Landscape and Branding: The Promotion and Production of Place, by Nicole Porter, London, Routledge, 2016, 239 pp.

In her final interlude in *Landscape and Branding* Nicole Porter describes a moment walking along a track in the Blue Mountains when a 'large droplet of water silently descended from a clifftop… launching itself into the void and plummeting downward before landing directly on my head' (p. 216). The cold droplet permeated her hair and skin and made her laugh out loud, 'it was like the landscape had entered my head, taken over my body and used it to laugh. The wilderness and I were laughing together'. The vignette evokes a tension that runs through Porter's original account of branding Australia's Blue Mountains landscape. Are those moments where humans are affected by sublime wild spaces, moments that resist representation, beyond the reach of the calculative logic of brands?

Porter argues that landscapes are cultural artefacts that codify the natural environment as representations and programmed experiences. Landscapes are produced through techniques like painting and photography, and via the creation of infrastructure like tracks, signage and lookouts. Landscape painters, photographers and designers standardise the visual and affective experience of wild spaces. Landscapes then are an interface through which the material world is rendered available for human experience, judgment and marketization. In some respects, landscape is the cultural technique through which the sublime, majestic and terrifying nature of wilderness is rendered available for human contemplation and consumption.

Porter's historical conceptualisation lays the groundwork for understanding branding as a process that draws on the representation and design techniques of landscape production: painting, photography, design and architecture (chapters 1 and 2). Porter explores Australia's Blue Mountains as 'an abstract 'brand', a pictorialized image, a televised landscape, a cinematic landscape, and a collection of designed and managed physical sites'. The Blue Mountains prove to be an especially provocative setting in which to work through a critique of branding. The national park is over a million hectares of protected wilderness made up of deep valleys and chasms, dense eucalypt forests, sheer cliffs and ancient sandstone formations. The mountains are an early frontier in the conflict between indigenous groups and their connection to country and the settler use of land production of landscapes.

The Blue Mountains were first populated by 'six Aboriginal language groups… tens of thousands of years ago'. These groups 'perceive of the area as a being rich in meaning and value, from ancestral creation myths and spirits through to an intricate knowledge of sources of food and medicine in the landscape'. Europeans first 'crossed the mountains in 1813'. Aboriginal history since this moment has been one of 'appropriation of homelands, dislocation, dispersal, and the loss of many languages' (p. 20).

Europeans brought their practices and technologies of landscaping to bear on the Blue Mountains. Their instrumental need to use the area as a corridor to agricultural land that lay beyond the range. Their aesthetic interest in contemplating the sublime wonder and terror of the geological formations with painting, photography and lookouts. Their cultural interest in the benefits of time spent in nature. Their economic interest in walking tracks, lodges and tourism. Evident in Porter's account is European settler efforts to colonise a strange continent. Set in this history, the Blue Mountains

brand begins its incubation with these early European practices of representing, modifying and producing the Blue Mountains as a landscape.

Reading Porter's account of this history I found myself thinking about Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012: 8) critical account of brand culture that aims not so much at symbolic appropriation but at the process through which brands reformat cultural life within market processes. Porter, although not engaged with Banet-Weiser, contributes an historical understanding of brand culture by carefully working through how a landscape with indigenous and settler histories, gets reconfigured within brand culture. Porter prompted me to think about how the colonial process of representing and modifying wilderness as culture is a kind of pre-history to the brand culture of Australia's landscapes.

Porter's account illuminates two intriguing points of tension in how we understand brand culture. The first is the difference that emerges between the labour of brand consultants and landscape designers. Both are critical labourers in the production and management of the Blue Mountains brand. In Porter's granular analysis of the Blue Mountains brand manuals she documents how brand consultants create a set of procedures for standardising a symbolic brand (chapters 3 and 4). The manuals specify colour palettes, fonts, words, image perspectives, signage and street furniture that are suitable for use within the brand framework. In doing so, they enact a form of brand management that operates and exerts control at the symbolic level. By contrast, designers and architects often work outside of the exact specifications of the manuals where they judge it necessary to design public spaces in-keeping with the natural environment or existing village character.

Where the brand consultant manages the brand as a set of symbols that *represent* an idealised landscape, the landscape designer manages the brand as an infrastructure *within* the lived experience of a landscape. This is an intriguing dynamic in Porter's account through chapters 3 to 7 because the impression it creates, at least for me, is that the landscape designers build a more durable and productive brand. Rather than adhere to restrictive symbolic coordinates, they create the infrastructural underlay for a range of encounters with the landscape. Landscape techniques – perspectives, tracks and lookouts – act as interfaces between the sublime and historically conditioned qualities of wilderness and the market formations brands aim to organise. Porter sets up this tension at the outset (p. 9) asking both how landscapes function as representational promotional objects and how landscape designers produce landscapes as components of branded spaces. Landscape designers prove to be critical actors in Porter's account because where they operate outside of the standard procedures of the Blue Mountains brand they do the creative work of adapting the brand to the cultural and material terrain. To borrow Banet-Weiser's (2012) concept, the landscape designer is an 'ambivalent' figure. They both weave landscapes more deeply into brand culture and are critical in the production of landscapes outside of the market logic of brands.

