Boom-and-Bust: (Hi)stories of Landscape Production and Consumption in California’s Sierra Nevada Foothills

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Abstract

Marked by a series of boom-and-bust industries and economies over the course of nearly two centuries, the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range are simultaneously singular and multifaceted, a region of tumultuous dichotomies. The region serves as a quintessential rural-urban interface, a hybrid landscape of variable historical, economic, and political trajectories that mingle and merge with policy and infrastructural interventions implemented from a variety of scales. This paper examines the entangled, multi-scalar processes that have shaped, and continue to shape, the boom-and-bust landscape that defines the Sierra Nevada Foothills. We unpack the historical extractive impetus that has characterized and underpinned policy-making and economic development in the region in order to reflect on how to reframe and redirect the intra- and extra-regional human desires that continue to shape the Foothills.

Introduction

If the Sierra Nevada were a storyteller, she could tell tales of riches and plenty, tales of scarcity and resourcefulness, and tales of hope and progress equally well. For centuries (millennia, when you consider indigenous peoples), the heterogeneous environment, the mineral-rich soil, the abundant water, and the proximity to both valley and alpine localities has made the Sierra Nevada Foothills a desirable destination—and place well-situated for human-environment interaction.

Black (2000) discusses the environmental history of the first oil boom landscape in the United States as an intensive human intervention propelled by human desires without the constraints of regulation or moral care for
consequences. This boom-and-bust mentality created a “culture of transience” (Black, 2000, p. 4) in which attachment to place is less important than attachment to the possibility of riches derived from that place. If the only goal is extraction and profit, there is “no reason to consider the region’s future” (Black, 2000, p. 5).

From this perspective, we take the long view and reflect on the rich and varied (hi)stories of the Sierra Nevada, asking questions like: In what ways do intensive resource extraction and associated cultural shifts leave their mark on how a region is viewed and valued in future contexts? Is the ethos of free-for-all boom-time economics, with its inevitable subsequent bust, powerful enough to shape the course of regional landscape production and consumption a century later? From these reflections, we explore the impacts of a series of boom-and-bust interventions upon the Sierra Nevada Foothills (SNF) on the western edge of California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range. Rather than viewing this region as non-contiguous patches of land to be mined, developed, and exploited for individual or corporate gain, we consider the place as a regional assemblage with extra-regional connections and impacts.

Although preceded by other intensive extraction cycles, including the “fur boom” that depleted marine mammal and beaver populations along the West Coast and the “cattle boom” associated with Spanish missionaries and Mexican rancheros (Dasmann, 1999), the California Gold Rush serves as a preeminent example of unbridled capitalist intervention, so much so that it partially inspired Karl Marx’s reflections in Das Kapital (Nash, 1999). Since those nineteenth-century non-Indigenous appropriations and colonizations, the physical and cultural landscapes of the SNF have been written and read in many ways by “come-heres” of various sorts (Hiner, 2014). One prominent framing is “Gold Country,” a designation which overlays a particular event—the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill and subsequent get-rich-quick extractive frenzy—over a wide swath of territory whose boundaries shift depending upon the narrative laid over it. This history of feverish landscape (com)modification underpins much present-day landscape production and consumption in the SNF, from water conveyance to the agriculturally rich Central Valley below and megacities beyond to in situ sprawling housing development, recreational opportunities, and various enactments of the “Good Life.”
Theoretical Guideposts

This project avails itself fully of Katz’s (1996) suggestion to practice “minor theory” to disrupt traditional theoretical framings of rural landscapes. We have found multiple theoretical perspectives that might be useful in helping us understand and begin to explain the complexity and interrelational significance of this foothill boom-and-bust landscape.

Political ecology commonly frames understandings of how existing land uses and the values of long-time residents in the SNF collide with the shifting economics of exurbanization and the political goals of in-migrants (e.g., Beebe and Wheeler, 2012; Hiner, 2014; Hurley, 2004; Walker and Fortmann, 2003). For example, discussions about the preservation of open space; the need for more progressive land-use planning (especially for housing developments and urban cores); the value and potential of maintaining remnant extractive economic activities, such as farming, logging, and ranching; and whether to curtail the influx of outside influences can become fraught with tension, fear, and outrage as people’s respective visions of and values regarding landscape and their rightful place in it collide (Hiner, 2016; McKinnon et al., 2017; Taylor and Hurley, 2016).

