

THE CONSTRUCT OF THE ISLAND:

A feminist research approach to analyzing the dialogue we use to describe
geographical attractions on Long Island, New York

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Places are created not only through place-making activities, but also around the words that create and surround them. In fact, place-making activities are structured around our language, too. The words we use to describe, locate, explain, define, label, and share our thoughts about a place help to make the place what it is in our minds and the minds of others. We turn to articles, websites, and other materials to learn about places and see how others gauge the places, too. Long Island, New York is made up of countless beaches, shopping strips, and tourist attractions all described at length and in by various means in order to attract customers and viewers to each of the different places. Just like any other geographical location, Long Island has newspapers and websites dedicated to boasting all of Long Island's splendors. The words on the pages of each site and paper create the dialogue that constructs the culture of Long Island. Through an analysis of various texts that depict one of Long Island's most popular geographical attractions—the Robert Moses State Park on Fire Island, New York—I hope to learn about the depicted traits of the Island. I want to learn about the Island and how it is portrayed to those who are visiting it; is the Island gendered? Raced? Romanticized? Politicized? By studying the Robert Moses State Park, the importance it holds on the Island, and current posts and tourist listings about the park I hope to learn how and in what way language constructs the culture of Long Island's attractions.

Motivation

I spent my entire life on Long Island, and yet feel no real connection to the place where my home is located. I spent my childhood in a two-story ranch in Medford, New

York located directly next to my elementary school. At the start of my final year at the elementary school, my family moved to another two-story ranch fifteen minutes away from the first. I spent the rest of my time at our new home in Patchogue, New York, before going away to college. My family is involved in the culture of Long Island on a community level—lots of involvement at the local church, the Knights of Columbus, and various other organizations—but not necessarily on an environmental/out-doorsy level. For that, we go to our small cottage on Lake Champlain in Vermont. I have known and experienced Long Island in terms of the crowded roads and shopping malls, not for the famous Belmont Raceways, the farm stands out east, or the wineries. And thus sparked my interest in learning more about Long Island’s biggest attractions and what they are really portraying to visitors—or natives—of the Island.

Research Approach

Although growing up on Long Island gives me an idea of the kinds of places that bring pride to the Island and hold geographic importance there, I want to be sure that my research is not only a result of my experiences on and around the land—as they could be gendered as well. While going right to the source is important, I began my research with a look at Long Island through online media sources like Discover Long Island, the “official” page for Long Island, run by the Convention and Visitor’s Bureau and Sports Commission. As the main source of web traffic for all things Long Island, the site is meant to highlight all of Long Island’s best and most prominent attractions and tourism activities. In addition, I scanned through Trip Advisor’s page about Long Island to learn what other sites are saying about the place and its attractions. These sites gave me a ton of useful information regarding what is most popular to do around Long Island. I decided

to devote the bulk of my research time to the Montauk Point Lighthouse and do some minor research on other points of attractions afterward.

I consider my research grounded in feminist political ecology. Elmhirst quotes Watts in saying that political ecology (PE) involves “the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of. . .access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods.” (Elmhirst 2011, 129) Rocheleau continues the conversation by adding that feminist political ecology (FPE) “expands PE to address women as a group, and gender as a category.” (Rocheleau 2008, 716) I believe that my project follows FPE because I am approaching Long Island from a social and geographical standpoint while not excluding my own personal viewpoints and emotions linked to the place(s). I want the structure of my study to be “grounded in embodied emotional geographies of places, peoples, and resources.” (Sultana 2011, 163) It is through this that I hope to uncover the nature of the Island.

What is the Robert Moses State Park?

The Robert Moses State Park, commonly shortened to Robert Moses, is one of Long Island’s most well known beachfronts. The park is located on Fire Island—which is famous for a slew of “nature” places—and boasts many “natural” attractions and scenes for tourists and native Long Islanders. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation hosts a page dedicated to the state park. It describes Robert Moses as follows: “Robert Moses State Park has about five miles of ocean beach from which visitors can swim, surf or surf-fish. Anglers can also fish from piers. A day-use boat basin can accommodate 40 boats. The park also has picnic areas and the 18-hole Robert Moses State Park Pitch & Putt Golf Course.” (Robert Moses) The New York State Office of

Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation constructs Robert Moses as a “natural” place, which calls for an analysis of what nature really is and how our “construction” of “natural places” is problematic in and of itself.

Robert Moses becomes a commoditized piece of nature when it is labeled a state park and has to be “preserved” as such. This preservation includes keeping the park neat and tidy, and therefore not allowing nature to take its course as it normally would. The organization relies on “countless volunteers and patron generosity to support a wide range of operational and programmatic activities.” (Friends & Support) It asks for help from Long Island neighbors and friends in order to keep the parks in “working order.” In regards to this, the Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation states: “From helping out at our nature centers to organizing trail clean up events we depend on our friends to help us keep our parks and sites open and accessible to everyone!” (Friends & Support) The organization asks for support in terms of volunteers and donors in order to keep the park looking natural and clean—which are potentially two contradicting ideas.

