

History 4321: Making Space

Syllabus Exegesis and Rationale

The Basics

This syllabus provides an outline for a course that begins the process of getting students to think about the role of space and spatial production in human interaction and history. Over the course of the semester I hope to incite the class, through the readings and the discussions, to a critically consideration of Edward Said's claim that we produce our own geographies as well as our own histories.

This syllabus is designed for an upper-level undergraduate class at a fairly rigorous academic institution. I have designed the class to accommodate between 10 and 12 students, and the schedule would need to be adjusted if the class size grew beyond that point. The final project presentations, for example, would need to be adjusted to keep to the calendar. As the syllabus indicates, the schedule is keyed to the Fall Semester in 2020, using Cornell's current academic calendar as a rough guide. I have not left space on the syllabus for Fall Break – something that I would address in using this syllabus for an actual class. I have, however, scheduled one library day, during which I would use half of the class period to cover the readings, and the other half to allow Boris Michev to show off the map room.

The amount of reading and extra-classroom work is appropriate for students at institution like Cornell. I would reassess the readings if I were teaching this class at a college or university with less-prepared or committed students, where asking this level of work might be counterproductive. In those cases, I would adjust the readings to fit the needs and abilities of the student body at large, while still attempting to keep the course's thematic components alive. I would also, in that case, include a significant "Further Readings"

section, both to demonstrate the of historiographical breadth available in the field, and to provide more motivated students with a roadmap for extra investigation.

Graded Assignments

The final grade from the class comes from three main sections: participation, long-form reading responses, and a final project. There are 100 total points available to students over the course of the semester.

Total class participation makes up 20% of the grade, of which 5% is tied to Blackboard discussion post reading responses. Grading is simple: if a student posts a substantive, thoughtful and timely post by Monday morning, he or she gets 1/3 of a point. There are 15 weeks in the semester, so a good response each weeks earns the student the full 5 points. The same holds true for in-class work, with the slight change that each week of attendance and participation earns the student 1 point. There are several purposes for the Blackboard reading responses: it allows me to see what parts of the readings students found interesting or troublesome (or both) and to thereby better guide class discussion; it provides a handy record for students of thoughts and questions attached to texts from earlier in the semester; and it forces students to begin to address the issues of the week before they sit down in class.

Three longer reading responses make up 40% of the total grade, with the first paper being worth less than the last two. This structure gives students a chance to acclimate to both the material and my grading preferences in a paper with less weight. These responses should be in the 4-5 page range. Students should synthesize the arguments from a week's reading(s) and to provide critique as they see fit. They may choose which readings they wish to write about within the ranges give (ie. the first paper may cover readings from between

week 1 and 5, while the second can deal with any set of readings from between week 6 and 9). The paper must be turned in by the beginning of the class for the week that the student is writing about – students can not use class discussions to inform their response papers. My rationale here is two-fold. Firstly, I believe that it is more intellectually profitable to have undergraduates write fewer, longer reviews rather than asking them to write weekly assessments. Giving them the (limited) option of picking the readings that most appeals to them should, in theory, make the resultant papers more engaged. Secondly – and selfishly – I am hopeful that this structure will spread out my grading somewhat (though I am well aware of the high likelihood that most students will simply put the work off until the last possible week each time).

The final assignment is a 12-15 page research project, on a topic of each student's choosing. The instructions here are fairly vague, in part because I am open to a wide range of possible projects. My stipulations for an essay topic are these: 1) that it be original to the student; and 2) that it focus some part of the semester's themes onto an issue that the student finds interesting or important. I require a meeting with each student to discuss his or her potential topics and research directions by October 12. I believe that by this point in the semester the students should have a good enough grasp on the course themes and concerns to know how to look for a paper topic, while still leaving them enough time before the end of the term to produce a solid piece of research-based writing.

