Non-places and Tourism:Towards an understanding of travel

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Abstract. The present paper put the non-places theory under scrutiny considering that there is no place in the world that can be termed non-place. This not only defies the principles of anthropology but also borders the boundaries of ethnocentrism. Quite apart from the afore-mentioned limitations we have examined in this paper, a second point of entry can be how an argument like this has been introduced, accepted, adopted and disseminated in anthropology academy and culture studies. Enrooted in the belief as more difficult to read the better and more credible for scholars, popular wisdom accepted non-place theory without any criticism. With more than thousand copies sold in the world, work of Augé should be critically re-considered.

Introduction

In last years an important body of knowledge in anthropology focused on the theory of non-places and its applications to the tourism and cultural geographies research (Kunstler, 1993) (Cabero Almenara, 1995) (Boswell, 1997) (Augé, 1998a; 1998b) (Augé, 1996) (Hannerz, 1998) (McCabe and Stokoe, 2004) (Maccannel, 1992) (Mahyar, 1999) (Bartolome, 2004) (Smith, 2003) (Hofmeister, 2002) (Belting, 2007); researchers and scholars whose area of expertise is the industry of travel, mobility and tourism saw in non-place insight a fruitful instrument in their studies. From this angle, serious problems at time of testing it with empirical facts were omitted. Conceptualization of what is a non-place is often understood as site of transit in which case travelers can very well experience a declination of their identity. Examples of these sites, we come across day-to-day with airports, train or bus or subway stations. However, a question immediately surfaces ¿what do we really understand as non-places?.

Influenced by part of geographical insights, one of pioneers in investigation of non-place was Marc Augé, a well-known French ethnologist who launched to the fame when wrote in 1992 a book entitled *Non-lieux: Introduction a une antropologie de la submodernité* that sold thousand of copies throughout the world. Preliminary, Augé´s career started with a set of extended field trips towards West Africa where he investigated Alladian customs. A second stage had place in different studies carried out in Europe in works as *An Ethnologist on Subways or Homes and Palaces* wherein Augé focused on some characteristics of Parisian Society. On last facet on his career, our famous ethnologist demonstrated global interests in topics of a broader nature such as the anthropology of modernity or constitution of super-modernity. Precisely we are concerned in detaching on this ultimate part of his biography as well as the notion regarding anthropological places.

For that reason, the present paper explores critically how Augé develops his idea of non-places as well as the problem or limitation this type of development shows. From this perspective, *"whether a place might be defined as a site of identity, relational and historic, a space that might not be redefined as relational or historic is a non-place"* (Augé, 1996: 83). Analytically, his work contains a prologue accompanied with 3 chapters, an epilogue and bibliographical references.

Non-Places theory under scrutiny

On his introductory chapter, Augé describes the situation of a flight departure by Air-France Company where an unknown traveler took a personal appearance on Free-Duty to shop some gifts and presents. Once on board of Airplane, he read some magazines, fastened his belt and tuned channel 5 to hear a concert of Joseph Hayden. This narration allows Augé introducing his thesis about the relationship between immediacy and remoteness. A distinction of this nature goes on the inception of anthropology performance in XIX century whenever remoteness was close-up observed. As a result of this, Augé questions as to how urban areas can be studied following an anthropological perspective. Starting from the premise that otherness should transcend the boundaries of time and identity, our author supposes anthropology not only is circumscribed to a globalized reality wherein identities are merged but also discordant with the role played by history in postmodern societies.

For instance, Augé reminds us that abundance of presence saturates how we perceive the past; this produces discordances in identity process. To put this in brutally, in postmodern times saturation of ego is associated to a mass-consumption, which takes presence in a site without territorialization (Augé, 1996: 41). In opposition to medieval times wherein travels characterized by an encounter between guests and hosts, modernity very well created sites wherein personal relationships with otherness are being replaced by visual attractions. That way, airports and bus stations work as places wherein no involvement and indifference marks the concerns of daily travelers. In what follows, a growing sentiment of disaggregation among people is being conjugated to a process of depersonalization that he termed anonymity.

