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NATHANIEL R. RACINE

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The Symbolic Landscape and Usable Past in the Lyrics of Robert Hunter

NATHANIEL R. RACINE

IN THEIR INTRODUCTION TO *A NEW LITERARY HISTORY of America* (2009)—a volume that includes essays on figures such as Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, and Bob Dylan, alongside the names more commonly associated with an anthology of US literature—editors Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors defend their approach to the project and its diversity of subject matter, writing:

American history, literary, social, political, religious, cultural, and technological, has been a matter of what one could make out of it, and of how one got across what he or she meant to say to his or her fellow citizens, as they no less than the speaker struggled to define themselves as individuals, and as part of the whole. (2009, xxiii–xxiv)

What they argue here is noteworthy: It points to the intersection of various disciplines in understanding the larger arc of US cultural history, but so, too, does it point to the intersection between the critical and the artistic endeavor—what the critic can “make out of” her materials and what the artist was trying to “get across.” Both are involved in a process of simultaneously communicating their own individual ideas while participating in the larger culture that produced them, and that they navigate and attempt to understand.

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For some, the shift in perspective offered by Marcus and Sollors may seem radical. Yet their general approach is not without precedent. In certain ways, they are reframing a debate as old as the field of American Studies itself, one that dates back more than a century now. That began before the classic studies of US literature and culture published by Leslie Fiedler, Leo Marx, F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, Constance Rourke, and Henry Nash Smith, among many others writing in the middle decades of the twentieth century—even before the studies of Lewis Mumford and Vernon Louis Parrington in the 1920s that can lay claim to the “foundation” of American Studies as a discipline.¹ In 1918, Van Wyck Brooks published an essay entitled “On Creating a Usable Past,” where he argued:

The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? (Brooks 1999, 215)

The question was timely, pressing, and prescient: the academy was steadily becoming professionalized, but literary studies were already suffering from what Brooks feared was a kind of retrograde conservatism. In asking this question and directly raising the issue, Brooks was inveighing against the state of literary studies in the academy and the deadening effect that many old-guard professors exercised on the contemporary critical imagination. As he saw it, the disconnect between past and present only results in the disconnect between generations of literary scholars; the solution to this academic stagnation is the rediscovery of the past in order to create a common identity derived from overlooked or neglected “inherited resources” (Brooks 1999, 213). Doing so will give living value and relevance to US history. As “the spiritual past has no objective reality,” the critic must ask what is important for the present genera-

tion, finding those tendencies from the history of culture and those ideas most applicable to modern society.

This is what Brooks means by a “usable past.” He challenges: “Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can, and that is what a vital criticism always does” (Brooks 1999, 215). Brooks envisions this process of discovery becoming cyclical, recurring from generation to generation and propelling US culture by way of reimagining its past in the present era and so on into the future. It is an idea of enduring relevance, which is why his essay was republished in 1999, and why it also serves as a useful way of reading, or listening to, the lyrics that Robert Hunter composed for the Grateful Dead. Hunter once described his project as “[an] improbable dream ... to aid and abet a unified indigenous American, or at least Western, music, drawing on all bona fide traditional currents including pop” (Hunter 2005, xi). It may have been aspirational, but his vision was nonetheless very real. It was a search for historical continuity in songwriting, partaking in a tradition while also participating in and contributing to the present; in other words, the reclamation—and reinvention—of a usable past.

His allusions outline that effort. In the same essay, Hunter cites his “good memory” and his “knack” for remembering song lyrics, including “most of the popular songs of the forties and fifties and ... most of the classics of the swing era,” not to mention the “untold number of folk songs during the folk revival of the sixties.” For this reason, he explains, “it’s small wonder that my songs are often fraught with allusions” (2005, xii). Tracing the almost endless litany of allusions in the prolific writings of a lyricist whose goal was the creation of a unified “indigenous American, or at least Western, music” will lead the listener through countless patterns and paths from the European tradition in the New World, and also necessitates some consideration of the Eastern traditions that influenced US culture. Following

these lines of influence and mapping the constellations of ideas and thought they produce is one way to think about the allusions made in Hunter's lyrics (as well as within the American songbook—and songbag—more generally). To speak of history and culture, however, requires some consideration of geography, and that is my focus here.