Porter documents the many ways in which the Blue Mountains brand borrows conventions from global place and destination branding. Yet, perhaps most original in the account is how standard place branding strategies sit in relation to the brand's dependence on the specific historical configuration of the Blue Mountains as a landscape. In the 1920s lookouts at key vantage points like Echo Point were built as representational frames for visitors, cantilevered platforms suspended visitors above the void, cliff formations were floodlit at night, and trees were lopped to increase visibility. The construction of lookouts were influenced 'by a general trend towards sublime mountain photography, which was in turn influenced by landscape painting traditions' (p. 105). Lookouts produced a representational frame for landscapes from European painting and photography. Even in these early modifications we can see the market as a force in the production of landscapes. Porter explains that trustees of the park 'went to considerable lengths to manipulate the

natural landscape so that it would conform to the picturesque aesthetic expectations of visitors' (p. 69).

In colonial Australia these landscape modifications served interdependent cultural and commercial purposes, constructing picturesque viewpoints and accessible walking tracks, facilitated 'access into the Australian landscape at a difficult time when many colonists still considered the bush unattractive and difficult' (p. 74). Porter documents how, over time, the 'sublime darkness' of the early colonial landscape becomes muted in the contemporary branded landscape. If the sublime experience of landscape spoke to a realm beyond human contemplation, the branded landscape speaks to the private domain of 'self-transformation' (p. 87). The branded landscape seeks to satisfy rather than unsettle the visitor. Porter argues convincingly that the sublime darkness of the Blue Mountains for settlers, the history of indigenous-settler relations, and the living indigenous connection to country are not easily codified by the standard operating procedure of brand manuals. These aspects of history become muted in the standard operating procedure of the brand.

Porter's analysis leads her to argue that 'the result of creating and co-opting landscapes as brands in this manner is a trend towards evermore predefined, systematic landscape ideas and experiences, which simultaneously mask their own prescriptiveness by giving the impression of greater variety, interactive choice and authenticity' (p. 185). Porter's contribution is to mark out how this deployment of landscape within the logic of branding is both a representational and architectural process. Both the creation of images of the landscape in films and promotional photography, and the design of walking tracks, lookouts and resorts that codify encounters with wilderness.

Porter hopes to find promise in landscape architecture as an antidote to the totalising logic of brands that 'engulf' space and culture (p. 231). In this spirit, she argues that (p. 232):

> The challenge of landscape architects is to produce experiential settings and symbolic references that avoid the excessiveness of branding's demographically led, media-friendly reductionism and stereotyping. The work of landscape architects must resist this form-follows-focus-group value system which branding's approach to cultural production typifies. It must continue to experiment with the inherent multi-dimensional qualities of physical space without resorting to the unified, simplistic application of logos, consistent motifs or simplified place brand interpretations of 'community' or 'nature'.' Instead, landscape architecture should 'encourage alternative ways of conceiving and perceiving landscapes.

The impulse to argue for the multi-dimensional qualities of space is a critically important one. Although, here critical questions emerge about how these creative design processes nevertheless contribute to the creation of brands that are more deeply interwoven into our cultural world. Porter's prescription for landscape architecture can be easily re-read as a brief for a hyper-efficient, participatory and reflexive brand consisting of ever-evolving stories, memories and sensations (p. 232). The landscape architects in Porter's account demonstrate how brands' efforts to standardise qualities need to go beyond standardising the symbolic procedures of representations. Landscape architects create the sensory infrastructure through which wilderness becomes incorporated into the larger logics of brand culture. Porter's invocation of the capacity of architects to model the 'multidimensional qualities of space' echoes Lury's argument that branding is the process of modelling markets in many dimensions (2009). Landscape architecture is an interface between human cultural sensibilities and non-human wilderness.

The question then is how to defend landscape design as a critical point of reference *against* the way brands reconfigure landscape as a resource for commercial exploitation. And, to account for this in a market system where landscape architecture is a key part of configuring the commercialisation of space. Porter's work here is provocative because it gives pause to contemplate the range of cultural and creative professions that now do the work of creating the technologies and infrastructure of brand culture. Brands will ask landscape architects to reformat wild spaces as platforms for organising private exchange. In the case of wilderness, landscape architects are asked to develop the infrastructure though which wilderness becomes a site for the self-transformation of middle-class consumers.

In this setting, the landscape architect has an important role to play in maintaining an open-ended cultural infrastructure, one that enables other encounters with the landscape. And, this needs to play out with regard to the specific histories and qualities of landscapes. The Blue Mountains is one of many wild spaces in Australia where questions about indigenous-settler and human-nature relations might be provoked and worked out. The reformatting of the Blue Mountains via the logic of brands turns it into a space where individuals are invited to work on themselves, rather than contemplate the histories and natural systems beyond their immediate experience (Chouliaraki 2012). That Porter's work raises these questions, by intersecting the history of landscape and the processes of branding, is a testament to its value as part of the scholarly and political efforts to understand and critique brand culture.

References

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