We have so far synthesized the main argument of Augé relating to Non-places; in part, his rhetoric impedes a deep reading and understanding how a term as non-places can take life in a scientific discipline as anthropology. Of course, the idea of non-places not only defies classical ethnological and anthropological body of knowledge but also the ontology of what philosophically we can understand as a place. Augé combines traditional texts as Durkheim, de Certeau or Chateaubriand looking for further support but his interpretation remains out of context. Like Chateaubriand, M. De Certeau is concerned in analyzing the function of sacred spaces in a time where secularization is wreaking havoc in religious believers. For that reason, we will in following section to discuss critically the fundamental inconsistencies of this theory. However, this seems to be a surface manifestation of a much more deep-seated issue.

Mobility and modernism
(initial discussion)

On an article of immeasurable quality, John Urry (2007) addresses the concept of mobility and culture applied on the field of displacement, acculturation and migration. From a poststructuralist point of view, author realizes that today 600 millions of arrivals are registered annually whereas in 1950 that number was only for 25 millions, an insignificant cipher whether we compare tourist and migrant displacements with evolution of transport in 50 years. More than 500.000 news rooms inaugurated at hotels every year on tourism while roughly 23 millions of refugees strand around the globe.

The underlying problem is the prominence of visual image in different human scenarios. For instance, Urry is convinced people make tourism based on the dominance of esthetic over other cultural values; not only the reasons as to why people travel following resting purposes far-away from home but also an unquestionable growing of photography in all spheres of social life reflect the validity of his hypotheses. To wit, in a globalized society characterized by the logic of spectacle, journeys are encouraged as a vehicle towards happiness, development and emotional involvement. For that reason, nations are reinventing their boundaries and identities constantly in the interchange of tourists, migrants and workers. This new forms of displacements are part of social memory and broader acculturation processes wherein researchers should shed light on.

In a similar manner, on a second work authored by Carla Lois, we will come across with an examination about the representation Europeans had over the Atlantic Ocean as well as America in the XVI century D.C. Inasmuch as the geographical imaginary was related to the drawing of maps and cartography, Lois suggests that this Sea played in such a epoch a relevant role; therefore, explorers were needed to open a new channel for commerce between Europe and India. Technically, for the end of this century, the Atlantic Ocean had many denominations such as Mare Occidentale or Oceanus Occidentalis. In the popular wisdom, no need to say that these seas expressed more doubts than certainness. Under this spectrum, two elements characterized the old European imaginary by respecting to Atlantic Ocean, the abundance of Islands, and the belief that monsters lived at the bottom of the sea. An overview of the medieval literature reminded us that whereas islands encouraged explorers to cross the unknown seas in search of fame and glory, monsters made them to see how dangerous this adventure may be. Sociologically speaking, the discovery of an island condensed uttermost part of attractions for travelers emphasizing in the conquest, experience and feat. For the other hand, Lois acknowledges that monsters were circumscribed in the cartography as a mechanism to create moral symmetries constituting an image of a world congruent with other more complex schemes such as religion. Basically, popular wisdom in Europe valorized the experience of explorers most of them written in books in form of legends. Every discovery has been baptized with a religious name related to the culture of discoverer as well as the exacerbation of Eurocentric rhetoric. Taking her cue from M. Foucault, Lois introduces the notion of mirror which combines utopia and heterotopy. The term utopia refers to the pivotal role played by Atlantic in assigning to America an unreal place while heterotopy allows this ocean at hand materializing specific practices of hegemony and territorial appropriation.

Under such a context, it is strongly important to re-examine the notion of non-place as a space wherein there is no anthropological or relational involvment. This encompasses a condensation of presence and anonymity converging with a much more rapid and comfortable form of travelling. Just there, as Augé puts it, founding parents as Weber or Durkheim denounced a declination of reciprocity due to the advance of industrialization.

Limitations of Non-Places.

For readers who wishing have clear the point that Augé considers physical locations as non-places, it is important to mention our author is a well-known ethnologist and self-oriented in the art of observing. His experience in the field in Africa and Europe gives credibility and support to this development. Nonetheless, some points of his work should be critically re-considered. At a first glance, it is important to mention that Chateaubriand, Certeau and Durkheim -who were in fact concerned by respecting to secularization's advance-, deemed the place as a symbolic convergence between theory and human praxis. Since places are deemed as a product of social practices circumscribed to a determined tradition, it is impossible to argue that there are places which somehow transform them-selves in non-places. For example, airports like many other constructions have a name and are inserted in a history, a culture that likely travelers do not know but there exist.