In his discussion on constructed nature, Cronin says that while we as a society believe that nature is “the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [nature/the wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history.” (Cronin 1995, 1) In the case of Robert Moses, the park is only able to be the park due to the work of the Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation office as well as the help of other supporters. Without these individuals, and without the “state park” label, the Robert Moses State Park would be an unnamed plot of land that went unnoticed. By naming the land and

giving it societal value through its connotations, though, we are demanding that the land be preserved in a certain way and in turn it is becoming gendered.

According to Cronin, we have tamed nature throughout time in order to appease viewers of it. He says: “But even as it came to embody the awesome power of the sublime, wilderness was also being tamed—not just by those who were building settlements in its midst but also by those who most celebrated its inhuman beauty.” (Cronin 1995, 6) It is by taming and controlling nature that we have gendered places like the Robert Moses State Park and others to be feminine in essence. “As more and more tourists [seek] out the wilderness as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty, the sublime in effect became domesticated.” (Cronin 1995, 6) When we tame nature we are taking away its wild, unruly, masculine traits and rather domesticating it, as Cronin says, so that it looks pretty and appealing for tourists who wish to see it. The volunteers who help to do trail clean ups at Robert Moses are in effect domesticating the land and forcing it to fit into society’s ideal of what the land should look like, how it should be in order to attract more guests. This “romantic sense of a domesticated sublime” is problematic because we are constraining nature to fit an ideal just as society constrains women’s bodies too to fit society’s beauty ideal. (Cronin 1995, 6) The two are one in the same. Eco-feminists follow similar trains of thought, believing that “As a set of ideas ecofeminism is most closely associated with the notion that the subjugation of women and the domination of nature are connected, and that the oppression of one cannot be eliminate without also eliminating the oppression of the other.” (Moeckli and Braun 2001, 115) This oppression can be seen at the site of Robert Moses in its entirety—the oppression of the land through its picturesque and seemingly “unnatural” appearance as

well as the oppression of women's bodies as they are forced to fit into beauty ideals as represented through beach bodies at Robert Moses's beach front, tiny bathing suits, and perfect windswept hairstyles even despite the heat and less than ideal hair circumstances of a day on the beach.

Another problematic aspect of Robert Moses is the fee section listed on The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation website. According to the site, there are many different fees that visitors must pay in order to enjoy "nature," if they so choose to take part. There are fees for four-wheel beach vehicle fishing permits, boat docking, metal detecting, night sport fishing permits, regional diving permit, star gazing permits, surfing, umbrella and chair rentals, and a general vehicle entrance fee.

Interestingly, most of the fees have two different rates, one for New York State residents and another, more expensive rate for out-of-staters. The fees range from eight dollars to bring a car into the state park during off season to \$110 for out of state individuals to purchase a four-wheel beach vehicle fishing permit or purchase a diving permit. ("Fees and Rates") In addition, the site boasts an Empire Passport that allows better access to all things Robert Moses has to offer. It says: "Your key to all season enjoyment of state parks is our season's pass. For \$65, the Empire Passport provides you unlimited day use vehicle entry into most of our parks. Apply on-line or call your favorite park for more information." ("Fees and Rates")

Charging for the enjoyment of nature is very problematic. Why do people have to pay to go stargazing at Robert Moses? Or pay to dive in the ocean? What would happen if people were asked to pay walk into a forest? Would they do it? Would they complain about the fees? Why are people not complaining about fees at "nature parks" owned by

the state? Also, what does it say about the state that it charges people to ultimately just be outside at the beach or in “nature”?

The problematic issues surrounding how we construct nature on Long Island extend beyond the Robert Moses State Park. Long Island’s other “natural” attractions could be analyzed, too, for gendering as well as other things that make nature seem unnatural. In a further study, one could expand the study to encompass places like the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum in Cold Spring Harbor, New York and the Belmont Park Race Track in Elmont, New York, as well as attractions such as sailing, fishing, farm stands, wineries, and golf courses. An analysis of a broad array of “natural” attractions on Long Island would yield similar results to the analysis of the Robert Moses State Park. We limit nature when it is portrayed as an attraction for the masses; we must construct it a certain way and in turn it is domesticated and gendered as a result. A further analysis would likely show that Long Island’s attractions are racialized, too, depending on which geographical portion of the Island is being analyzed. Abstracting from the physical effects on the nature and land itself, it is important to think about the effect all of this has on the people of the Island. Are our views of the Island changed based on the ways in which our language and our officials limit nature for the viewing pleasures of others?

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