Moreover, the political ecology framework is useful to buttress several research foci, particularly upon the intersections of policy, economic development schemes, and various value systems and the ecological consequences thereof (McKinnon et al., 2017; Taylor and Hurley, 2016; Walker and Hurley, 2011). However, there are other ways to try to suss out the significance of this landscape. For example, Heley and Jones (2012) discuss the utility of Katz’s ideas of countertopography to more fully comprehend how particular rural spaces are materially produced, symbolically realized, and narratively experienced in relation to other similar spaces and the multifarious processes of globalization. Countertopography also gives voice to subaltern and counterhegemonic experiences of the landscape, allowing a fuller realization of local complexities and their relationship to wider social, political, environmental, and economic patterns. Also of value are Katz’s (2001) elucidation of critical topography, an examination of how the sedimentation (Pred, 1984) of historical material and narrative processes upon the landscape over time allows similarities and disparities between particular places to develop.

These ideas intersect in interesting ways with Doreen Massey’s (2005) conception of space as a product of interrelations, of coexisting and simultaneous multiplicities that are always in process, of interactive power geometries that mold
and crumple space, allowing certain spaces to be viewed similarly while hiding
deep dissimilarities. Through all of these concepts, it is possible to see the
multiplicity of meanings hiding in the Sierra Nevada Foothills, in the “Gold
Country.” Each extractive cycle leaves a different imprint on the landscape, with
more or less “permanent” traces—mine tailings, dams and irrigation canals that
feed the valley the waters of the mountains above, meadows permanently
degraded by grazing, forest ecosystems altered by logging and burning and
replanting, highways that lead urban dwellers through the foothills to the
mountains and lakes above, creation of wilderness and conservation areas,
recreation outposts, farming, viticulture, ranching, housing development and
ranchettes for a rural idyll—all of these impositions are varied across this space,
which itself is already topographically variable.

Finally, Rose (2002) asks an intriguing question: how does a particular
landscape “stick” in people’s minds? His answer is that landscape is “called forth”:
it becomes materialised, valued, and understood in the world as it is put into
practice; the landscape is always being shaped by human desires and actions. In
the context of boom-and-bust in the SNF, the heritage of extraction allows room
for bizarre excess—or at least intensive (environmental) intervention—that is
occasionally visible along two-lane Foothill highways (Figure 1). An economic
and political history of excess and personal reputation-making combined with a
sense of “awayness” opens the possibility for flamboyant expressions on the
landscape for the purpose of being seen and being seen as having limited
limitations.
It is through these theoretical lenses that the multiplicity of meanings of the SNF’s “Gold Country” become visible.

Methodology

For many years, both authors lived in the SNF, traveled its byways, and intensively studied its cultures and landscapes, and, through these interactions and observations conducted a long-term landscape ethnography (Ogden, 2011). The reflections and analysis presented here is less an empirical analysis and more a theoretical essay on the meaning of this landscape vis-à-vis the cyclical boom-and-bust experience of the place and the people in it. Our mixed-method efforts have included interviews with diverse actors within and external to the region; analysis of policy frameworks, political and counterpolitical discourse, economic development strategies, census data, and historical texts and narratives; walking interviews to capture lived experience and historical knowledge of specific
locations (some of which were linked GIS outputs); analysis of ecological and agricultural datasets and aerial photographs; assessments of landscape changes wrought by industry and development; and autoethnography based on our own ongoing personal and professional experiences within the region.

Overall, this methodology allows us to examine the material, symbolic, and narrative constructions/realities of this relational landscape. Through this work, we have found that each extractive cycle leaves a different imprint on the landscape, including varying material remains and riches as well as symbolic ones as these improvements and impositions vary across the region, producing different outcomes across time and space.

The Study Area: Slippery Boundaries

Biophysically, the SNF is a subregion of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, a narrow-ish band of mainly contiguous blue oak and foothill pine woodlands and chaparral running north-south for about 400 miles, reaching from about 500 to 3500 feet in elevation with a growing season between 200 to 320 days (Jepson Herbarium, 2013; U. S. Forest Service, no date). Like many regions, however, its boundaries can encompass greater or less area depending upon who is giving the description and their primary focus and descriptive motivation (Bowlick et al., 2016).

