundings are sold to us as “natural” … we should pay close attention’ (Wilson, 1992: 12). The important thing about the ‘naturalness or purity’ of nature is that it is constructed to be so at the level of the ‘social imaginary’ (Shields, 1991). The value given to a particular landscape therefore, is a product of the social imaginations invoked to give it meaning.

Bell (1996: 29) suggests that New Zealand has

two versions of romanticised landscape. Landscape is either beautiful but potentially dangerous: sanctified, visited, enjoyed, photographed, then left; a vision to inspire. Or it is beautiful and beautifully cultivated, a tribute to both nature itself and to the efforts of human labour’.

In the Wakatipu Basin these two versions of romantic landscape are spatially connected. In terms of landscape identity practices however, the important point is that both of these images of landscape – the mountain and the pastoral scene – are invested with the natural and therefore sacrosanct myth.

“This is about protecting the environment. It’s a wake-up call,” he says.

“People realise that if they don’t do something they’re going to lose forever an environment that has been sacrosanct” (Revell Buckham cited by Ansley, 2000: 23)

This connection not only high-lights the centrality of the ‘natural’ myth within the place-identity practices of the Wakatipu Basin, it also serves to disappear the early colonial inscriptions on this landscape.

Quite simply, the colonial inscriptions missing from the constitution of the Wakatipu Basin as natural are fire, exotic grasses and sheep. Miller (1949) describes a fire in 1860 where the colonial gentlemen Rees and Von Tunzelman used a match to clear native fern, speargrass and matagouri in preparation for their return with three thousand sheep (Miller, 1949). This fire was not the product of carelessness or mindless vandalism. Rather it was a product of a social imagination of place that ‘tied their local and immediate experience [of this landscape] to the Anglo and European worlds’ (Dunlap, 1999: 98). In other words this was the remaking of an alien and
‘inhospitable land’ into a familiar European pastoral scene. As Dunlap (1999: 46-47) argues, ‘(t)he settlers destroyed and re-created, appreciated the beauties of the land, and sought to bring it closer to their own ideal, and they did it on a grand scale’. Thus, following the fire came the exotic grass, the sheep and the Arcadian spatial imagery. One of the powerful settler myths of New Zealand as an ideal society, claims Fairburn (1989: 29), was that New Zealand was a land of Arcadian plenty.

Of the themes constituting the Arcadian conception of New Zealand, the most common was the notion of New Zealand as a land of natural abundance...The assumption had all the power of a legend. Not only was it taken for granted and extraordinarily popular, it also had its own predictable rhetoric and met with little resistance let alone reasoned skepticism.

It is this Arcadian pastoral imagery that has been mobilized as the history of the Wakatipu Basin landscape in this dispute. Accordingly, the rhetoric of Arcadian mythology is drawn explicitly into the debate. For example,

‘Judge Jon Jackson told them that they were threatening the character of the district and would have to fit into “a pastoral or Arcadian landscape in the poetic sense”’ (Ansley, 2000: 23).

In addition, in a 20/20 television report (Langston, 2000), Wakatipu landowner Jeff Williams describes the area that surrounds his own renovated historic cottage as

“still relatively unspoilt. Its still a beautiful piece of Arcadian landscape and it’s a very important part of the landscape, it’s a very historical part of the landscape down here”.

Issues of location and locality are central to any discussion we might have of what critical management studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand might look like. The landscapes of Aotearoa / New Zealand can provide us with important insights into the multiple and complex ways that other locations become inscribed onto and merged into this place. Within the Wakatipu Basin development dispute for example, those opposing urban development constitute this landscape as a place of natural beauty that needs to be preserved and protected for future generations. The landscape that these agents are defending is the pastoral Arcadian scene of green pastures and grazing sheep. Submerged within this landscape however, is another natural landscape that
was erased by early colonial pastoralists in 1860. To rephrase a letter to the editor\textsuperscript{1}, the ‘rampage by an unguided super-tanker of development’ 150 years ago, rather than being a lament for generations to come, worked a piece of land into a very particular natural landscape that is deserving of protection today. Approaching location and locality therefore, demands that we not only attend to the multiple histories of landscapes but also to the ways in which these inscriptions from other places enter into normalized responses to this land.

**References**


\textsuperscript{1} The original from Bill Taylor – Frankton ends with the sentence: ‘This rampage, by an unguided super-tanker of development, only now seen to be unstoppable, will be a lament for generations to come of New Zealanders’ (ODT:24.8.2000).