Imagined States

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Introduction

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This volume explores the role of phenomenological and existential others—human, animal, political, and mythic—in the process of cultural self-identification. The organizing and empowering metaphors for this process are the "imagined states," by which humankind constructs and locates itself in those worlds, places, and territories of the mind. States may function metaphorically or designate the psychological and the mythic as well as actual geographic and political entities. The difference is not significant, as Benedict Anderson showed in his groundbreaking work *Imagined Communities* (1991), to which this book is indebted for more than its title. Shurmer-Smith and Hannam point out that "all places are imaginary, in the sense that they cannot exist for us beyond the image we are capable of forming of them in our minds" (1994, 59).

It is our purpose in these pages to demonstrate various sociopolitical, historical, and ethnographic contexts of such states, and their interdependence. Central to this collection of essays are these questions: How are "states" (national, utopian, or existential) imagined or constructed? How do their permutations create (or collapse) boundaries between ethnic or national groups, between genders, or between the human and animal worlds? How and why does this process frequently entail the demonization or idealization of such oppositions in oral cultures. Consider, for instance, the national type of the Irishman (the stereotype is invariably male), demonized in the English broadside tradition in the same way as the American gringo is in the Mexican border *corrido*. Various essays herein examine the ideological construction of the four-nation United Kingdom (Porter), the racial stereotyping of Turks in Germany (Cheesman), and the role of colonial folklore discourse in the construction of a de-historicized Indian identity (Naithani).

Il Paese di Cuccagna, the Italian variant of Cockaigne—also known, in American tradition, as the Big Rock Candy Mountain—engages a process of idealization, drawing on a centuries-old gastronomic utopia, the mythic land of plenty, known all across Europe, that expresses basic human needs and hence represents a "poor man’s paradise" (Del Giudice). This topos of a mythic Cockaigne, firmly embedded in immigrant imaginations as they sailed for America from Norway, Italy, Germany and beyond, inversely reflected the actual living conditions of the European lower classes, whose lives largely comprised
penury and starvation. Thus such imagined topographies, providing alternate and parallel possible worlds, closely linked real and imagined states.

Idealized states may be more modestly expressed, as Norwegian railway navvies glorified the workplace and the itinerant life of freedom (Kvideland and Porter). Faced with social stigmatization from the larger society, a life of harsh living and working conditions, and real physical danger, this occupational group created a compensatory imagined state in which they constructed inverted and opposing values for themselves. In this idealized existential space, positive emic values of generosity substituted for the etic label of spendthrift ways, just as vagrancy was reinterpreted as freedom, and so forth. Positive occupational cultural identification in Norwegian navvy songs, food utopias as expressed in the Italian folk worldview and immigrant cultural practices, existential equilibrium attained through bodily metaphors of the human vis à vis the bovine in Celtic agricultures (Griffin-Kremer), or the existential and familial refuge of pre-marital Latvian women disrupted by “marriage as exile” (Vīķe-Freiberga) are all powerful examples of the various imagined states which communities have created with the purpose of humanly sustaining themselves. Such are the cultural spaces this collection of essays explores.

This volume draws on narrative traditions, largely on still little-known oral and broadside ballad traditions, to create an innovative, interdisciplinary narrative of its own. Yet even though these essays are all well grounded in traditional ballad studies—of both print culture and live performance—they go far beyond textual analyses of narrative songs to situate texts in broad historical, literary, and anthropological contexts, and integrate recent scholarship in cultural studies, gender studies, ethnicity and immigration, social history from medieval times to the present, the history of print, folklore, food history, and even agronomy.

Imagined states are both constructed of and within the symbolic order. This is evident not only in specifically historical contexts, such as the resurgence of mythic pasts in nationalistic movements like the Italian Risorgimento (unification), but also in the apparently timeless, idealized set of rural practices centered on Celtic cattle herding, rural Latvian marriage practices, or Italian immigrant foodways. The kinship with the bodies of bovines felt by traditional cattle-herders in Ireland and Britain has been disrupted but not displaced by the emergence of modern industrial food production and other developments concomitant with that of the centralized state. Cow bodies become symbols and reminders of existential equilibrium, social harmony, and the interdependence of the human and animal worlds.

In Latvia, the patriarchal nuclear family, the most cogent organizing and symbolic principle of rural society, contributes a powerful metaphor of marriage (which breaks that primary family bond in women’s lives) as banishment from happiness, of marriage as bitter exile. The first imagined state posited here is the
foreign land mentally constructed by all exiles—a land of strangers to which they can never belong, so they become citizens neither of a past nor a present land. The mythic homeland, with the further passing of time, increasingly becomes imagined as well, for nostalgia and longing play parts in such cultural constructs.