The last day of class – November 30 – is given over to student presentations of their projects (or, at least, of their progress to that point). This serves several goals. It forces students to engage with their topic earlier in the semester rather than later; the class follows immediately upon the heels of Thanksgiving break, meaning that students will have needed to do most of their research prior to break. The presentations should keep the class from

excessive procrastination. They also provide a forum for feedback, whereby students may get ideas or suggestions that provide new thoughts or directions for their work.

I considered, but decided against, requiring an in-progress bibliography due on November 9. This would have served as a further benchmark for progress and given me room to offer direction. However, I ultimately decided that in a senior-level history class this degree of handholding should not be necessary. If the class were adjusted down in difficulty, or if it had a high number of younger students, I would likely include the in-progress bibliography as a requirement. Likewise, if I felt it necessary based on the class's performance in other areas, I would not be averse to introducing the bibliography as a requirement mid-semester, and to then roll the grade into the overall project grade at a rate of something like 5 points.

General Structure:

The structure roughly follows the discursive path that I pursued in my field essay. I have broken the semester into five roughly thematic sections of between 2 and 4 weeks each. Each section addresses a different way of creating geographies. There is a fair amount of overlap in the sections – my imposed structure is for all intents and purposes a map, and (as such) does not reflect reality so much as it creates it.¹ Each section has an internal logic, however, and the overlap lets them connect to each other in a way that seems sensible to me.

Throughout the semester I hope to keep several stands of inquiry active and open simultaneously. The first is somewhat mechanical and asks the students, on a week-to-week

¹ As an aside, it is probably good pedagogical practice to pay attention to the geographies of knowledge that we produce in our syllabi, and ask our students to inhabit. To riff off of Paul Carter, the syllabus is something of an itinerary of travel, making history by naming it as such. It might be worth considering as such, from time to time.

basis, to pay attention to the technical details at play in the readings – to note how the authors understand the process of spatial or geographic creation. The second is more holistic, and asks students to try to weave those weekly ideas into a broader tapestry of understanding. To think, for example, about how the spaces created by personal movement and experience relates to issues of place creation, or to map usage. The question of created histories will form the third thematic thread. The first half of Said’s claim – the bit about geographic manufacture – will likely demand the bulk of the class’s instinctive attention. However, the role of geography in history-making needs to be addressed, both because it is worth making the point to the class that our histories are neither single nor teleological, and also because it leads to the the final strand: paying attention to what happens to histories and spatial practices when they collide with each other.

Weekly Structure and Reading Rationale

Introductions

This section covers the first two weeks of class. The first class period, as is often the case, will be given over to introductions, performing a dramatic reading of the syllabus and covering basic expectations. I will also use the class period to have a discussion about geography and geographies, in order to both set the intellectual stage and establish a baseline for the students’ familiarity with the subject.

Said’s *Orientalism* provides the only reading for this section. I have placed it in the introductory portion for several reasons. Firstly, it is approachably written, which makes it a good starting point for students fresh off of their summer vacations. Secondly, because *Orientalism* provides the quote that lends rationale to this course, it made sense to me to set the book at the beginning of the semester. If

we are going to spend the term interrogating Said's claim, we should begin by understanding the context in which he was writing. Lastly, *Orientalism* shines a light onto many of the basic thematic elements that will recur throughout the course. The book concerns itself with how ideas about people and history get bound up in the ways that we think about space, to the extent that the imaginary becomes more influential than the factual. Said's book lets us begin the process of seeing what happens when historical imaginations come into conflict, and understanding what the stakes are in asking spatial questions of historical narratives.

Experiential Geographies

In this section I want to begin to push on student's understanding of our spatial practices – of the way that we produce and reproduce space and place as we move through the world. I want to focus, in part, on the physical action of moving, and have the class think about the way that such an apparently simple action as walking – simple, yet so intrinsically and basically human! – can infuse so much meaning and purpose onto both the natural and the mental world. By paying attention to the ways that moving and stopping inflects on our ideas of time, these weeks should extend and broaden the conversation about history-making that Said's book started. This section will also introduce issues of geographical creation as an act of physical change.

