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The Landscapes & Material Culture of Empire

a response by Rachel Winter

Tobah Aukland-Peck's essay offers a fascinating inquiry into empire through posters and seashells, seemingly mundane objects tied to a complex history of travel, advertising, oil, and empire. No longer solely the domain of Romantic painting wistfully imagining the expanses of empire under the guise of a serene landscape, this paper focuses on an aspect of material culture not often studied. Aukland-Peck argues that the "bucolic" domestic landscapes pictured throughout a number of posters advertising Shell's enterprises neglected to depict the ravages wrought on the landscape by empire and capital in an effort to achieve material and corporate gain at a moment of Britain's anxiety about its own status. Focusing on posters with their catchy phrases designed to foster interest in Britain, Aukland-Peck shifts our way of thinking about the proliferation of empire towards the innocuous nature of cost-effective, reproducible media. The "visual responses to war within the pastoral nostalgia", as so poignantly articulated by the author, point towards the dialectical constructions laden within the imperial geography of empire and its visual culture. The presence of a peaceful landscape reveals a dialect of destruction; through visions of the countryside, the absence of imperial geography becomes present; and the relationship between the metropole and colony, as well as urban and rural, continue to be co-constitutive.

Through its foray into empire, land, corporations, tourism, and the exploitation of natural resources, the tenets of this paper create a framework for analyzing other material cultures of empires, such as photography and its role in the Middle East. Photography and posters are two sides of the same material culture coin in their

ability to envision empire through their dialectical absence of violence and their reproducibility. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century, European photographers in the Middle East captured romantic visions of vast spaces, occasionally with verdant greenery, others with the disintegrating remains of archaeological sites, and some of people inhabiting the idyllic land. Photographs were used to affirm religious beliefs, document a fleeting moment, or research terrain that would become the subject of empire's conquests. Reviewing the ordinary objects and landscapes in photographs of the Middle East demystified the region for European audiences while also sparking imaginations about a new land that could be used in service of empire and capital.

Aukland-Peck's critical analytics around capital, nature, power, memory, and exploration begin to illuminate the idyllic landscape seen in a nineteenth-century photograph of the Pools of Solomon in the West Bank made in Maison Bonfils, the studio of Félix Bonfils (fig. 1). The sepia-toned image depicts a barren landscape against a clear sky divided by a body of water. However, the once verdant landscape is now decaying, with dry shrubs, sand, and rocky hills. The water is not a natural feature, but rather, three manmade pools work as reservoirs and aqueducts fed by multiple streams that formerly facilitated the flow of water into Bethlehem and the old parts of Jerusalem, although its dispersal capabilities are now limited. Framed by a shaded box and inscribed with Palestine, what is beyond the "bucolic" landscape, to adopt Aukland-Peck's term, cues the viewer to landscape's location.

The formal qualities of *Pools of Solomon* resonate with the examples set out by Aukland-Peck, capturing similar concerns around empire, violence, and its consequences across different landscapes. Bonfils captures the jagged nature of the landscape, as does Nash, both also cognizant of water and its centrality. The use of a monochrome palette, be it in black and white or sepia, also captures the landscape in a seemingly timeless moment that incites interest in an environment yet to be explored. These photographers share visions of landscapes in which visual evidence of then contemporaneous acts of violence are absent, yet paradoxically, this omission suggests the potential for future exploitation symbolized by the open space. For *Pools of Solomon*, the violence is embodied in the land through the harm rendered in order to construct the artificial water channels, a trauma which is dialectically absent. If the British landscape would be capitalized on by oil tycoons, then Solomon's pools would be the site for fiscal gain as a tourist landmark now managed by Bethlehem Convention Palace, or Convention Palace Company, an event planning company in the West Bank that administers the pools, allowing



Figure 1. Maison Bonfils, *Pools of Solomon*, Ca. 1875, Photographic Print, 10.75 x 13.825 in. University of Chicago Library, Middle East Photograph Archive, Chicago, IL. Image courtesy of Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

public access for recreation and leisure. A British artist in his native country, and a French photography studio in what would become the British Mandate of Palestine, both artists aestheticize the land, highlighting its natural beauty while also displaying the natural resources to be exploited, be they oil or water, locating nature in contested global orders, and posing landscape as a site for violence.

Aukland-Peck's essay operates at an important juncture between past, present, and future. Such insights on this historical problem resonate with our present and future, prompting questions about the way empire permeates the now digital visual culture of postmodernity. As notions of materiality evolve in a world shifting towards paperless, what is the new material culture of empire in the twenty-first century digital era? And under globalization, neoliberalism, and even neo-imperialism, what is the new form of empire, or empires? Perhaps there is no singular definition for either material culture or empire as the tumult of the twenty-first century resists any stable definition or consistent interlocutors, particularly in a digital world with its amorphous ephemerality and rapidly evolving crises that continually alter life as we think we know it. Rather, recognizing and interpreting the material

cultures of empire in their diverse forms, just as empire has many modes and locations, creates possibilities for dismantling the hegemonic systems of empires as they evolve, and reclaiming the land from its many forms of violence in the hopes of an alternative future.