Cuccagna remains in Italian immigrant food practices and collective psychology as a symbol of perpetual abundance. Through the persistently reenacted festivalization of the quotidian or the search for abundance, Italian immigrants discover the paradox of a place that does not exist and that risks obsolescence through the very act of discovery and enactment. The attainment and the destruction of this particular imagined state, Cuccagna, coincide.

Imaginings of states not only evolve out of, or are constructed by, cultural collectives themselves, they also are sometimes imposed upon them by others—professional scholars (anthropologists, folklorists, and cultural historians) among them. We might call this an “anthropologizing state,” whereby rural practices, observed and rewritten from an urbanized perspective, give us supposed (and largely imagined) access to “the real” through discourses of authenticity. It is a typical feature of such observations that they function metonymically. For example, the writings of nineteenth century collectors of Indian folktales frequently featured gross generalizations drawn from the study of a minuscule geographic area at a specific point in historical time. This Orient, suspended in unchanging space and time, as classically described by Said (1978), therefore itself became a folktale.

Imaginings of this kind, of course, often involve a severe reduction of the human element in the constructed landscape. Indeed, humanity could be eliminated from the imagined landscape altogether: Eldorado was not a country where gold was mined with great human effort but one where it lay in the streets waiting to be picked up. Where they did appear on the topography, men and women featured as abstractions, represented as either primitive or degenerate, the first showing no signs of civilization at all, the second relegated to a conveniently distant past. In both cases they were represented as resigning themselves to passivity. Such scripts naturally required revision in the light of well-organized uprisings like that in Jamaica in 1865 and in India in 1857.

The question of agency and voice is a significant one. Who speaks in these narratives? Who constructs? Who destroys? In the cases of the Turks in German Bänkelsanger (broadsides), the narrators of the folktale called “India,” and the Scottish “loons” in London street ballads, neither the Turks, nor Indians, nor Scots speak directly. All are spoken for through repeated acts of cultural ventriloquism. In this dialectic of discourse for and by, ideology maintains its momentum: these cultural constructs, these imagined states, “directly or indirectly contributed to the processes of social and political impoverishment and disintegration” (Naithani, this volume).
The creation of a modern state demands precisely such symbolic ordering of reality, an ordering which is constantly contested and remade in the interests of established power. Such vigilant realignments are surely reassuring, for they legitimate the sanctioned worldview and the interests of the power structures. Such a process has, and still does, involve both the demonization of outsiders and the idealization of safely distant, imagined, and therefore unattainable territories. Thus, during the construction of the artifice that is the modern British state, Englishness was defined by its relation to diminished outsiders like the Irish and Indians, while Germans became equally obsessed with Turks, for similar reasons. And while Italian peasants dreamed of Cockaigne in America, Europeans peddled the same narratives of the land of plenty to Africans, to lure slaves to a land (the very same land, America) that was anything but ideal (Minton 1991, 39–47). Upon their arrival on American shores centuries later, of course, Italian immigrants themselves learned of the bitter gulf between imagined states and actual ones.

Ricoeur (1986) distinguished between the revolutionary change in the structure of experience implied by the utopian model, and the perfecting of that structure through refinement. On the other hand, Oscar Wilde wrote famously that “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing” (1963, 924). Utopias grow out of both personal and societal dilemmas. In the life of any individual, they pose a fundamental question, whether to grow up, recognize “reality,” and give up childish pleasure, or rather to change that reality in order to recover lost sources of pleasure. As Del Giudice notes, wild-eyed dreamers, the natural audience for Cuccagna narratives on the many piazzas of Italy, were regular targets of social opprobrium. But as she also demonstrates, dreams of alternative reality for Italian peasants produced real instances of liberation, like the legend of the “flying Africans” did for African American slaves. Dreamworlds do set us free, for legends and myths of this sort planted mental seeds of hope for freedom and fulfillment. Many African slaves did indeed escape along the Underground Railway, and many Italian peasants did find their land of plenty in America, but never without great effort, and always at personal risk. Imagined worlds, however, also coincided with real societies in negative ways, as they did for Latvian peasant women for whom marriage in a virilocal society became the equivalent of perpetual exile (Viķe-Freiberga). And like the political exile, the Latvian woman’s fate was to live in the netherworld of longing for her homeland while condemned to be surrounded by strangers. Her past became a mythic and idealized state of bliss forever blighted by the life passage into marriage.

While utopias characteristically involve a displacement in both space and time: a distant land, a place that cannot be found on maps of the known world, the ends of the earth, the top of the highest—but nonexistent—mountain, they always betray the imprint of their source, for they inversely reflect that source.
On utopian landscapes we recognize many of our own known points of reference. J. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth, for instance, is a recognizable and comfortable version of the Home Counties of southern England. And so too, through the inversion principle of utopian thought, Cuccagna, the land of plenty, inversely reflects its source, Italy, as a land of hunger, particularly from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, a period punctuated by frequent famines and food scarcity. Idealized topographies often, of course, coincide with actual territories: both Said (1978) and Anderson (1983) emphasized just how much of the “reality” of geographical space is based on the imaginary and the ideological, and their conclusions have since been extended to the realm of nature as well (Plumwood 1993).

