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Self-De(con)structing Vegas
By Jess Bier

At this year's AAG annual meeting, I was more aware than ever of the fact academics work is just that— labor (Peet 2008).¹ The kinds of topics that academics deal with are at the behest of capitalism, even down to the decisions that are made before ever starting a proposal. As such, the gaps in the AAG conference booklet, as in any conference booklet, were especially glaring this time around— such as the lack of any major sessions devoted to the Middle East, after several successful years of holding similar sessions, as well as the reduced number of presentations overall owing in part to the current recession. It is fitting then that the conference was in Las Vegas, because the city itself was originally conceived as an absence.

Las Vegas received its first major boom as a tacitly-approved (but publicly condemned) weekend getaway for construction workers on the Hoover Dam, then called the Boulder Dam (Cooper 2004). It was one alternative to the strict hierarchical organization of the build site, and the rules of society in general, a town whose greatest asset was the fact that it was not the West Coast, not the East Coast, not the South, and not the Midwest. Las Vegas, as it developed, was an absence in the map of the U.S. that was notable only because, within the continental boundaries, it was *not* anywhere else. But if Vegas has long represented the Wild West, and was until recently one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S., in the past year it has carried that legacy to its ultimate conclusion: these days, Vegas is a ghost town.

Over the past twenty years, Las Vegas has disney-fied itself, selling VIP tickets to the dynamiting of historic hotels, so that guests can drink champagne under the swing of the wrecking ball. And lately, in the abortive attempt to super-size itself yet again, Vegas has become the site of several behemoth construction projects that would have provided it with a series of sequels to the pre-existing half-full hotels. But now, thanks to the flailing economy, Vegas is under deconstruction— namely, the process by which a city-wide construction pit,

¹ I would like to thank Elinore Pedro for her comments on this piece and also for trudging across Las Vegas with me.

deserted under lock and chain-link fence, abandons itself to ruin. David Harvey has shown how healthy capitalism is always an ongoing production, a constant shuttling between liquid and fixed capital, the latter often in the form of buildings (Harvey 1990). So he would no doubt recognize the implications of the dank holes that now abound in Vegas– bulldozers, excavators, cranes, and trailers all empty of their operators– where skeletal steel frames wait beneath enormous sheets of tarp poked with holes to let the wind through in the interim.

Las Vegas is incapable of simply waiting, however, so it self-destructs. This essay plots the contours of that destruction at three scales where the overt and the hidden aspects of Vegas meet, the fault lines of Vegas' self-de(con)struction: beginning with the divide between the city proper and the tight Strip of casino-hotels, then moving inwards to the back stairwells and service entrances of those same casinos, before pushing outward to consider the relationship between Las Vegas on the whole and the surrounding desert. This essay maps these frontiers by deconstructing not a text, but a bright self-engorging sprawl delimited by the springs, lakes, and mountain ranges that form the basin known as the Las Vegas Valley (Derrida 1998; Peirce 1991; Soja 2000). If there is sense in the absences it yields, it is the sense whereby everything is organized willy-nilly around a single, fictitious principle that is forever imploding in on itself. In short, it is the nonsense of Capital, with a capital 'C', in an upside-down world where aporias reign and contradictions are the only constant (Galeano 2001).² Las Vegas is one epitome of the contradictions of contemporary U.S. capitalism. So, if I use reason in my attempts to analyze the city, it is only out of habit.

When Foucault (Foucault 2001) wrote *Discipline and Punish*, he based his research in part on Eastern State Penitentiary outside of Philadelphia, which in its time was touted as the first fully modern prison. Eastern State is now a museum, complete with an audio tour which points out in a suave voice that, while it was in operation, the prison was essentially the precursor to the spaceship because it had to house, feed, clothe, and otherwise keep in breathing order, more individuals than had ever been fully supported at that time in the U.S. in

² For example, the fact that bankers laying waste to the disposable income of the working class is considered a condition of freedom.

a single facility. It was the first Biodome. Other inheritors of this tradition, built environments that cater to every aspect of human survival, include the gigantic ocean liners of the early 20th-century— notably, the *Titanic*— as well as the World's Fairs, traveling carnivals, and their successors, the major amusement parks, and ultimately, the hotel-casinos of Las Vegas. This legacy is reflected in the exoticisms of the Strip, inherited directly from the World's Fairs, and its representations of regions like the Asia-Pacific (Mandalay Bay), the Middle East (Luxor, The Sahara), Europe (Paris and The Venetian), The Americas (New York-New York and MGM Grand), and The Caribbean (Treasure Island), among others, which together form the skewed Vegas Map of the World. There is something to be said for playing with time and space, finding ways to reconceive them; but these versions aren't exactly creative. Jammed in along either side of the eight lanes of Las Vegas Boulevard, the Strip literally forces the global map into a single, linear dimension.