I am taking Yi-Fu Tuan and Michael de Certeau as starting points here. Both readings contain discussions of the ways that human movement and experience condition the world around us. The selections from Tuan's book give us some basic definitions of place and space to work with, and discusses moments of movement

and pause in those terms. Tuan's focus here is on the individual human experience as a baseline component for spatial creation. The reading also brings the question of time to the fore, and discusses the importance of motion in the perception and description of history.

The sections from de Certeau's book also deal with the creation of geographies through motion. In his case, the question comes down to whose geographies and spaces you create through your itineraries. I picked this reading because it gets at an important point about space and history: though we make geographies and paths, they are never ours alone. They are always conditioned by other, prior or contemporary instantiations of others' ideas. The trick lies in seeing those influencing factors. De Certeau's chapter about train travel is especially noteworthy in making this point.

Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* makes for a nice companion piece to de Certeau and Tuan. Solnit's book is not academic, but is instead a meditation on walking. The chapter that I have picked discusses a wide range of topics – literature, biology, social and architectural factors, to name a few – that revolve around and concern the practice of walking. Solnit's work offers an array of paths towards thinking about how walking through the world establishes meaning in place and space (including the inner space of the body). The writing is highly accessible, and students should enjoy it as a counterpoint to the level of attention the de Certeau's writing demands.

The last reading in this section is Hugh Raffles's book, *In Amazonia*. The book broadens out the theme of experiential geographies to point explicitly to the problems that arise when cultures with radically different spatial practices come into contact. Especially noteworthy in this are the author's discussion of Sir Walter

Raleigh's mistaking indigenous landscaping for nature in a manner that fed European preconceptions about both the landscape of Amazonia and its people, and Raffles's later discussion of the ways that local spatial practices and natural knowledge acted as an invisible hand in crafting European's "scientific" exploration of Amazonia.

Raffles also brings up the issue of affecting physical changes to the naturescape as a further means of creating geographies. I suspect that this part of the discussion may expand out to discuss other types of built geography, such as cities.²

Geographies of Place

These next weeks take as their subject the various ways that people build a sense of place. This continues something of a theme from the prior section; place plays a prominent role in Tuan's, and also in Raffles (though he uses other terminology). Keith Basso's book comes first in this section. *Wisdom Sits in Places* is useful because it provides a highly differentiated perspective on the potential use of space as a container for cultural narrative. It also opens doors for discussing the idea of multiple histories being in play for a given people; Basso makes note of this explicitly in his discussion of the Apache's dual historical consciousness. Lastly, the book leaves room for discussions about the complications surrounding indigenous rights to traditional cultural and physical artifacts.

The second week in the section sets Brian Friel's *Translations* and Doreen Massey's "Places and their Pasts" as readings. Both of these works, in different ways, pay attention to questions of how and why we attach meaning and history to places. Friel's play touches on matters of physical geography, but also spends a fair

² At which point, Neil Smith's *Uneven Development* may be a useful resource to help guide the discussion.

amount of time dealing with linguistic geographies. The play should demand that students think about the way that language and linguistic practices can bind peoples situationally and historically – language in Friel’s play is as de-historicizing as maps or an Orientalist attitude.

Massey’s essay is fairly short, and makes the claim that naming and identifying places not only intervenes in geography, but that it also creates history as it does so. Massey’s essay here stands in, to some degree, for Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay*. *Botany Bay* is too long and convoluted to set in an undergraduate class, but Massey’s essay distils at least this part of Carter’s argument into a bite-sized portion. Taken with Friel’s play, Massey’s essay suggests the power of language as a tool for the making of both space and history. Both works also point to the problems inherent in translating spatial practices between cultures and classes.