For example, several county-level tourism boards are collaborating to create a coherent system for regional economic development that derives from interconnection along the byways of “Gold Country.” However, there already exist other tourism-affiliated entities that have designated “Gold Country” to be a subset of these counties: Amador, Calaveras, and El Dorado. California State Route 49 traverses “Gold Country” as well, running through the highlights of the SNF region’s Gold Rush history from just south of Yosemite National Park to north of Lake Tahoe. Different still is the boundary of the Sierra Foothills American Viticultural Area (AVA), designated by the federal government to extend from a small corner of North Yuba County south to Mariposa County below Yosemite, which itself employs the cultural cachet of its location within beautiful and historically rich “Gold Country” (Figure 2).
In even these few examples, the SNF’s boundaries are fluid and dependent upon the desires, legal authority, and relative political, economic, or persuasive power of those seeking to designate distinct separations. This thrusting together of places that share common history, topography, and economic potential and which simultaneously hold within them dissimilar, conflicting, or competing visions, resources/ecologies, and relative power has the potential to create a regional assemblage that can work together without ever unifying coherently over the long
term (Cochrane, 2013). However, realizing this potential might necessitate a more purposeful construction of the assemblage, including acknowledging and rebalancing destabilizing intra-regional inequalities, such as the disproportionate dominance of wine tourism in one or two counties (Hiner, 2015a). Perhaps incorporating a conception of the SNF as multifaceted and complex could be a path toward more measured policy and planning, a means to pursue a more diverse, more evenly distributed, and less emphatically and uniformly extractive, economic development and regional identity.

Boom-and-Bust and Landscape Production/Consumption

The name “Gold Country” is a powerful signifier. It fixes the landscape of the SNF region in a particular time, rooting the public imagination in a particular past. The name erases other past peoples and their activities in the region. It crumples space to obfuscate other aggressive landscape alterations concomitant with mineral extraction, as well as those activities’ present-day manifestations upon the landscape. Can this regional narrative, forged by enacting a persistent boom-and-bust narrative, be disrupted to make room for other understandings of the SNF to shape its future uses?

Indigenous people populated the region for thousands of years before European colonization and profoundly influenced it as they managed the landscape to meet their daily needs. In fact, pre-colonization landscape management is at the heart of the present-day, idyllic foothills landscape: rolling chaparral with patches of oak and pine woodlands were created and managed through planned fires, intentional planting, and other landscape production activities to facilitate living the original SNF “Good Life” (Anderson and Moratto, 1996). These are the landscapes of modern-day leisurely drives along SR 49 to a favorite winery or waterfall, their origin stories hidden in the interstices of crumpled space (Massey, 2005).

Although Indigenous communities have been irrevocably altered over two centuries of colonization, Native peoples still have a strong presence in the landscape, particularly through development of destination casinos and renewed gambling revenue-derived economies, a means of resource extraction that plays upon the same frenzied desire that originally compelled Anglo wealth-seekers to the foothills.

The Gold Rush was a free-for-all: miners of all stripes felt unfettered from regulation and ungoverned by constraints defining their social status back home
While impressively environmentally destructive and region-altering, the Gold Rush itself was relatively short-lived and location-specific. However, it spurred other, more extensive and long-lived landscape production processes like farming, ranching, and logging, which were originally associated with mining. After the rush of gold-seeking individuals tapered off and mining consolidated into corporate hands, those who had not struck it rich commenced these other land uses instead, which themselves became as capital-driven, consolidated, and extractive as the diminishing gold fields (Henderson, 1999).

Vast acreages of fruit and vineyards were planted across the foothills and were deliciously productive for many decades before they lost their primacy to the more expansive and abundant agriculture of the Central Valley, ironically irrigated by water conveyed from the high Sierra Nevada range through the foothills. Timber harvesting (and subsequent intensive management) for building and industry substantially altered forest species composition and ecosystem structure (Laudenslayer and Darr, 1990). Livestock grazing in mountain and foothill meadows took a toll on water quality, compounded soil erosion and compaction, caused meadow subsidence, and introduced invasive vegetation (Dasmann, 1999). These extractive impacts, uncurbed by regulation or moral quandary, remain layered in patchwork fragments throughout the region. In many ways, this precedent of fragmented and feverish extraction still influence regional landscape production and consumption.

