

Place and Placelessness

A Virtual Environmental History Workshop for Graduate Students

October 7, 2011 <http://virtualeh.wordpress.com/>

NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment <http://niche-canada.org/>

Program: <http://virtualeh.wordpress.com/workshop-program/>

*Follow Up Blog also Posted Below

Panel 4B **Imagining and Making Place** 1500-1630 EST

Moderator: Andrew Watson, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Presenters: Polly Knowlton Cockett, Erin Neufeld

Panel Participants: Christina Silaghi, Linnea Rowlatt, Jeffery Doherty, Elsa Devienne

Panel 4B – Presentation 1

Ephemeral and Enduring: Socioecological Cycles of Place-Making in an Urban Prairie

Polly Knowlton Cockett, University of Calgary

Location: Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Key Words: place-making, community, education

Abstract:

Strewn with the daily-renewed petals of wild blue flax matching the vast prairie sky, the Natureground is alive with a myriad of colour under the early morning's summer sun.



Community volunteers, working side by side with city parks employees, arrive to tend the reclaimed and restored native biodiversity of the grasslands in the midst of urban encroachment and infestation by alien invasive plants and escaped ornamentals. Children from a day camp explore Whispering Woods and hunt for the interpretive signs depicting seasons and cycles of indigenous flora, fauna, and landforms through paintings, poetry, and prose by local artists, writers, and students. Graduate students from the nearby university hold an environmental education class in the sandstone amphitheatre, discussing ecological identity, place-based curriculum, and community engagement. As the summer wanes, teachers return to the schools nearby, preparing for another year of inquiry with their new students which includes explorations into these precious spaces at the precarious intersections of our natural and built environments.

Join me on a virtual peripatetic Jane's Walk in Brentwood, a suburb in northwest Calgary, Alberta, to explore a variety of outdoor environmental projects. Discuss how these community- and school-based engagements have engendered a sense of place amongst their participants. Reflect on the sustainability of such engagements in the face of ever-changing dynamics and recurrent rhythms of school and community life. Our conversation together seeks to illustrate avenues where we might each contribute to a renewed season of *in situ* ecological mindedness.



Panel 4B – Presentation 2

Field season: The role of science in the development of place in Antarctica

Erin Neufeld, University of Canterbury

Location: Christchurch, New Zealand

Key words: Antarctica, place, science, field season

Abstract:

Antarctica has been a place of many things. For the Greeks it was a place of logical assumption, balancing the Northern hemispheres' continents. For the whalers and sealers who came later, Antarctica was a place of rich resources. For the explorers of old, Scott, Amundsen, and the likes, it was a place of personal challenge and national empires. Today, Antarctica is these things and more, it is a place for science, for the wild, and for the imagination. And throughout all of these ages, Antarctica has been a place strongly defined by its' seasons – accessible and inaccessible. Despite our advances in technology this is still the case. This paper explores the current notions of Antarctic place held by New Zealanders, focusing specifically on the role that the scientific field season plays on its' development. Examining interviews conducted at Scott Base in the summer of 2010, the idea of field season will be defined and then applied to the understanding of what takes Antarctica from blank, white space to felt, coloured place. Drawing of Entrikins' notion of 'betweenness of place' (1991) and Cronon's connections(1992), this work presents the place of Antarctica as determined by scientific practice and linkages.

October 20, 2011 – FOLLOW UP BLOG

<http://virtualeh.wordpress.com/2011/10/20/post-pp-imagining-and-making-place/>

Post P&P – Imagining and Making Place

Moderator Blog Post by: Andrew Watson

The participants on this panel read two very different papers from Polly Knowlton Cockett of the University of Calgary and Erin Neufeld of the University of Canterbury that nonetheless shared a common focus on the importance of 'place' and the process through which place is conceived and constructed. The first thirty minutes was devoted to a discussion of Knowlton Cockett's paper, followed by thirty minutes on Neufeld's paper, with the last thirty minutes intended as a broader discussion of the themes common to each paper. Joining us on the panel were Cristina Silaghi of the University of Canterbury, Jeffery Doherty of Calgary, and Elsa Devienne of L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales. Due to technical problems, Linnea Rowlett of the University of Kent was unable to attend the panel.

Knowlton Cockett is a community activist in a residential neighbourhood of northwest Calgary called Brentwood, and a PhD candidate in Environmental Education. Knowlton Cockett's paper focused primarily on the reciprocal relationship between strong social bonds within the community and an engagement with and understanding of local ecological diversity. While not primarily interested in the history of this relationship, Knowlton Cockett does take a longer view of the community, its inhabitants, and the changes that have occurred within Brentwood over the past sixty years. Knowlton Cockett used Brentwood's community website to take participants of 4B on a virtual tour of Whispering Woods in order to get a better sense of the place she discussed in her paper. This evolved into a broader discussion on the use of technology such as GPS and interactive websites as a means of introducing non-residents to places, and whether a sense of place can be achieved without actually occupying the physical space.

The idea of knowing a place without having visited it provided the perfect segue into Erin Neufeld's paper. Neufeld is a PhD candidate in Antarctic Studies, and native of Yukon, whose work explores the ways people develop and establish a sense of place in the extreme environment of Antarctica. Like Knowlton Cockett, Neufeld includes a historical context in her work, but is more interested in contemporary understandings of place. Neufeld's paper reveals the way an alien environment, such as Antarctica, is imagined by people who have never been there, and how the challenge of knowing a place that has almost no human history. The discussion quickly turned to concepts of 'scale' and 'change' and their influence on how people have constructed a sense of place. As an extreme environment, the landscape, day length and climate in Antarctica are at odds with the scale of peoples' lived experiences, which in turn creates a sense that there is no change in such a place.

While the papers dealt with entirely different places, the focus on 'place' allowed for some interesting intersections. The panel picked up on the importance of technology and different types of media in helping to create a sense of place. Knowlton Cockett's website reveals that people can share in community and local ecology without actually having to meet their neighbours or get their hands dirty in the process, while Neufeld's work makes clear the role of stories and images have in formulating conceptions of places most people will never visit. The panel also encouraged both authors to consider the cultural assumptions at work in creating a sense of place in both suburban parks and extreme environments. Whose voices speak for the popular conception of these places? What kinds of language is being used to construct that meaning? And, who is excluded from these places, and what does this do to creating a sense of place?

Like any good workshop, the panel ended before we could figure out all the answers...