The last reading in this section comes from Peter Salhins. In considering the role of the French-Spanish border in creating national identity, Salhins’s book, *Boundaries*, picks up on the themes of localized spatial practices. The book’s discussion of spatial negotiations between center and periphery is notable, as is its ultimate argument that national identity formed at the border – and because of the border – before it formed in the interior of either country. *Boundaries* provides room for discussions about problems with so-called natural borders, but also demonstrates the on-the-ground implications of constructed geographies. Lastly, the book provides a bridge to the coming section on mapping.

Cartographic Geographies

This section moves on to discuss maps and mapping as a way of creating and reifying geographies. The first week includes J.B. Harley's classic essay, "Deconstructing the Map" and selections from Denis Wood's *The Power of Maps*. If the class has not had much exposure to cartographic history, these two readings may be surprising to them. Harley's focus on maps as cultural productions following specific social rules provides important grounding for the next several week's worth of readings. Wood's book provides a similar focus, and is useful in part because his style is more approachable than Harley's, and because (in this section, at least) his focus lies in understanding maps experientially rather than academically. Wood also raises worthwhile questions about image production. The readings for this week are somewhat light, and I would plan to spend some time looking at examples of maps and thinking through the process of deconstructing them as a class.

Week 9 tackles Susan Schulten's *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950*. Schluten's book is useful here for a number of reasons, chief among them being her focus on the way that mapping by non-state institutions can have tremendous cultural impacts. Schulten's discussion of the role of The National Geographic Society in setting the agenda for the ways that Americans have understood the world over the last 100 years provides a useful balance for readings over the next weeks which focus on statist mapping projects.³ Moreover, the book's final chapter offers a thought-provoking discussion of alternative geographic visions produced during World War II.

³ I would anticipate also discussing the history of the Sanborn maps this week. I would likely ask Boris to spend some time with the Sanborn collection during the class's library day.

The tenth week brings with it Barbara Mundy's *The Mapping of New Spain*. Mundy's book should engage students wholeheartedly in the problems created by the meeting of different cultures of spatial practice. One of the joys of the book is the rich archive that Mundy has to work with; the class should enjoy the aesthetics of the text, even if they disagree with its arguments. In terms of the class narrative, the attention that Mundy gives to language occlusion serves as an important echo of the issues that Friel and Massey dealt with in week six, and her discussion of the historically and culturally contingent nature of map production gives some substance to the claims of Harley and Wood. We are not reading Matthew Edney's *Mapping and Empire*, which demonstrates these contingencies in detail, but the same points can be drawn out of Mundy's book.

The last week in this section looks at Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped*. This is one of my favorite books, in no small part because of the wide range of issues that it touches upon. Thongchai's text brings together problems created by the cultural spatial blindness of European colonial powers, the issues intrinsic to indigenous efforts at adopting a Western register of cartographic expression, and the production of history that can spring from mapping. The Thai government's anachronistic projection of its recently created geo-body into the past should provide fuel for a discussion about history-making, and also points us on toward the final section of the syllabus.

Imagined and Reimagined Geographies

This last part of the syllabus examines geographies of the mind. The title, of course, offers something of a false distinction – all geographies are geographies of

the mind. The focus of these last weeks, though, lies with spatial imaginaries that exist primarily in mental spaces. The first week in this section looks at Daniel Smail's *Imaginary Cartographies*, with its focus on methods of spatial thought in medieval Marseilles. Like *Siam Mapped*, Smail's book brings together, in an explicit way, a number of themes from the semester. His examination of spatial construction in Marseilles has much in common with Basso's description of the Apache as a mapping, but not a map-making culture. Smail tracks issues of place and identity through the peregrinations of the city's notary corps, bringing us back again to the connections between movement, space and history. Because he has no maps to work with, Smail tracks geographic constructions through the language of legal documents. Lastly, *Imaginary Cartographies* does us the good favor of focusing attention on Europe as a location for alternative forms of mapping and spatial practice; too often the literature ignores the degree to which Europe's own spatial self-perception is a historically negotiated, rather than a natural, phenomenon.

