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Landscapes of Elision: Nostalgia and Imperial Networks

a response by Megan J. Sheard

A striking aspect of Auckland-Peck's piece is the way it traces a connection between naturalism and environmental exploitation via imperial networks. By grounding the discussion of Shell's advertising campaign in a discussion of its historical emergence as a company trading in exotic seashells from across the British empire linked to existing domestic interest in seashells and fossils by naturalists, Auckland-Peck establishes naturalism itself as part of the lineage of Shell's exploitation of imperial networks for later intensified forms of environmental extraction. There is no overstated claim here however: the move from seashells to oil and kerosene is clearly an economic one, with a kind of nostalgia for the oceanic constituting a thread of continuity with Shell's seashell-trading origins, most obviously in the company name and logo. However, the connection between British domestic interest in the natural landscape through collecting and landscape painting and the growth of a commercial network which ravaged both imperial and domestic environments is striking, not least because of the poetic connection Auckland-Peck makes between the seashell as an exotic product for trade in the first instance, and as part of the substrate from which oil is extracted in the second. While imperial collecting was always extractive, this linkage between a set of practices at least seemingly oriented around an interest in "nature" and the groundwork it laid for later intensive environmental exploitation is an intriguing avenue of inquiry.

This connection between natural history and corporate capitalist extraction is made most compellingly in the concluding section of the article, in which geological history supersedes aesthetic and historical concern with monuments: Nash's interest in the "stones, flora, and shells of England" creates precisely the form of knowledge required by Shell in the form of a paleontological cartography. The question arises here, however: supersedes for whom, and by whom? While Aukland-Peck's eloquent articulation of Shell as the "corporate iteration of the nineteenth-century seashell hunter" is understood as metaphorical, the nineteenth-century seashell hunter participated in imperial networks and institutions, just as the imperialism of the corporation proceeded on the basis of action undertaken by particular actors: a clarification of the actors within this history could strengthen the agential and structural dimensions of the article.

In the connection drawn here between the production of knowledge about nature and rapacious environmental extraction, I'm reminded of the role of botanical knowledge in British imperial expansion, including in its connection to the picturesque. For example, the development of a network of botanic gardens across the empire created spaces of experimentation for cultivating agricultural and other commercial crops such as rubber, as well as plants appreciated for their aesthetic qualities – the botanical complements to the seashells-as-exotica discussed by Aukland-Peck. In this piece, knowledge about nature in the form of a "paleontological cartography" maps out sites for extraction; in the case of botanic gardens, the instrumentalization of knowledge about nature might be said to go even further in the reconfiguration of plant life itself into a technics of colonization and ecosystem destruction (in the form of plantations, for example). The trade in exotic plants considered as a source of imperial wealth also underlines the connection between the nostalgia of the naturalist collector noted by Aukland-Peck and broader processes of imperial expansion; the romantic and picturesque associations of these botanic gardens within their respective publics, continuing into the present, hardly needs underscoring here. Importantly, thinking about commercialized collection of exotica within this expanded field also raises the specter of how such extraction processes and their accompanying solidification of objects into discrete "facts" impacted the bodies of indigenous people, not only as processes of extraction appropriated indigenous land and labor but also in the display of "artifacts" including human remains in international exhibitions and ethnographic collections, which worked to incorporate indigenous peoples into the taxonomies of colonial natural history. Again, romantic associations are interwoven through such practices, such as the imperial nostalgia reflected by the collection and documentation of artifacts, language and practices of Aboriginal cultures in Australia during the 19th and early 20th century, cultural material which colonial collectors and

institutions understood as belonging to a “dying race” and imagined themselves to be holding in posterity for their own descendants.

Something that would be wonderful to see here, given the emphasis of Aukland-Peck’s argument on the elision of the landscapes of extraction via the advertisements’ picturesque vision of the British countryside, would be a detailed consideration of one or two such landscapes in their specificity. Such a move would challenge methodologically the absence of the materiality of exploitation in the visual language which the article so thoughtfully highlights, combatting the tendency of discursive analyses to reproduce the elisions they critique. Ultimately however, this challenge likely stems from the ambitious rubric of Aukland-Peck’s project, which draws together British imperialism, the commodity fetish, print culture, British landscape traditions, environmental history, the rise of the multinational corporation, cartography, and a form of the military-industrial complex worked through both the landscape and its artistic-commercial representations. I’m looking forward to seeing the directions in which each of these analytics are expanded in future work.