Postmodernism, with its flamboyant celebration of the power centers of modern life, maintains that utopia is already here. Conversely, this complacent statement has been subversively echoed by the counterculture, which has found in Stonehenge, for example, a center of popular resistance to the market-driven values of modern society. And even the twentieth century political state can offer its counterpart to this discourse in, for instance, Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s eulogy to Soviet Communism: A New Civilization (1935), which was written at the height of Stalinism, when political exiles in the labor camps were writing more personal narratives and wistfully looking back at the homes they had left behind. As Viķe-Freiberga points out, in reflection on the astonishing abundance of Latvian dainas about the bride who has to leave her childhood home, such narratives also involve oversimplification and nostalgia for the premarital state. They often construct carefree worlds where it never seems to rain and which are, not coincidentally, settings removed from time and change, neatly counterposed by the inevitably bleak postmarital state of internal, and external, exile, which is where the constructed and the real actually coincide.

In transporting us from the everyday to the ideal and back again and by switching our mindsets from one referential code to another, utopias cause us to journey and to cross borders. We are of our own limited worlds but not limited by them. This same dualism is inherent in the uncertainty about identity, both personal and national, which leads to the construction of demonized others. Examples of this political strategy abound, most strikingly in the metaphors adopted from 1945 onward during the Cold War, culminating in Ronald Reagan’s 1980s image of a City on a Hill resisting an Empire of Evil—a curious blend of Biblical and Hollywood imagery. Sartre wrote that the individual self becomes aware of itself by perceiving its distance from others. Shurmer-Smith and Hannam added that “it is in the act of differentiating that repression begins, for ‘appropriate’ behaviors, thoughts, degrees of autonomy are granted according to constructed categories of age, gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexuality; along with notions of the appropriate go notions of both appropriation
and inappropriateness” (1994, 1). Two of the papers here (Cheesman and Porter) consider these acts of differentiation within a European context. In German street ballads the landscape of fear created—sometimes literally, for they were often accompanied in performance by painted multi-scene placards—projects backward to the wicked Grand Vizier of the orientalized folktale and forward to the demonization of both gastarbeiter (imported laborer) and Arab leaders in our own time. Cheesman argues that because the identification of a generalized Ausländer or foreign enemy is rooted in a sense of one’s own identity, representations of that outsider will change according to how precarious that self-sense is. Thus the trajectory of representations of the Orient changes and comes to reflect, or correlate, at each historic moment, with the state of German national consciousness, that is, with the condition of the imagined community of the German nation itself.

Such political processes of enemy-making may have at their root psychological issues resulting from a crisis of identity. An analogous process might be seen in the expressions of inevitable loss and estrangement experienced by women in traditional marriages. In the Latvian daina, the contrast between the parents’ place as home and the husband’s homestead as a foreign land is highly dramatic. The native home is presented as warm, beautiful, and well-loved, while the new place of residence is perceived as alien, unattractive, and hostile. Psychologically, the “imagined,” or mental, state of the bride in marriage is expressed as a kind of ennui or indifference to her changed status: the bride constructs a postnuptial world in which love will have no place and the emotions will be deliberately deadened. It is a world of practical tasks in which the familiar, the childhood home, becomes estranged, represented only by some faded flowers still clutched in the hand.

The daina powerfully demonstrates how surroundings become integrated into the self: they are just as significant a part of the conscious experience of self as the awareness of one’s clothing, body movements, thoughts, or feelings. In the same way, the interrelationship between traditional herders and their cattle created a mental world which enabled them to define themselves through comparison and opposition, as well as to envision access to a beyond-human condition—immortality. Making the cow the measure of a working person’s land and labor (such as through place and occupational names) involved assimilating the state of nature into a cultural context—a process through which nature and culture were both differentiated and conceived (see Ursula Le Guin’s “ecotopia,” Always Coming Home (1988), for a further exploration of this relationship). The human/animal connubium is particularly significant during childhood, for the child’s play of “being” an animal demonstrates the effort to cross the body boundary by creating bonds of relatedness and consciousness in what is related
yet other, thereby allowing the child to both define individual identity and transcend that identity through exploration and play.

The following papers therefore travel through a variegated landscape of imagined topographies, projections of human longing or loathing. National and ethnic stereotypes, social stigmatization, poverty, hunger, and alienation prompt various cultural coping mechanisms. Though constructions of possible and alternative worlds or projections of distant utopias permit escape, other avoidable spaces of ethnic undesirability confirm and bolster the group. Imagined states therefore, can represent as much acts of cultural resistance and reinforcement as acts of collective quest. They comfort, console, or disturb, as the cultural and sociopolitical case may be.

WORKS CITED


