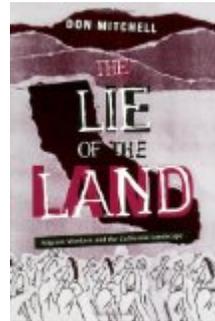


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Don Mitchell. *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. xi + 245 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2692-2.

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Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1996)



## Migrant Workers, California, and The Land

There is no shortage of books on the agricultural history of California and its migrant workers. But Don Mitchell's *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* is, in a double sense, ground breaking. Its originality lies in its analysis of the way that landscape has been produced in the Golden State.

Mitchell joins a group of art historians, environmental historians and geographers like himself—W. J. T. Mitchell, Mike Davis, William Cronon and Edward Soja, among others—who are re-examining landscape, not simply as a species of artistic representation, but as the process, at once material and symbolic, of re-shaping our natural and cultural environment. Mitchell has little patience for approaches which untether landscapes from the ground to which they refer by considering them to be “free floating.” He insists that landscape is a real space created historically, “a unity of materiality and representation, constructed out of the contest between various social groups” (p. 28). From his neo-Marxist framework, landscape is the contested creation of workers and capitalists and, therefore, its evaluation raises more questions of political economy than aesthetics. To analyze the particular formation of California's rural landscape, Mitchell brings the labor history of migrant workers into contact with the theoretical insights yielded from the group of scholars involved in what Soja calls the “reassertion of space in critical social theory.” This proves to be a fertile encounter.

His narrative begins with an analysis of the Wheatland Riot which erupted during a strike at a Sacramento

Valley hop ranch in 1913. Having been subjected to spectacularly bad conditions, workers went out on strike behind the leadership of former Industrial Workers of the World member Richard “Blackie” Ford. When a posse confronted the strikers, a riot broke out and two workers, a deputy, and the district attorney were killed. Mitchell claims that the event became a “fulcrum for leveraging a simultaneous progressive and repressive transformation of the California agricultural landscape” (p. 40). Partly in response to Wheatland, Governor Hiram Johnson's new Commission on Immigration and Housing (CIH) was mobilized. Mitchell points out that the CIH proposed an “environmental” solution to such labor strife: better living conditions would lead to worker contentment. By making the reproduction of labor power efficient by making workers and working conditions clean and modern, the promise of scientific management could be fully realized in California's agricultural fields. At the same time as it was working to improve camp conditions, the CIH also spied on the IWW and did everything in its power to neutralize the Wobblies.

In addressing this seeming contradiction—“progressive and repressive transformation” working together—Mitchell adds to our understanding of Progressives by revealing how they tended to see the agricultural landscape and the workers who toiled on it. Instead of asking political and social questions about the structure of California's emerging system of agribusiness, Progressive reformers proposed a “landscape solution” to the problem of worker unrest. By rationalizing the flow of labor and modernizing worker housing, the labor

problem and laborers themselves would be *fixed*. But Mitchell shows that this solution would actually disempower workers for it would make them more subject to repressive power. For workers, mobility was a form of power useful in waging strikes and evading systems of surveillance. In this dynamic, Mitchell finds an essential pattern: “The history of the California landscape is the history, on one side, of finding ways to control the movement of labor, and, on the other, of finding the means to make that mobility subversive” (p. 195).

Mitchell carries the story through the Depression, showing how growers’ organizations like the Associated Farmers worked to objectify and racialize workers by controlling space and how worker’s organizations like the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union employed spatial strategies to resist exploitation. Indeed, he persuasively argues that the drama of migrant workers that fully came to the nation’s attention in 1939 with the publication of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Carey McWilliams’ *Factories in the Field* was the product of a long-standing struggle over the meaning, use, and nature of landscape.

Mitchell draws heavily on the records of the CIH, which, with the exception of one dissertation written in 1942, have not been utilized. In fact, the CIH has received scant scholarly attention in the 28 years since Spencer Olin addressed the topic in *California’s Prodigal Sons*. By making excellent use of these and other primary sources, Mitchell’s cogent discussions of landscape and critical so-

cial theory are elaborated in a rich empirical web.

However, his use of the secondary literature is not without some problems. While I would grant that Mitchell’s approach does an exceptional job of revealing how the “California Dream” was built up out of systematic repression, it is not entirely fair to judge Kevin Starr (who has just completed his fourth volume in his history of that Dream) to be naively complicit in “erasing the traces of work and struggle” (p. 20). Starr certainly recognizes the ideological dimensions of the myth of California as a rural idyll, explicitly pointing out that “the nomadic farm workers of California [were] bearing these myths on their backs” (see *Inventing the Dream*, pp. 165-75). In addition, Mitchell might have taken advantage of James Gregory’s *American Exodus* and Vicki Ruiz’s *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* in order to add to his interpretation of how “Okies” inscribed their culture into California’s landscape and how gender and Mexican identity were part of the workers’ struggle over landscape.

*The Lie of the Land* is an original and provocative work, an admirably grounded effort to critically evaluate the power of landscape in California. It is a book to be reckoned with, and not only by those who are concerned with California’s cultural landscape. For anyone who wants to know more about how space is being reasserted in critical social theory, Mitchell’s book supplies at once a road map and an eye-opening journey into this promising new terrain.

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**Citation:** Douglas C. Sackman. Review of Mitchell, Don, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=589>

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