Secondly, these sites take different symbolism depending on the role every actor plays; that way an airport can acquire a deep emotional sense for employees, migrants and expatriates who return to their own countries after a long absence. It is not necessary to go too far-away to realize airports represent for employees who work there something else than a simple territory. For expatriates an airport is frequently viewed as a much deeper feelings which trigger frustrations, happy or unhappy memories and homesickness. Solidarity and identity are concepts very complex to define; in part, expatriates hold a dual loyalty between the land of birth and adoption. A migrant is cut in two parts; one of them belongs to the land where he or she was born while other pertains to a future that almost all remain uncertain and fuzzy. Following this, Augé acknowledges that conversion from a place to a non-place depends upon involved perception. The question as to whether a person can see a place wherein other find a non-place is a subject difficult to grasp. ¿How can we scientifically determine what is or not a place?.

As a whole, we can find the following guidelines in Auge´s development: a) a saturation of sense is characterized by an hegemony of present produced by modernity; b) modern means of transport in conjugation with a revolution in communication fields generates a over-abundance of present; c) exacerbation of virtual territoriality exacerbate psychological ego towards mass-consumption. The condensation of present looses sight of tradition, past, history and identity. Anonymity of all travelers who are in movement disarticulates the liaison between symbols and soil. Terrorism that usually is triggered by attacking in non-places surfaces in response to the advance of modernity.

Third, there is a serious problem in the way Augé assumes modernity works in non-places. Legally, our author emphasizes on contractual relationship as a form of realizing we are in presence of a

place which lacks of history and tradition, in a contract both parts agree formally in honor certain commitments; of course this relation is characterized by formality and impersonality. At airports, traveler's identity is only verified whenever he or she is obliged to submit a personal document for further verification; in a major or lesser degree, tourists are accompanied with a veil of indifference. Unless otherwise resolved, tourism is trivialized as a mechanism capable to produce alienation and misunderstanding. With this background in mind, Augé has been seriously criticized because of many reasons we have already mentioned in other work published a couple of year ago (Korstanje, 2006). Ultimately, our French ethnologist seems to be unable to precise the contexts and reasons as to why a place can be transformed in a non-place; as previously emphasized, there are some specific cases that very well contrast with non-places theory such as strikes at airports, fatal accident in highways wherein friend and love ones pay homage to victim or a sporting triumph that congregates miles of fans for celebration purposes.

Finally, in an interesting essay, P. Wright calls into question about the essence of what we recognize as a space. The existence of spatial relationship depends on the inter-linkages of both or more subjects. Movement of elements that compose a specific space can be interpreted as the inception of own existence. This idea is accompanied with the belief that human interaction creates a circle of expression that converges with the capacities that human beings have to transform a space. From this interesting posture, any place is in such an anthropological location aside from its own degree of historicity (Wright, 1995).

Tourism as an impossible travel.

After further examination, Augé accepts that his frame-work shows some limitations. In a posterior book entitled as *toward anthropology of contemporary Worlds*, he will stress that *"what for one is a place can be a non-place for other and vice-versa. An airport -for example- is conditioned to the involving eyes of passenger who occasionally are en-route whereas inversely for workers this standpoint will vary substantially on"* (Augé, 1998a: 147).

Before closing the book on this issue, it is important to question ¿what is the role of history in this process?. Specifically, he distinguishes two interpretations along with history. For one hand, it can be examined as an instrument to register empirical facts in past re-elaborating symbolically the preference of society. In almost all groups coexists two antagonist tendencies, one linked to rememorize "golden times" by means of mythical archetype while the other is related with the history of future. ¿What does the history of future really mean?. Paradoxically, inasmuch as modern technology allows reducing distances and sites, otherness began to be considered as dangerous. Whereas a part of foreigners like tourists are welcomed the other migrants are generally disavowed. The logic of modernity entails to live every day in an extreme situation blurring the boundaries between actuality and history. Movement of post-modernity creates an immediate past in uncontrolled ways. This past seems to have nothing to do with historic conception of past it-self.

