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Thinking about Place and Culture: An American Geographer in Catalunya[1]

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Abstract

In this essay on the geography of the heart, I use my experience in Catalunya to elaborate how geographers discover place and how a foreign encounter can transform one's thinking. Intellectual inspiration in this trajectory has come from Goethe (self-aware traveler with an open mind); Herder (originator of the notion of cultural-linguistic diversity), A. Humboldt (scientist curious about foreign lands); Royce (philosopher of the periphery); and Sauer (maestro of a cultural historical approach to geography). Learning about place at three scales has been a process of discovery illuminated by revisitation, reflection, and comparison. The small city of Olot has offered perspectives on pedestrian—oriented urban living; the comarca of La Garrotxa has stimulated thinking about the logic of an environmenteally coherent micro-region; and Catalunya has provided an example of how soli-

[1] I have chosen to use the endonym 'Catalunya' rather than the English exonym of 'Catalonia.' Insistence on the local usage of place-names legitimizes the linguistic character of a nation. Insensitivity to politico-cultural change in the Spanish state is apparent in a world gazetteer published in the United States that gave preference to Castilian place-names (e.g. Gerona rather than Girona) in the entries for the *països catalans* (Cohen 1998).

darity, a sense of the past, but also the conjuncture of the Zeitgeist, have led to an extraordinary cultural resurgence.

Key words: Place, culture, language, comarca, Catalunya, Olot, Garrotxa

1. Introduction

Like philatelists collecting stamps, geographers collect places and store them in their memory bank. Yet how these spatially-trained people discover for themselves over the course of a lifetime the structure of the world has rarely been examined. The literature of geography is virtually devoid of individual accounts of how a place epistemologically unfolds in one's consciousness. Considering that the process of professors teaching students offers many clues to how that learning works, it is an unexpected omission. A geographer assimilates many places as part of his or her travelsx and readings. Those remembered best are either written about, periodically revisited, or perhaps embedded in the brain by a special experience.

2. Geographers and Place

Geographers use two complementary ways to think about places they encounter; one scientifically ("geography of the head") and the other humanistically ("geography of the heart"). The former approach distills a mass of data to provide an objectivized assessment of the place. The latter takes a hermeneutic stance by discerning a location imbued with particular human values. As such, it has an ability to coax introspection of personal biases and cultural filters. Berdoulay (1999, p.571) epigrammatically expressed that process as a «jeu de miroirs qui se dédouble dès que le géographe s'intéresse à la culture.» However one approaches place, its definition remains that of a bounded space of widely varying extent that has a particular human identity and an identifiable landscape. A place reveals itself with ever increasing complexity to the person studying it. Revisitation winnows previous assessments to provide a more accurate and better rounded perspective. Fragments of knowledge interconnect to create configurations that raise new questions and demand complex answers. Considered as a never-ending organic process, learning about a place becomes the stuff of memories. It adds to a personal fund of knowledge about the world at the same time that it forces us to come to grips with our own cultural filter. Interpretation of place cannot be dissociated from who we are as individuals with our own life experiences and the background brought to it. At the same time, learning about a new place, especially one based on foreign travel, can have a transformative effect.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe's travel accounts form an inspiration for peripatetic geographers who place high value on individualized forms of human experience and a geography of the heart. Local variations and the particularities of different places charmed him and gave him an appreciation of the unrepeatable uniqueness of a point in space and time. Goethe's awareness of the meaning of travel to other lands led to his observation that "all the things surrounding us from infancy persist forever as something common and trivial to our eyes." Implicit in that remark is the realization that new places can stimulate the thought processes of outsiders to see landscapes and peoples in unexpected ways. Foreigners have frequently offered valuable perspectives about a place different from those that engaged local scholars. That the professional stranger sometimes has useful insights is suggested by the saying that "the visitor usually brings a sharp knife." Among geographers, Alexander von Humboldt remains the classic example of how a fundamental curiosity combined with cultural dislocation can fruitfully open a compelling new dimension of understanding about the world we live on. In the United States, a Prussian model of scholarship gave rise to the concept of advanced graduate training, academic freedom, and a Humboldtian tradition of transcultural research. Many American geographers have done their dissertation research on other countries and participate in foreign area studies programs.

