

## Reimagining Landscape

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Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 283 pages.

*Sowing Empire* is a book about “landscaping, diasporic movement, and memory,” so it is fitting that its flow is fragmented and, to echo Casid’s use of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the intractable “rhizome,” is in a process of “becoming” itself. Casid’s rhizomic, excursive writing and organization may appeal to some readers, but the book’s form inhibits its revolutionary function—to clarify “how to relandscape the overdetermined ‘garden’ we may most want to displace” [p. 241]. Nonetheless, despite the challenge of navigating Casid’s arguments and jargon, her first book is an impressive product of interdisciplinary synergy and research, inspired by an obvious passion for the material that keeps the reader going.

Like modern colonialism itself, this book starts with a vision, a dream. Casid mimics the logic of the notion that “the ‘New World’ was invented before it was ‘discovered’” [p. xi]. If ideas come before reality, *Sowing Empire* is a vision of a future that could help undo some of the oppressive colonial landscaping and botanical practices that she details in the first three chapters of the book. Revolution must be envisioned before it can happen, and Casid’s attempt to alter the world begins with a text—her book. Alteration is not merely a material event. “The colonial landscape was planted and replanted not only through successive eras of colonial plantation, [...] but through forms of reproductive print, visual and textual” [p. 2] she begins. Images precede and may alter, even if they fail to replace, material reality. In Casid’s thesis, images of 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial Caribbean landscapes served as “vehicles for the dissemination and production of imperial power” [p. 2]. “It is not merely that landscape views are like paintings,” Casid explains, “but that the colonial transformation of the landscape becomes art” [p. 60].

What is original about what Casid does with this thesis emerges in her final two chapters. There she considers “potential counterdiscourses of landscape” in both the periphery and the core of 18<sup>th</sup> century European empire, from William Shenstone’s Leasowes in England—a queer “joke” on the imperialist, heteronormative, seed-sowing georgic ideal—to the “countercolonial landscapes” of slave gardens, maroon farming, and Vodou botanical practices in Jamaica. These examples of inversions and resistances to colonial landscaping illustrate how imperial power was exercised through land, but they also endow activities of the deviant “other” with revolutionary value. Most importantly, perhaps, they beg to be mimicked in the future.

In her fourth chapter, “Some Queer Versions of the Georgic,” Casid displays her interdisciplinary agility. She playfully “sexes” Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*, contributing a much-needed queer theory perspective to landscape history. Such a perspective challenges the notion that “the performative field of queer construction and contestation remains the assumed-to-be ungrounded, rhizomic, anonymous, and deterritorialized streets, sheets, back alleys, clubs, and red-light districts of the urban metropole” [p. 129].

Extending Williams' "dialectical materialism," which suggests that the English city and countryside materially and figuratively construct each other, Casid argues that the countrysides of the imperial core are as important to investigate as its cities. Sexualized notions of fertility and productivity—fortified by masculine cultivation of the *periphery*—were at least as tenacious in the countryside of the empire's core as they were in its cities. In the gardening practices—transplantation, grafting, and hybridizing [p. 130]—of European elites, Casid finds mimicry of, and resistance to, the sexual expressions of empire. "Taking on the georgic," she concludes, is "an opportunity to queer the 'master' discourses of nature and political economy to expose their inherent instability and to open up this terrain again as a space for the production of queer fruit" [p.168]. If the georgic equation of family-farm-nation emboldened empire, then "queering the georgic" was a form of resistance in the metropole that helped "upset [...] the center-periphery division" [p. 134]. Casid's queering of the country challenges the myth that the land is the soil from which masculinity, nationalism, and heterosexuality "naturally" grow. Nature can also cultivate resistance.

And Casid finds that countercolonial landscape practices in the core are dialectically related to those in the periphery. Just as "sexing the country" resisted colonial power in the core, maroon and slave landscape practices resisted empire in the periphery by "poach[ing] power from the colonial landscape machine on the master's own terrain" [p. 214]. Nomadic gardening, Vodou botanical knowledge, the alternative planting technologies of maroon communities, and slave uses of so-called "provisional gardens" are examples of peripheral tactics that Casid explores in the fifth chapter, "Countercolonial Landscapes," to show how landscape literally provided the ground on which resistance could be enacted and agency exercised.

By showing that the periphery resisted empire, often by subverting the landscape practices of the core, Casid helps to revise the misconception that indigenous and slave practices are unproductive, deviant, or spurious. That resistance could occur on botanical terms provides a fruitful insight for reading colonial history but also reinforces contemporary efforts to counter "environmental imperialism." Casid's argument about 18<sup>th</sup> century European imperialism in the Caribbean can be read as a warning against the "green imperialism" of our own time, where Western notions of what counts as good environmental management are often paternalistically imposed as environmental management in developing countries, which are seen as not competent to manage their own resources.

However, Casid does not explore the link between her accounts in *Sowing Empire* and comparable indigenous histories, or between agricultural imperialism and current neoliberal environmental policies, such as "debt-for-nature" swaps and carbon sequestering enclosures that similarly exploit "peripheral" resources for the benefit of the "core"—the First World. By not exploring the ways that the effects of global capitalism on postcolonial landscapes are the legacy of the colonial practices she describes so richly, Casid passes up an important chance to translate the book's "dream" into reality.

As a text, *Sowing Empire* is as fragmented and hard to read as a dream. Better clarity would make Casid's messages accessible to readers who are not fluent in the discourses of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. And, a more thoughtful grounding in the economic legacies of colonial land practices would have addressed the "so what?" question this book otherwise ignores. In the end, though, as a dream of the future, *Sowing Empire* is hopeful and

full of creative connections between ideas, disciplines, readings, visions, and images, all of which Casid, for better or worse, helps “become” imaginable.