Typically, one would want a map to aid in geographical exploration, yet any sort of map drawn from Hunter's lyrics would serve only to reveal the complexity of cultural influences found in the allusions—a complexity whose broad expanse has already come into focus through the hundreds of papers, essays, and volumes comprising *Grateful Dead* studies. Such a map might result in a dazzling kaleidoscopic pattern, but it would likely be cartographically chaotic and not leave us with any deeper understanding. In that scenario, landscape would be a point of departure only, and would not require us to return to it. The allusions would merely form a part of some hypothesis regarding language and poetics; they would not situate us in the reality of the world evoked, even if that world might in fact be imagined—the symbolic is just as real in terms of a culture's sense of identity.

In his essay "Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind's Eye" (1979), geographer Yi-Fu Tuan addressed this idea. For Tuan, "pictures in themselves offer only superficial information" but the written word can offer "a mental image in which visual elements of the landscape suggest, and are interwoven with, relations and values that cannot be seen" (Tuan 1979, 93). This offers a more useful geographical perspective for understanding the strong sense of place evoked in Hunter's lyrics—or really, in any poetic expression that achieves that effect.

Hunter constructs the world found in his lyrics through language—and language is symbolic by nature. Tuan reminds us:

Of man's symbolic systems only the verbal kind is subtle and flexible enough to articulate such a world. We hear it said that a picture speaks

a thousand words; true, but only because we have language and use words. If we were not linguistic animals, visual images could not carry even a small fraction of the meaning that they often have for us. (Tuan 1979, 93–94)

In this sense, a strict analysis of the place names and their origins and meanings, while interesting for many reasons as toponymy, does little for the listener confronted by the many place names that dot the landscape of Hunter's lyrics. More evocative are the images that have subsequently attached themselves to these names over the course of history. Hunter suggested as much, writing:

A song is only ever fully realized when it belongs to everyone whose language it inhabits. Which is as much as to say: Few songs are ever fully realized. More than simple creative acts, they are acts of accretion, moss-covered and lichen-bearing bits of interstellar matter, living beings of word and harmony. (Hunter 2005, xv)

These sets of images—accretions, as Hunter calls them—are the symbolic landscape that concerns us here.

In the fields of landscape studies and cultural geography, the symbolic landscape exists somewhere between the mythical landscapes of the imagination and the real landscapes of the continent's physical environment. The symbolic landscape solidifies over time, forming an impression that is held in the collective imagination—what geographer D. W. Meinig describes as "the kinds of landscape images widely employed because they are assumed to convey certain meanings" (Meinig 1979, 164). The landscapes of the many places evoked in Hunter's lyrics are important as specific environments in which different facets of US culture have grown and developed over hundreds of years, but so too are they important as symbolic landscapes, as they come to represent and communicate "something which is widely appreciated" and suggest "not just something important in our past, but a visible bond between past and present" (Meinig 1979, 165).

When we consider the actual places named in Hunter's lyrics—Abilene, Buffalo, Cheyenne, Chicago, Cumberland, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Memphis, New Orleans, New York, Reno, Santa Fe, Tucson, Tulsa, Wichita—we should also note those that are fictional, such as Saint Angel in “Black Peter” (1970) or the Bigfoot County of “Brown-Eyed Women” (1971). The alliterative Sycamore Slough, Shadowfall Ward, and Seminole Square found in “Lazy River Road” (1993) two decades later play this role as well. None of these can be found on any known map, but the listener instinctively knows where they are; and as neighbors of the actual in this symbolic landscape of Hunter's words, they gain the same “moss-covered and lichen-bearing” qualities of their real-world counterparts.

Perhaps the most prominent and well-loved example is Fennario. Appearing in both the Grateful Dead's arrangement of “Peggy-O” (1973) and their original song, “Dire Wolf” (1969), Fennario is “mythic territory,” according to Hunter. It is the same expansive but undefined geographical location that includes the riverside where Uncle John's Band plays, “a peculiar place where Appalachia met immigrant Scottish, English, Welsh, and Irish folk traditions” (Hunter 2005, xx).

In Alan Trist and David Dodd's *Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* (2005), the footnote for Fennario ventures a “folk etymology” for the term that combines imagery drawn from throughout Hunter's lyrics to describe “a rural, wooded, marshy region of the imagination, which bears no particular relation to the actual geographic ‘Fenario’ referred to in the ‘Peggy-O’ folk song lyric and its variants” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 83). More interesting is the suggestion the footnote offers, citing a 1990 interview with Alan Trist, who points listeners to Alan Lomax's work as a folklorist:

[Lomax] suggests that *Fennario* is a perfect place-name, if you need a generic name for an

indeterminate place, because it has four syllables: fen-na-ri-o. If you need a three-syllable place-name, you might use “Fyvie-O.” So Fennario is a place in the imagination. The syllabic imagination, perhaps. (Trist and Dodd 2005, 84)²

Continuing, Trist observes, “You were hoping it was a real place that had a lot attached to it. Well, I think you can attach those things to it yourself. It's a very evocative name” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 84). Trist's idea of a “syllabic imagination” would therefore seem, in song and poetry, to be integral in the formation of the symbolic landscape.