At the same time, however, geography in the USA has a feeble or nonexistent jrole in many secondary schools and universities.[2] One result of that subject matter absence has been a lack of awareness on the part of the general population about places and resources at home and abroad. A citizenry generally poorly informed about the world has made it more possible for several American governments to unleash problematical military adventures in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

A desirable travel destination and the ancestral origin of most of the U.S. population have made the average American somewhat more knowledgeable about Europe. The American mental map of the continent is nevertheless sketchy: Paris yes, Nice, maybe, but not Limoges or Pau. Spain has a place in the American imagination, but it is glossed with patent unreality in its attachment to the Andalusian folkloric stereotypes of a previous era. Extrapolation of my own sample inquiries suggests that Catalunya is not an identifiable part of Europe for more than 80 percent of Americans over 18 years of age. Unlike the German *Gymnasium* or French *lycée*, the typical American high school has no systematic requirement to learn about the lands

[2] It is worth pondering why geography in the United States, though with a professional past going back to 1901 and more geographers than any other country (ca. 10,000), is nevertheless less successful than professional geography in Catalunya (Montaner and Sau, 2004). Catalan geographers have been part of the national project of recent decades, and before that, played a role in questions of territory in the Republic. American geographers have been more in their ivory towers. With some exceptions, they have not been influential in public policy nor did they, at a critical time, work with state boards of education that would have assured a place for geography in school curricula.

and peoples of an ever-shrinking planet earth. Only a small fraction of the American students who go on to university learn the basic geographical patterns of earth climates, fossil fuel distributions, or languages of the world. Learning about geographical place and process with an American education can thus be happenstance and idiosyncratic.

3. Unfolding Catalunya

Personal appreciation of Catalunya as a territorial space with its own individual character has progressively revealed itself over the years. My first formal study of the geography of Europe, in 1958, came at a university level, but it included hardly a mention of the Iberian Peninsula. The professor had apparently taken seriously the cliché, then widespread, that "Europe stopped at the Pyrenees." Impetus to initiate my learning curve about Iberia came by way of Latin America (Gade, 2001a; 2001b). Living and traveling in the Andes during parts of the 1960s led me to frame questions about its cultural-historical geography that made it impossible to ignore Spain. Finally, in 1973, Iberia called and Barcelona was my introduction to it. On that visit, Catalan identity was still largely submerged to the traveling outsider. Only later did I appreciate the significance of the fact that my interlocutors in Barcelona were originally from Andalusia who were not well equipped to guide one into the cultural layers beneath Franco's imposition.

3.1. Sorting out the underground

My moment of personal epiphany came on Palm Sunday in the medieval core. There, amid the frond-bedecked crowd in the parvis of the Cathedral, young and old people together (a rare sight in America) were engaged in a circular dance accompanied by a wind band. No signs, speeches or even introductions accompanied this display, but given the presence of musicians, it was obviously not spontaneous. The setting and timing suggested that more was going on than just entertainment. In the *sardana* I had witnessed a gentle act of resistance to the cultural hegemony of the Madrid government. While its performance in 1973 did not constitute a political transgression. I learned that in the earlier and most repressive period of the Franco dictatorship, the sardana had been banned. This dance has been long part of Catalan folklore and its symbolism could not be missed. A visit to the Benedictine abbey of Montserrat would have revealed more overt manifestations of Catalan identity. Only when I recrossed back into France by way of Andorra, where I bought my first Catalan grammar, did I become aware of Catalan as a street vernacular. Although Catalan was the official language in the Principality, only about half the population there actually spoke it. The con-

tradiction that that represented to a North American was but a tiny factoid in the complicated linguistic montage of Europe.