But the infamous Strip of hotels and hotels-to-be is the stereotyped version of Vegas. The Strip isn't even located within the Las Vegas city limits, and its owners don't pay Las Vegas taxes (Cooper 2004). Its absences are, namely, the rest of the city: downtown Las Vegas and the surrounding suburbs, including the poor and working-class neighborhoods that are themselves spaceships of a sort— yet ones designed to never *fully* meet anyone's needs. Beyond the strip, miles of strip malls meet the fancy colonies of teetotalling gated communities that are flattened into the desert, suburban plantation-houses that form the Janus-face of the casino economy. As usual, together these areas far outspan that of the still mammoth hotel-casinos; they mushroom out from the strip to such a broad extent that, without the 24-hour-a-day light show, it would be relatively easy to drive haphazardly around Las Vegas and never know the Strip existed.

With that in mind, my ultimate goal here is jump scale, to push out towards the constitutive outside of Vegas' gilded plastic nugget of capital (Luxemburg 2003) to consider the desert, that other self-sustaining spaceship whose potential reclamation could be compared to Borges' dubious paraphrase of Genghis Khan: namely, that he laid waste to the cities because their inhabitants had themselves obliterated all of the continents' tremendous, life-sustaining

grass-filled plains. But first, I will zoom in, to the absences inside the functioning casinos, the waitresses, busboys, and even geography convention-goers that fill out the façade.

I can only imagine what it is like to work on the Strip. I hear that casino jobs are well-paid, at least as far as the service industry is concerned, but I wonder if that argument takes into account the sheer time and energy it takes simply to show up in uniform at a workstation that is deep inside of a behemoth. The first job I ever had that required me to obtain a social security number was as a cashier in a gift shop at Astroland, a now-defunct theme park in Houston. We worked ten-hour shifts for less than minimum wage (the park had gotten a concession). But with the added time it took to open and close a stand— including the ritual mopping of vomit, it was an amusement park, after all— count the till, and walk forty minutes across the park to the locker rooms where our pork-fat stained uniforms were stored (and whose washerwomen were toothless for want of health insurance to provide dentures), the average shift was, on average, twelve to fourteen hours, for which we would receive about thirty dollars after taxes.

These are the memories that Las Vegas drudges up. In the best of times, I'd suppose that they are reminiscent of its standard operating procedure, whereby employees' are meant to be invisible, human absences, and their movements and pathways are even more spatially-regulated than those of the average tourist. The suburbs and back-alley entrances to the strip, then, are complemented by the hotel-casinos' internal absences: the break, lunch, surveillance, and locker rooms; the catacombs of tunnels and service hallways for custodians, cocktail waitresses, and rented security officers. And in case some might assume that such labyrinths are not structurally significant, it is possible to point to the famous fire at the MGM Grand in 1980, where smoke from the upper floors of one of the towers traveled throughout back hallways, as well as a ventilation system with mortal flaws in its design, in under an hour, resulting in the deaths of at least eighty-five people, with more than 650 wounded (Clark County Fire Department 1980).

Astroland had them, and I knew that Vegas would. So, as intrepid tourists playing hooky from the AAG meeting, my partner and I searched out the ghosts of my employment history. We started with the most luxurious hotel we were willing to reach on foot: The Venetian. It wasn't difficult to find an entrance to these utility stairwells and freight elevators, and— in our

finest clothes to imitate hotel guests and ever-conscious of the reality of closed-circuit cameras or of running into a bad-tempered employee— we made our way into the service tunnels of the gondola haven. We had little trouble finding our way in, but our real difficulty, it turned out, however, was to get out once we were ensconced. Like Borges' infinite library of Babel (Borges 1998), each turn opened onto yet another stairwell, and we climbed flight after flight only to find ourselves pushing open yet another fire door identical to the one that had locked behind us a moment earlier.

When we did emerge, it was from the mouth of another hotel down the street. Apparently, they are connected like certain restaurant blocks in that urban legend about New York City: they all share the same kitchen. Centerless, faceless, stairwells that could almost be anywhere (Augé 1995)— that are apparently utilitarian, but whose usefulness breaks down in the face of their sheer size and number, a number that is finite but still so large it could almost represent infinity: these are the unmapped absences built by the dollar bills that my cousins feed into the Vegas slots at regular vacation intervals. In front, the ceiling is painted with pink clouds; in back, the ceiling is dripping with unknown fluids. Because of such interior networks, it might be possible to travel the entire Strip indoors, while only catching sight of it in glimpses— an adventure we left for a subsequent visit.