Yet, any understanding of place in Hunter's lyrics must account for the constant sense of movement and travel evoked in his songs, which would undercut or even contradict the impulse toward fixity implied by a strong sense of place. A rolling stone, after all, gathers no moss (or lichen). Here, Tuan is again helpful. In his influential book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), he articulates the relationship between movement and place, drawing attention to the different ways in which we might think about these two interrelated aspects of experience:

If time is conceived as flow or movement then place is pause. In this view human life is marked by stages as human movement in space is marked by pauses. Just as time may be represented by an arrow, a circular orbit, or the path of a swinging pendulum, so may movements in space; and each representation has its characteristic set of pauses or places. (Tuan 1977, 198)

These patterns that Tuan identifies help us understand the patterns of movement found throughout Hunter's engagement with the American landscape. The most prominent example might be found in lines from “Truckin'” (1970). Here, the speaker travels a route along “Main Street,” which stretches through Chicago, New York, and Detroit. Later, he will recall Dallas, Houston, and New Orleans, before heading back to New York and, later, Buffalo. For the speaker, these cities are

“all on the same street” and are all collectively the “typical city”; and so, while the song inarguably revolves around movement, one of its dominant images is, nevertheless, that of home. Although the speaker feels the constant tug of the road, calling him to “get back truckin’ on,” he does so only after he has returned home, “back where I belong” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 131–133).

Here, home is a place to pause on the “circular orbit” of the speaker’s constant journeying, which would appear to be the defining characteristic of his experience. As Tuan writes, “Most movements complete a more or less circular path, or swing back and forth like a pendulum” (Tuan 1977, 180). Any lesson—any meaning or lack thereof—is found at the moment when the circle is completed, or at the moment when the pendulum stops before swinging back the other way. This resonates with the journeying of a touring rock and roll group and the nomadic existence of bands who made their living on the road like the Grateful Dead.³ Yet, Tuan also reminds us that:

The nomad’s world consists of places connected by a path. Do nomads, who are frequently on the move, have a strong sense of place? Quite possibly. Nomads move, but they move within a circumscribed area ... the cyclical exigencies of [their] life yield a sense of place at two scales: the camps and the far larger territory within which they move. (Tuan 1977, 182)

Perhaps one of the most comforting moments of pause and reflection in Hunter’s lyrics is the invitation to “Come hear Uncle John’s Band,” to sit and rest “by the riverside,” itself a complicated image whose open-ended qualities Gary Burnett (2003) has explored.⁴ The banks of the riverside are never described but are nonetheless richly evoked when one imagines stopping to listen, somewhere in that “peculiar place where Appalachia” met immigrant European folk traditions—and that now encompasses the country as a whole. Uncle John has, after all, “come to take his children home.” If home is in some sense perma-

nent, a place that persists despite larger historical forces, it is where one finds one’s past, a place where the music plays and evokes certain shared emotions and a collective awareness. It is a place where, as Hunter puts it, these lyrics “verbalize, in a way deeply meaningful to me, one of the ongoing agendas of life, the coaxing and cajoling of the forces of generational unity” (Hunter 2005, xix).

That collective awareness spans more than a single generation. Home may be the US itself, but it may also encompass the vastly different places that the word might evoke for many listeners. This personal, individual aspect of interpretation is critical. Van Wyck Brooks’ idea of the usable past asks us to consider, “What is important for us?”

What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we to elect to remember? The more personally we answer this question, it seems to me, the more likely we are to get a vital order out of the anarchy of the present. (Brooks 1999, 216)

The “vital order” amid the “anarchy” could be something very much like the idea of “home” articulated above, whether it is the place to patch one’s bones in “Truckin’” or the place toward which one turns after travelling through the “many worlds” remembered by the speaker in “Brokedown Palace” (1970). In all of the travel, all of the movement—all the speeding arrows, all the swings of the pendulum, all the trips around the sun—what we need is a place to pause, to carve out a space in the world in which order can be created. Amid our travels, we seek that one road out of so many that might lead home.