My next visit to Catalunya occurred in the context of the 1986 IGU meetings, by which time, the Generalitat and its constituent municipalities had reestablished a public Catalan identity. Reading had ill-prepared me for the remarkable resurgence that had occurred in the decade since the restoration of democracy. A profound shift in mentality since my previous visit had occurred. The changes apparent in the city had not yet entered some basic reference works in geography. The regional treatment of Spain in Terán and Solé Sabarís (1978) made no reference to Catalan identity or to the *països catalans*, nor did the second edition of Terán, Solé Sabarís and Vilà Valenti (1986) in their basic systematic treatment of Spain.[3]

At another level, however, the role of geographers in the Catalan effervescence was clear. Before the main Barcelona event, Professor Maria Bolòs and colleagues had organized at Banyoles the IGU commission meetings on landscape geography. It was largely an occasion for Catalan geographers to demonstrate the role of land-use planning as a tool in crafting a country or what the Catalans have called "*fer païs.*" Contrast with the USA, where many states, counties and even quite a few municipalities have had no land use or zoning plans, could not have been sharper. The case of Catalunya was not the first time that regional planning has been wedded to nation building.

Participants in these meetings benefited from superb excursions to the landscapes north of Banyoles that introduced the logic of the comarca and included stops in Girona, Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Besalú, Olot, Castellfollit de la Roca, Ripoll and La Molina. Some 30 km east of Girona in La Garrotxa, a volcanic landscape extended within the urban perimeter of Olot. In that small city, the municipality gave the contingent of visiting geographers an elegant reception. No American city of comparable or even larger size would have sponsored such an event, lest taxpayers complained that the municipal function was to provide basic services. The city as a vehicle of culture is very much a European idea.

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[3] Silence about Catalan specificity within educational materials published in Spain contrasted with three English-language pedagogical manuals written during the Franco period. The British geographer Shackleton (1964, p.114) wrote that "Catalonia has a strongly pronounced regional consciousness, probably the most highly developed in Spain and certainly the most vocal. The consciousness is anti-Castilian and is based on profound differences of environment, language, and historical development between the bustling Mediterranean regional and the aloof inland Castile." Gottmann's (1969, p.451) spare comment that " the Catalan people are somewhat less austere than the average Spaniard" contrasted with a more forthright remark from the American geographer Malmström (1971, p.41), who informed his readers that "most of the eastern face of Iberia is not really 'Spanish' at all, but Catalan. The Catalan people have a distinct language, literature, and history of their own."

3.2. Thinking about the comarca

My third visit to Catalonia in 2001 led to another level of comprehension about Catalunya, not from traveling more widely, but by going back to the same Pyrenean foothill zone. I was especially drawn to La Garrotxa to better grasp the character of this comarca with its delicious tectonic remains, important maize cultivation, beech forests, and strong sense of *catalanitat*. These generalizations falter in the northern part of the comarca where sharp mountain relief, pine and evergreen oak forests, and widespread farm abandonment stand out. Interviewees told Nogué (1983) that the high country ("land harsh and difficult to traverse") was the *real* La Garrotxa. Wielding the Alta Garrotxa with the part of the comarca in the valley of the Fluvià River has been the Olot weekly market. Re-implementation in 1987 of the organization of Catalunya implemented in 1936 for a brief period into comarcas (though 41 instead of the original 38 and with some different boundaries) was a kind of poetic justice as applied to space and place. In so doing, Catalunya superimposed for second time its own conceptualization of space different from the provincial system that the Spanish state had imposed in 1837. Comarca organization owed much to a Catalan geographer, Pau Vila i Dinarès (1881-1980), who in 1931 drew up at the behest of the Generalitat territories based on physical relief, road infrastructure, and the market network (Garcia-Ramon and Nogué-Font, 1991).