So, if the Strip is riddled with wormhole hallways, veins to its arteries and open avenues, and if the hotels themselves, under present economic conditions, require their adjacent slums, then what of the desert that surrounds the city? Is the desert an absence, a dry, faceless entity, an Other to westernized civilization, as so many Orientalist texts would have it— or a flat expanse full of comforting reminders of death, as Yi-Fu Tuan has described (Tuan 2001)? Alternately, is it a discerning, living, exacting range of sand and scrub-bush? For one thing, it has not been left alone. The scions of capital and nation have also managed the desert. The contemporary Nevada desert is a conglomeration of sci-fi movie sets, deserted quarries, failed irrigation schemes, depleted bat guano mining operations, shanty town ruins, dry lakes, nuclear test sites, solar panel farms, underfunded Indian reservations, and overpopulated RV parks. It is vaster than the hotels, and it also has its absences.

Past Native American civilizations are often implicitly denigrated in the U.S. because it is believed that they did not have their own monumental works. This isn't true if *monumental* is a synonym for big, as the numerous large-scale Pueblo Sites in the West, the Cahokia Mounds, and the remnants of the Mississippian civilizations in the East serve to show (Russell 1996). But it isn't entirely false either. It's just that monuments, as Vegas proves, are not all that they are cracked up to be. Now, given that the Strip serves to efface and conflate certain aspects of time and space, creating an endless present, the resulting negation of history does thereby relegate the memories of previous forms of capitalism, like ghost towns and defunct mine shafts, into absences. However, the starkest absences from the Nevada desert are not those of historic industry, but they are the valuable resources that are hardly missed, or depicted as a blank slate for future development, renewable or otherwise. A confirmed city-dweller and non-desert inhabitant like me looks from one rock to another, barely able to distinguish between the Joshua Trees, barrel cactuses, limestone ridges, and prickly pear found in the average guidebook.

But these deserts sustain life, and they once sustained much more of it. Like so many places in the U.S., arrowheads and other artifacts from groups such as the Paiute and the Shoshoni can be found with only the most basic attention to what is underfoot. And although hunter-gathering is often implicitly depicted as 'simply walking around', it took at least as much skill and expertise as it does to survive in contemporary economies— forms of knowledge that must have been flawed like any, and that may have laid the ground for conflicts, abuse of power, and misappropriation as much as survival and cooperation among the desert's once vast populations; forms that nonetheless are rich resources that might help when it comes to pondering alternatives to capitalism. But the vast bulk of such knowledges, cultures, techniques, and ways of life are lost or critically misunderstood as being themselves timeless, part of the underappreciated wages of colonialism (Fabian 2002). Those who have continued to develop such legacies over time, many of them Native Americans, are often not listened to, their voices dismissed as imperialism stretches into the present— because, it is assumed, they are not future-bent, and thus must only be valuable as a form of nostalgia that could hardly be relevant to contemporary efforts to transform Nevada. Their great achievement--that of failing

to have an overwhelmingly deleterious impact upon the landscape--is considered a flaw because it is barely visible, and, furthermore, because most have been trained not to see it.

So the desert's most valuable absences, its past ways of living, are largely unknown in mainstream U.S. society, and they are often not even included under the scope of what is considered to be knowledge. As places that were not constructed, in the sense of a structure built on top of the land and conceived as something external to it, the sites of pre-colonial life demonstrate the inadequacies of deconstruction as a metaphor in this instance. It is evidence of continuing ignorance that some-- or I, since at least I can speak for myself-- can hardly appreciate how much has been lost. We are not even at the point where we could idealize or demonize the desert anymore, let alone its previous societies, so many continue to represent it as blank, vacant, in order to mask our own lack of prescience-- what we don't know must be unimportant. If anything, the self-destructive character of the three forms of absence I have discussed-- those interior to the strip, bounding the strip, and outside the city-- are the most blatantly evident, however, in the wanton inability to listen to those of the desert's legacies that still might be reckoned with.

Maybe my concern for absences like these desert transformations also stems from that part of me that visited the AAG conference as myself an absence, working on alternative cartography, mapping the archive for Arab American labor in New York City--a topic that is in dire need of further research but one that has less of a prospect of funding because it is seen as marginal to the grand narrative of the U.S. economy. It is a topic that stems from a recognition of the need to fully diversify all areas of geography, to reconceive of the absences within the discipline, and to engage with the multifarious geographers-- whatever measure of variety one uses, be it economic, racial, postcolonial, or otherwise-- that are already active.³

Attempts to come to terms with my own inadequacy and strengths brought me to a small but dedicated group of radical presenters. We took part in an evening session organized by Dr. Patricia Noxolo, entitled "Postcolonial Geographies of Text and Textuality". It was located

³ Such efforts would coincide well with the deserved recognition given to geography's tradition of interdisciplinary work, as evident in Winona LaDuke's plenary speech at the AAG's 2006 annual meeting.

in the Convention Center, an empty and gaping building that was separated from the Riviera mothership by searing pavement, blaring traffic, and a thirty-minute walk. A building that required us to walk endlessly, it seemed, in its never-ending hallways before finding our destination. Funny, then, that we got so much out of our time together, of our short stay in the ephemeral, drab big-box spaceship of a city: a reminder that absences don't need to be deficits.

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