In the inventory of place-names listed above, San Francisco did not appear—a deliberate omission. That city always remained personal to Hunter, Garcia, and the Grateful Dead. To list it alongside those other cities would be to misstate the vital sense of place it provided, and provides, the people behind these songs. As the speaker

reminds us in “Mission in the Rain” (1976):

There’s some satisfaction
in the San Francisco rain
No matter what comes down
the Mission always looks the same
(Trist and Dodd 2005, 260)

Perhaps even more striking is the imagery in “Standing on the Moon” (1989), where the speaker’s extraterrestrial perspective allows him to consider the whole of planet Earth. While tracing the shores of the Gulf of Mexico and the coast of California, he also sees Southeast Asia and El Salvador, drawing the listener’s attention to the suffering and war that persist from generation to generation—yet the most tangible image in the song is that of home, “Somewhere in San Francisco / On a back porch in July” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 351).

This essay focuses on everyday, ordinary images and the possible meanings they evoke. That focus is part of what the perspective of cultural geography can provide: an understanding of—or at least an appreciation for—the profundity of these images and allusions. They are shared by the collective consciousness of a people in a place at a time—here, specifically in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. Tuan’s emphasis on the importance of landscape and its symbolic value is relevant here as well. He asks, “Why should we want to make a landscape a focal interest? Why study it, why does it seem worthy of our close attention?” (Tuan 1979, 101). His “tentative answer” suggests that:

Yearning for a human habitat is perhaps universal. Such a habitat must be able to support a livelihood and yet cater to our moral and aesthetic nature. When we think of an ideal place in the abstract, the temptation to oversimplify and dream is well nigh irresistible. Dire consequences ensue when that dream is set prematurely in concrete. Landscape allows and even encourages us to dream. It does function as a point of departure. Yet it can anchor our atten-

tion because it has components that we can see and touch. As we first let our thoughts wander and then refocus them on the landscape, we learn to see not only how complex and various are the ways of human living but also how difficult it is to achieve anywhere a habitat consonant with the full potential of our being. (Tuan 1979, 101)

What might be the “full potential” of the beings dreaming the landscape mapped by Hunter’s lyrics? In the context of the larger countercultural movement of the 1960s that shaped the emergence of the Grateful Dead, perhaps it is the idea of bringing great social and political change to a world in dire need of both. Such change could only be possible in the US by recognizing the existence of a cultural past, engaging the present with its future possibilities, whether or not the “full potential” of the dream can ever be achieved. In Hunter’s lyrics, we have a glimpse of what that might look like.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was given at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association, Albuquerque, NM, February 20, 2020.

1. Parrington’s three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927) is typically cited as the foundational text of the fundamentally interdisciplinary field of American Studies. The first sentences of his introduction are frequently cited in this context, as he approaches “the genesis and development in American letters of certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American” from a broadly historical perspective that encompasses political, economic, and social considerations, “forces that are anterior to literary schools and movements, creating the body of ideas from which literary culture eventually springs” (Parrington 1927, iii). Lewis Mumford’s *Golden Day* (1926) also deserves inclusion here as a model for subsequent interdisciplinary study. In his introductory note he writes, “This book rounds out the study of American life begun in *Sticks and Stones*. Where in the first book I used architecture as an index

of our civilization, in *The Golden Day* I have treated imaginative literature and philosophy as a key to our culture” (Mumford 1926, 3).

2. For the original interview with Trist, see Gans (1996). In a July 2022 email to the Working Papers Editor, Trist explained that he had been provided with the question in advance and had confirmed Hunter’s reference to Lomax directly with Hunter. Hunter was often vague in his details, however, and there is no work by Lomax entitled *Song Archivist*, although the larger point about Lomax’s interest in the syllabic economy, efficiency, and other aspects of folk song lyrics is well documented in his writings. In his *Folk Song Style and Culture*, he noted that throughout Europe, “folk song style had a distinctive model of vowel color which held the frequencies of the vowels in its songs to a certain proportion” (Lomax 1968, ix).

3. Both Jacob A. Cohen (2012) and Mark Tursi (2012) consider the nomadic aspects of the Grateful Dead in terms of the audience, the committed Deadheads who followed the band across the country, illuminating the nature of space and place on tour. Cohen traces this nomadism through geography, directly engaging with Tuan’s writings and including other influential geographers such as Doreen Massey. Tursi approaches the same theme in terms of the characteristically counter-cultural quality of Deadhead culture, drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to theorize the place this audience occupies—both literally and metaphorically—in US culture.

4. For the larger context of Burnett’s paper, see Meriwether (2013).

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