3.3 The linguistic imperative

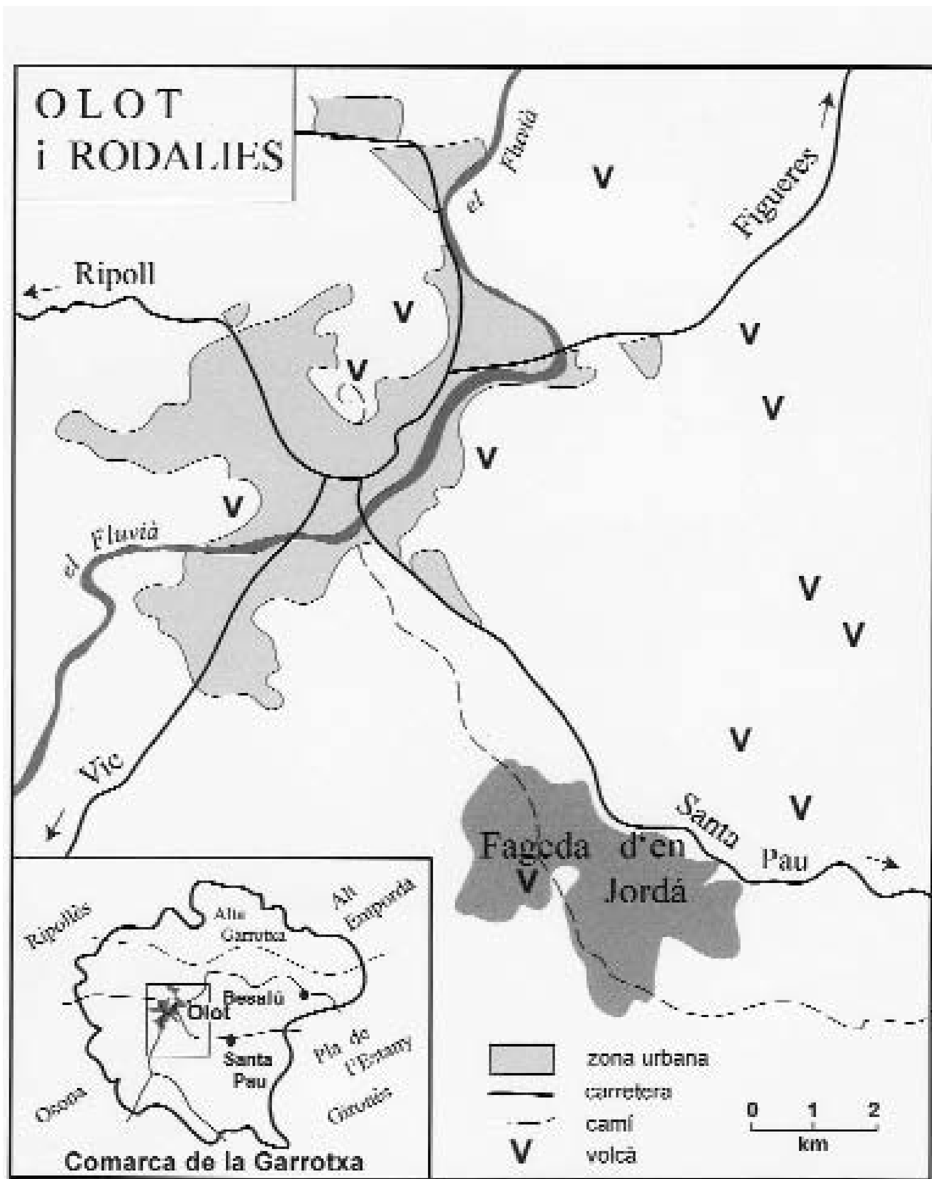
My next two visits to Olot and its comarca, in 2002 and 2003, exponentially enhanced my understanding of the cultural resurgence. By then I had realized the need to establish my own linguistic contact with Catalan, an effort, however, that was only partly successful. Although I learned to read almost everything with good comprehension and even to write Catalan, albeit with grammatical and stylistic deficiencies, speaking was the biggest challenge. Catalan bilingualism slowed my progress, to which was added a view of their language as an in-group mode of communication. Efforts to speak Catalan sometimes seemed like trespassing into a private domain. Both factors lowered the interlocutory expectation on people perceived as non-Catalan. Yet Llobera (2003) and others have argued that Catalan identity is achieved rather than ascribed as noted in the successful policy of educating non-Catalans who live in Catalunya in Catalan. At the same time, however, a substantial number of Catalans write mainly in Castilian, the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Barcelona is published in Castilian, and Barcelona has remained as one of the world's three main Castilian-language publishing centers in the world. The *països catalans* as a sociolinguistic region and Catalunya as a geopolitical space manifest unusual and sometimes perplexing patterns.

