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Author

Laberge, Yves

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Review: This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism
By Terre Ryan

Reviewed by Yves Laberge
Québec, Canada G1V 0A6

Ryan, Terre. *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011, xv+171 pp. ISBN: 9781558498730, paperback.

This new book by Professor Terre Ryan (from Loyola University Maryland) is like a celebration of the U.S. landscape and it starts from a moment in 19th century when the population of the United States became fascinated with its environment and its landscapes: “an era when Americans, seduced by their country’s beauty, fell in love with their landscape” (p. 1). Then, the wild American landscapes, as represented in classic and pastoral paintings such as those by Thomas Moran, were idealized and copied, and they naturally “became the aesthetic backdrop of expansionist mythology” (p. 1). In her reflection on American identity and its construction, Terre Ryan coins this concept as the “Manifest Destiny aesthetics” (p. 2). This twofold perspective from the 19th century (“landscape mythology”) is still fundamental nowadays for Ryan who argues that “landscape aesthetics remain so influential in contemporary culture that they may encourage us to view our environment much as expansionist-era boosters viewed it - a stockpile of resources to be exploited or as scenery to be preserved” (p. 4).

Ryans’ linking of images, writings, and American history is what really makes this book special. Starting from there Ryan looks at some of the famous U.S. symbols and places that now constitute the American imagery. She is fully aware of the symbolic role of places such as Mount Rushmore National Memorial in the American nation-building. Reflecting on the power of iconography, she argues that “landscape is as much a collection of ideas and values as a book or a law or anything shaped by human imagination...” (p. 8). This is how Terre Ryan articulates her concept of “*Aesthetics of Patriotism*” to be found in her book’s title; in other words, how patriotism emerges from these landscape paintings (p. 9). Her whole book is like a narrative written in the first person, with some analysis and theoretical insight about the deep, symbolic, inner meanings of these images and commemorating places. In fact, Terre Ryan does not blindly reproduce the discourse of the “founding fathers” and can sometimes be critical towards 19th century mentalities and this legacy of “patriotic totems” (p. 25). Reflecting on Mount Rushmore, she proposes two opposite interpretations: “We may call Mount Rushmore our Shrine of Democracy, but it would be more accurately labelled a monument to white patriarchy and imperialism” (p. 24). The most interesting passages are whenever the author links aspects of the American landscape with previous observations made either by writers or politicians, for example, the 1965 speech about the Highway Beautification Act made by President Lyndon Johnson about the “Natural beauty”, which according to the U.S. President “shapes our values” and also “molds our attitudes” (p. 68).

I was somewhat disappointed, however, with the argumentation because it relies almost exclusively on American scholars, ignoring European theoreticians and historians who have written on the construction of national identity. For example, from a theoretical perspective, it is clear that Terre Ryan is not aware of the fundamental works by historian Pierre Nora who did a whole reflection about national identity in France (translated from French into “*Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire, The State*”, University of Chicago Press [1984]) which have systematically investigated the countless symbols of French national identity, but his theoretical background could be transposed to the USA.

This Ecstatic Nation: the American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism is not meant to serve as a coffee-table book; the few images reproduced here are very small in format, black and white, and not always clear. The focus here is on ideas and symbolic links, as synthesized in the conclusion: “The landscape *is* the narrative” (p. 126). And this does not only apply to the past; there is nowadays a “Green patriotism” as well (p. 130). This original book will obviously be instructive for students in American Studies and creative writing, or for scholars who want to link Environmental Education with Citizenship Education into eco-citizenship.

Yves Laberge, Ph.D. <yves.laberge.1@ulaval.ca>, Centre de recherche en éducation et formation relatives à l’environnement et à l’écocitoyenneté – Centr’ÉRE, Québec, Canada G1V 0A6

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