The life in urban areas looks to be experiencing a major saturation of images which attracts miles of tourists moved by needs of curiosity. Paradoxically, the same process depersonalizes the relationships between citizens while emerges the consumption, images, nets of information and news dissemination. Figures of outlanders who are obliged to exile in abroad as a migrant are relegated to live in anonymity. Western societies have institutionalized the journey as a stereotyped as a fictionalization of World. Risks that historically have characterized the needs for adventure have been collapsed thanks to a newer artificial way of making a travel, tourism (Augé, 1998: 15). In turn, travel agencies draw the globe inventing different paths and destination emulating a pseudo-contact between hosts and guests. Augé does not to hesitate to suggest that tourism stimulates a fictional reality which drives towards alienation. Philosophically, effects of tourism contribute to create a bubble where a customer pays for a travel or the lodging that has never existed. This type of staged reality reinforces previous imbalances of economy and jeopardizes a fairer wealthy re-distribution. Unlike other centuries, privacy is today put at order of non-conflict or better said, at the service of division between richness and poverty. The gap between fictionalized tourist destinations and peripherical zones of manual workers is being enlarged. As a consequence of this, modern tourism represents a tendency oriented to create a false-consciousness of otherness. Once again, in his three examined books, Augé describes his impression what for him it is real; the point of what is apparent is circumscribed to an ideology of over-look. Following the Kantian idea of synthetic judgment, Augé combines erroneously experience with a lineal causality. Pretending a hermeneutic posture, he trivializes tourism as a vehicle toward alienation and misinformation.

A more profound view on this issue suggests Augé does not understand that hermeneutic (a disciplined based on the subject interpretation of context) does not upend the object from subject. Broadly speaking for this philosophical wave, image is image, travel is travel and dream is dream. On contrary, Augé insists that social fact in their complexity do not depend on a lineal causality but are mutually influenced. In a kind of spurean cyclic causality, cause and consequence are inevitably merged. In accordance to this, his explanation gets the matter darker than clearer. A well-known anthropologist H. Belting criticized to Augé that *"the production of imaginary is subject to a broader social process, for what anyone can understand that fiction does not occupy the place of imaginary. Auge in person, who holds an argument of this nature, should realize that an image cannot be another thing than an image. The power that involves an image is given by us. That follows, anyway, it is not pretty anonymous to exscind the ego from there"* (Belting, 2007: 102). In part, even though Augé has set certain precedents in emphasizing in regards to the bridge between identity and soil, his development should be put under scrutiny.

Conclusion

Quite apart from the afore-mentioned serious limitations we have examined in this paper, a second point of entry can be how an argument like this has been introduced, accepted, adopted and disseminated in anthropological academy and culture studies. An alternative answer would be that postmodern literature seems to be inextricably related to the theory of complexity. Versed on a hard rhetoric of paradox, this body of knowledge is unclear and overcomplicated. Enrooted in the belief as more difficult to read the better and more credible for

scholars, popular wisdom accepted non-place theory without any qualms. Thus, with emphasis on the facts that theory of non-places has gained a considerable attention and acceptance in Social Science and beyond, the present exploratory article was aimed at debating critically its own main limitations and ethical dilemmas. In brief, there is no place in the world that can be named non-place or emptied of sense. Any sites where people pass or reside are spaces with less or more symbolic liaison. The question as to why a site can be pointed out as a non-place still remains unresolved.

Ethically speaking, theory of non-places facilitates many things for aristocracy assuming that people living in these spaces are persons who lack of rights, duties, dreams and fears. Perhaps, this reflects the volume of sales that the book of Auge had in past. In general, it is not surprising that non-places lodge day-to-day many people who are relegated to live under the line of poverty; they may very well be homeless, vagrants, out-landers, and exiled people who do not have a good position on a hierarchal society –in terms of Derrida (2006) all who does not have an overt sense of hospitality-. Implicitly, people who live in non-place can be named non-persons. Of course, bus and train station give protection to citizens who characterize to be out of the health and economic system. Under such a context, Auge´s treatment not only remains unable to provide a serious explanation as to why the absence of Nation-State in covering basic needs of its own citizenship is increasing but also his perspective looks to be ethnocentric. To the best of our knowledge, the question as to whether Non-places engender non-persons or non-rights still remains unresolved and functional to hegemonic interests.

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