Besides language, the other avenue to understanding Olot was to uncover its past, especially the twentieth century. Documents in the local archives revealed the authoritarianism of the Franco years carried out by Catalan officials not administrators brought in from elsewhere. Local toponymy changed to Castilian forms aimed to make Olot a "Spanish" town. In the late 1970s and the return of a democratically elected municipal council, the process was reversed and Catalan was triumphantly restored. Yet much of Olot's built landscape has reflected not so much a specific Catalan character as it does an industrial economy that started with the water power generated on the Fluvià. Any one who probes the local history would find puzzling a description of Olot as a conservative Carlist town where the main economic activity was making religious statuary.

4. Urban character of Olot

Olot is far from being an aesthetically impeccable city. Unprepossessing building facades dominate many streets, as if the collective memory of a still remembered earthquake risk led to an architectural minimalism. As elsewhere in Europe, part of the city's old core has turned into a low-rent neighborhood for immigrant workers. Like most self-respecting Catalan cities, Olot has its rambla. The bourgeois element in the town is most apparent in a residential neighborhood, the Eixample Malagrida, laid out in a felicitous radial pattern by an Olot entrepreneur who had made his fortune in Cuba.

Olot's relative tranquility comes from a marginalized transportation structure . No trains come through there any more; the track has been torn up and replaced by a bike path. The highways are modest, though Olot seems more isolated than it really is: it lies only 30 km from the north-south autoroute that connects Barcelona to France and Europe. Within the city, the automobile has not disaggregated the generally compact settlement arrangement. Olot is a town where daily displacements on foot still prevail, because most people—apartment dwellers in large measure—live within 1.5 kilometers of the core. The daily market near the hospital and the larger Monday market on the rambla as well as most shops are still found in the center of town. The kind of commercial development that occurs on the fringes of most American towns of similar size are still absent in Olot. Walking here is the natural mode of locomotion. Access to the four volcanoes is by foot. The idea of walkability extends beyond the urban perimeter to the Fageda de Jordà. This large beech woods growing on an ancient lava flow is dear to the hearts of *olotins* who hike through it on trails in its different seasonal moods. Olot's own lyric tradition of landscape painting founded in the nineteenth century drew much of its inspiration from the variegated forest often shrouded in mist. Excursions through it have also inspired poetic sentiments: «La fageda d'en Jordà/gran joia preciosa és/a la Garrotxa Déu posà/per a veïns i foras-


OLOT
i RODALIES
Ripoll
Figueres
el Fluvià
el Fluvià
Vic
Santa Pau
Fageda d'en Jordá
Ripollès
Alta Garrotxa
Alt Empordà
Besalú
Olot
Santa Pau
Pla de l'Estany
Osona
Gironès
Comarca de la Garrotxa
zona urbana
carretera
camí
volcà
0 1 2
km

ters» (Bayona 2001:19). Some of my affection for La Garrotxa has come from crossover identification of this, the rainiest and greenest comarca in Catalunya, with my own "Green Mountain State" of Vermont.