Week 13 is dedicated to rethinking pre-set cultural geographies. The two readings for the week, Liisa Malkki's "National Geographic" and Epele Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands", both look at the ways that traditionally disadvantaged communities experience spatially and economically marginalization. Both essays suggest alternate ways of thinking about their case studies that seek to reframe the problems into new solutions.

Malkki's essay examines the persistent mode of thought that understands underdeveloped cultures to be inherently attached to the places of their origins. She notes that this perception is especially damaging in the case of diasporic and refugee communities, who are often treated as a naturally liminal people because they are no

longer rooted in their native soil. Malkki's argues in favor of decoupling people from static connection of native space, and let them recreate geographies of home in new places. Her discussion of the modern perception of uprootedness as a pathology, rather than a historical effect, works well with the themes of the course, as does the attention that she gives to the fact that, as cultural constructions, such geographic imaginaries can be reconstrued along more positive lines.

"Our Sea of Islands" works along a similar track. Hau'ofa urges Pacific Island people to reimagine their ocean as a single spatial and cultural unit; to ignore the development narrative that describes the Pacific as a patchwork of tiny, weak and poor nations. Hau'ofa notes that, as a whole, Oceania stands as one of the largest cultural and economic blocks in the world, and that the Pacific Islanders understanding of the ocean as anything but a single unit is a modern, imposed geography. The essay makes the point that diasporic movement of Pacific Islanders into the developed world is a modern reiteration of their ancient cultural traditions of voyaging and fishing. Like Malkki's essay, "Our Sea of Islands" points the class toward the problems that Western-dominated geographies have posed for indigenous peoples. Hau'ofa suggests a solution in a rejection of those spatial constrictions and a reframing of Pacific culture and space under indigenous terms.

Week 13 is the last week with any substantive class reading, and I have placed Hau'ofa's essay here in part because, unlike many of our other readings, "Our Sea of Islands" is strikingly optimistic. One of the last points that I want to get across to students is this: understanding the flexibility and composite nature of space and history carries with it great potential for making the world better – that the methods

by which developed nations have imposed themselves on the world can also provide a pathway of remedy and remediation.

Week 14 provides the last set of readings for the semester, and it is a light load. This is the week of Thanksgiving break, and I anticipate having neither a full class nor my class's full attention. The two books for the week are both explicitly atlases of imaginary places: Jeremiah Post's *Atlas of Fantasy* and Olivier Le Carrer's *Atlas of Cursed Places*. Both books will be held on reserve in the library, and I will have a signup wiki on Blackboard listing the plates. The students' assignment for the week is to look through the two books, to pick out several maps to present in class for discussion, and to give some thought to the kinds of overlap that exist between geographic imaginaries and imaginary geography. That theme will provide the topic for our last class. I anticipate a shortened discussion, and we will use the remainder of the time as a writing workshop for the final project.

As noted above, the last week of class is set aside for presentation of those projects.

Deficiencies

I like this syllabus, and I suspect that it will work well, both in terms of presenting a series of readings that make sense together, and in terms of provoking generative discussions. However, I also recognize that there are several deficiencies in the course narrative that I have laid out. Most notably, from my perspective, is that the syllabus pays only glancing attention to questions of empire and post-colonial development. I suspect that these are issues that will arise in the course of class discussions – especially empire – but they are somewhat underrepresented in the readings. Moreover, some of the books that I think are most important in the field are not on the syllabus...I am thinking here specifically of

Edney's *Mapping an Empire* and Carter's *Road to Botany Bay*. Both books would have brought much more direct attention to questions of empire and hegemony, but I felt that neither book was suitable for an undergraduate class with a lot of ground to cover. I do not believe that, in such a class, either book could be handled in one week. Lastly, there is nothing on the syllabus that attempts to address the relatively recent revolution in machine mapping and spatial production. I would be tempted to add at least the second half of Denis Wood's *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (or something like it) to the list at the end of the semester.