The SNF today are undergoing rapid exurbanization, a “modern-day land rush” that has consumed agricultural land in sprawling subdivisions and 5- to 20-acre ranchettes (Beebe and Wheeler, 2012). Foothill counties have been among the fastest growing in California for decades: attracted to perceived and real rural amenities, in-migrants are generally whiter, more conservative politically, older, and wealthier than California’s overall population (Beebe and Wheeler, 2012; Hiner, 2014, 2015b; Walker and Fortmann, 2003). This housing boom was slowed but not completely halted by the global recession. The urgency of the imperative to extract the “Good Life” from this landscape is a driving force behind local land-use decision making.

Along with this change in residential population is an influx of visitors seeking the pleasures of the region’s abundant outdoor activities—from camping to wine tasting and agritourism. In Amador and El Dorado counties, the number of wineries have increased several-fold in less than a decade, contributing to some residents’ worries that the region will become the “next Napa,” with carloads of
presumably-buzzed tourists winding along small rural roads seeking their next sip of old-vine Zinfandel. The region also is a throughway connecting Central Valley and coastal communities to mountain skiing and lakes, national parks, High Sierra camping areas, ghost towns, and reservoirs. These connections are made primarily via Interstate Highways 80 and 50, which make tourist journeys efficient but have mixed benefits for scattered foothills communities that stand to gain from tourist spending but also bear the burden of their impacts.

Diverse desires for connection to history, recreation, residence, and a piece of the Good Life collide frequently in this region, and the power to determine a given landscape’s fate shifts with the politics and economic desires of far-away entities. The SNF’s multiple and simultaneous connections to other landscapes cannot be understated. Even today, tailings from hydraulic mining lay in piles strewn throughout and downstream of the SNF; this refuse exacerbated flooding in 1861-62 by clogging streams and rivers, allowing the entire Central Valley (250-300 miles long and 50 miles across) to flood and destroy vast agricultural holdings (Dasmann, 1999). The past use of mercury to extract gold continues to plague the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where fish have bioaccumulated mercury in such quantities that it is unsafe to eat more than one or two caught there in a month.

Sierra Nevada water extraction provides 60 percent of the natural resource-based wealth from the region today (Stewart, 1996). Water from the mountains is held in the Delta and then transferred to the Central Valley to support the most productive industrial agricultural landscape in the United States and to provide for urban water needs in the Los Angeles Basin. Water from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, just north of iconic Yosemite, flows through the foothills to provide San Francisco its water. Hydroelectric power generation also is a product of these extractive connections. The Delta itself was transformed by unsuccessful miners who left the foothills and made their way to the fertile peat soils of this once-brackish marsh. These people “reclaimed” the land by draining it and installing levees to create what is now a heavily subdivided farm-and-freshwater-recreation area cut off from its former tidal influence. This entire water-conveyance mechanism lies at the heart of the existential contests over water resources that plague California to this day (Sze et al., 2009), particularly in the face of climate change, agro-industrial pollution, and drought.
Conclusion

While there are many regions with long histories of boom-and-bust resource extraction, within each are particular collections and intersections of history, economy, resources, culture, desire, and power geometries that continue to form its cultural bedrock, so it is with the Sierra Nevada Foothills. These (hi)stories are powerful, even if they are not truly unique. Our purpose in this project is highlight the complexity and depth of this region in order to encourage acknowledgement of the complicated human-environmental intertwinnings of this peculiar place into narratives and policy and planning.

Similar to the oil landscapes described by Black (2000), in many ways, policy and management of the present-day Sierra Nevada Foothills are guided by a perception of uniformity, fixedness, and perpetual abundance from which to satisfy transient, extractive human desires. We argue that “Gold Country” should more appropriately be viewed as a regional assemblage of fragmented, relational, and malleable landscapes sharing a common experience of boom-and-bust production and consumption. Through the long intimacy of ethnographic research and participant observation, the authors have explored the far-reaching, reciprocal spatial and temporal impacts of boom-and-bust cycles on this region. While it is apparent that these boom-and-bust (hi)stories are intimately tied to the identity and functionality of this region, we believe that it is possible to decouple this past extractive imperative from future development trajectories and instead allow a more resilient and multifaceted region to emerge.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the people of the Sierra Nevada who have opened their homes and thoughts to us over the years and to Texas State University for providing research support for this work via a Research Enhancement Program grant and to several anonymous reviewers who helped make this paper what it is. Our love of this landscape inspired this work and we hope that our love comes across vibrantly to readers near and far.

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