5. Olot and its comarca as models for wider reflection

The experience of Olot opened me to a place that became a vehicle to better understand Catalunya at large. In addition, it has provided me with a *lloc modelic* to reflect on my own North American culture. Though Catalans and Americans share many core values of Western civilization, they have had different histories and manifest some different cultural assumptions. For example, Americans tend to privilege the periphery rather than the center.[4] Intellectuals in Barcelona have formulated their ideas about linguistic policy and the Catalan resurgence and spread them to the corners of Catalunya and the other *països catalans*. But cosmopolitan Barcelona has many residents and visitors who do not conduct their affairs in Catalan. To me, Olot, a town with few outsiders and a strong Catalan character, seemed like a good place to get to know precisely because of its relative isolation. An American philosopher, Josiah Royce (1855-1916) believed that an overconcentration of anything was a hindrance to a healthy society manifests a point of view quite different from that found in Europe. Distrust of centralized power explains why Americans have placed large and complex universities in small towns (for example, Bloomington, India; Princeton, New Jersey, Amherst, Massachusetts; Gainesville, Florida) or why many state capitals are in small cities (Montpelier, Vermont; Springfield, Illinois). Yet I am also willing to admit that European cities may benefit in other ways by their wide functional mix. Inhabitants of Chicago, Houston, Miami and Detroit may wonder what their cities would be like if they had been so fortunate to acquire all the functions of Barcelona, with its capital of the Generalitat and the seat of the two biggest and oldest universities.

5.1 Clustered living vs. sprawl

Olot has a relative compactness that contrasts with many North American cities in the same size category and beyond. Low-density sprawl characterizes the American settlement fabric to facilitate the driving and parking of private vehicles. That emphasis on wheeled mobility has displaced commerce to the fringe and created a diffuse landscape of individual dwellings on large

[4] Many Europeans assume that New York and Chicago must be important centers of geographical research in the United States. Smaller American cities such as Austin, Madison, Berkeley and Baton Rouge contribute more in this regard, as have even smaller places such as Athens (Georgia), State College (Pennsylvania); Boulder (Colorado) or Lawrence (Kansas), the last four cities of less than 100,000 people.

lots. A more recent settlement trend has been exurban expansion into the rural countryside beyond cities. At rush hours, the rural roads are choked with traffic and the daily commutes to work average 40 to 50 minutes. In the middle class, typically every family member aged 16 and above, owns his or her own vehicle and, outside of some northeastern cities, poor people in America must also have their own car. That preference has consequences ranging from obesity (23% of the U.S. population) to resource depletion, global warming, and international politics. America's fleet of more than 200 million cars, many of them large and heavy, guzzles 11 percent of the world's daily petroleum output. Commuting as an aspect of daily life in America has also had a psychological effect on loosening civic engagement, social connectedness and place identity. One Catalan writer, Pep Subirós (1986) described car-obsessed Los Angeles (*anticiutat del Nou Món*) in these terms:

> "*If strolling downtown during the day is uninteresting and even rather depressing, it is decidedly frightening during the evening. A few cars are still moving about, though not many, and very few pedestrians and, among those, no strollers at all. There is really nothing to see nor, so it seems, anywhere to go. Offices and shops are closed except for a couple of places like tacky movie theatres that repel rather than invite. In this desert, when you see a group of three or four individuals approaching, you don't know whether to greet them or start to run away from them.*"[5]

Many American cities large and small follow the script of high automobile dependency. Large metropolitan areas—Atlanta, Phoenix, Kansas City or Houston—but also small cities the size of Olot such as St. George, Utah, Biloxi, Mississippi or Lewiston, Idaho have distended physical layouts that discourage pedestrian movement. They have created a "geography of nowhere," which is also the title of a scathing book on the way Americans have reconfigured their cities to benefit cars more than people (Kunstler 1993). Olot and all cities of Catalunya manifest some aspects of automobile culture, but in those with which I am familiar, cars have not been allowed to destroy the core. Municipal automobile storage facilities are discretely placed underground. The desire for convenience is not as high a value as it is in North America; thus, for example, Olot has no commercial establishments with a drive-through window. Strip malls do not dominate the access highways into the center. In clustered Olot, cars are much less necessary for everyday life. Olot is 4 km at its longest extent, but more than 75 percent of the population live within 1.5 km of the core. Apartment living is the rule,

[5] The original text is: "Si passejar pel *downtown* durant el dia és poc interessant, i més aviat depriment, durant la nit fa decididament por. Encara circulen alguns cotxes, però no gaires, vianants poquíssims i de passejants cap. Realment, no hi ha res a veure ni, pel que sembla, enlloc on anar. Oficines i botigues estan tancades, i un parell de locals i sales de cinema de mala mort conviden més aviat a allunyar-se'n En aquest desert, quan veus apropar-se un grup de tres o quatre individus, dubtes entre anar-los a abraçar o arrencar a córrer. "

which means that olotins are less involved in house repair and upkeep and thus have more discretionary time for community and other activities. Olot's high density pattern has origins in pre-modern defensive factors, but also in a Mediterranean ethos of sociability and, more recently, zoning policy to direct growth. Fewer obese people are found in Olot than in a comparable American city; but how much of that difference is related to more walking in the former and more driving in the later can only be surmised.

5.2 Comarca and regional definition

My encounter with the *comarca* awakened a latent interest in the notion of the bioregion. Coined as a neologism during the counterculture movement of the 1970s, the bioregion refers to a bounded area with a coherence defined by the lay of the land, usually one formed by part of a watershed. Its value as a spatial concept is to encourage inhabitants to think locally and act environmentally. Though still largely a theoretical idea in the United States, the interest in the bioregion constitutes a reaction against an administrative geography that has defined the boundaries of states, counties, and townships, in terms of geometrically delimited rectangles. Even parts of the Canadian and Mexican boundaries were set along a latitudinal line that had nothing to do with natural or cultural division on the land. At least four political levels, geometric boundaries reflect the imposition of an artificial order on the landscape and human behavior. Countering this infelicitous way of delimiting spatial units is the comarca, a territorial entity that has grouped populations, roughly speaking, into physiographic areas, rather than astronomically determined divisions. The comarca also has an historical meaning of people inscribed on the land through tradition and the resources of a place. Comarcas lend themselves to sound land-use planning and sensible tourist development, and while they cannot be the framework for all public or private services, they succeed in bringing together town and countryside into a felicitous functional unit. The comarca enhances a rooted identity, each with its own set of characteristics, so that the *comarques* as a composite highlight, rather than diminish, the regional diversity within Catalunya. If only from an ecological point of view, North America is ripe for a bioregional revolution of this sort. Catalunya is a fruitful model for understanding the multiple factors that go into comarcal composition and learning about the politics of comarcal implementation.

5.3 Cultural identity: Catalunya vs. USA

My sojourns in Olot as a *foraster pensant* opened a space of reflection about certain contrasts in American and Catalan cultures. A reverse process has been at work between the two. Whereas ethno-identity in the USA has replaced an earlier immigrant one lost to the melting pot, in Catalunya, an ethno-identity has undergone a late twentieth century retrieval from a government that sought to impose the melting pot in the interests of Hispanic unity. In the American case, a coherent nation-state could not have evolved if individual ties to an ancestral past had not been severed. The "multi-culturalism" so much discussed in the years before September 11, 2001 was actually a residue of recent heavy immigration. Newcomers necessarily maintain aspects of the cultures into which they were born, but their children and especially grandchildren are part of the inexorable homogenization process of Americanization that has gone on now for more than three centuries. That cultural and linguistic surrender occurred millions of times in the formative years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and helps to explain a subconscious American attitude—implicit in the title of the song "we are the world"— that everyone on the planet would benefit from speaking English. Globalization had encouraged that attitude, and now even non-native English speakers are inclined to share that notion. At the same time, many assimilated Americans carry a sense of loss at the demise of an ancestral culture and with it a language that was part of their own heritage.

Catalunya has reversed the assimilationist project that prevailed for almost four decades. Catalan identity was forced to go underground when the language was banned from local government, business and commerce, schools at all levels, mass media and public use in general.[6] The revival of a public Catalan identity attests to a refusal to accept that trajectory. Accounts of this remarkable turn-about have emphasized how return to democracy in 1977 set in motion the cultural resurgence, but a larger dynamic in the late twentieth century world has had a part to play in the process. Groups with their own language, previously suppressed or just ignored, have asserted their cultural character as a matter of political and human rights. Ethnic recuperation and language revivals were part of the *air du temps* that revived a romantic idea going back to the eighteenth century. The movement revalidating the linkage between language and nationhood owes much to Johann Herder (1744-1803) who believed that a linguistically separate collectively had language as its most central fact of existence and vital source of its creativity.

[6] The Francoist injunction against Catalan culture was nuanced, for many exceptions to this generalization occurred later in the dictatorship. An example was the publication in Catalan of Vicens i Vives (1962), who had published four editions of his remarkable book between 1954 and 1969. However, much of his book analyzed Catalan formation during the Middle Ages and he did not criticize the Spanish state, the Generalísimo nor did he profer any comment on the Civil War.

Two observations had triggered Herder's reflection on this subject. In France, the central government ruthlessly suppressed minority cultures to the point of obliteration. In the land of the Germans, Herder realized that Slavic-speaking groups, though considered backward, had the right to preserve their language and maintain their identity. This key forerunner of Romanticism belonged to a line of thought that insisted that "not only that…there are diverse excellences, but that diversity itself is of the essence of excellence" (Lovejoy, 1936, p. 293). Catalans have implemented the Herderian message as much because of the Zeitgeist as it was a reaction to the Franco dictatorship. Reinforcement of Catalan aspirations as one of the nationalities of Europe has come from the European Union. The Spanish state has shown flexibility on important issues, some of which can be attributed to the s*eny* and shrewd wisdom of Jordi Pujol, centrist banker and political genius, during a crucial period. Multiple factors explain the Catalan achievement

In Olot, the scriptorial landscape—defined here as words writ large on signs, inscriptions, banners, graffitti and other public displays—is heavily in Catalan (Gade, 2004). Only exceptionally are signs also in Castilian, usually commercial firms that serve all of Spain, and sometimes those words are effaced. From one perspective, the heavily Catalan signscape is a function of the demographics in La Garrotxa that shows more than 90 percent native Catalan speakers (Burgueño Rivera, 1997, p.40). From another perspective, that unlingualism of the scriptorial landscape raises questions. According to the 1978 Constitution both Castilian and Catalan are the official languages of Catalunya. Most olotins are fluent also in Castilian and the administration of justice is still primarily in Castilian. In the last analysis, the Catalan face of Olot reflects not the bilingual reality, but a determination to cast off the Francoist imposition by banishing Castilian from public spaces. More than simple resentment about the past, the unilingual signage put in place in the 1980/1990s comes an appreciation of the power of the written word to galvanize Catalanist sentiment. As a symbolic mode of territorial appropriation, the signscape of Olot plays an active role in shaping Catalan identity.

If, in the USA, the self has been detached from a cultural context, in Catalunya (as in Québec) cultural identity politics are issues that enter individual consciousness. In this regard, the question is not how Castilian and Catalan differ as a language, but if and how they diverge in thought structures. Whorf's (1956) notion that a person's thought pattern is determined by the particular structure of his or her own language has generated much controversy but little illumination. Are Catalans more aware of the human qualities of *seny* –for which there is no equivalent in English–because a word for it exists in their lexicon? Words may be the moulds in which we see our thoughts, but that does not explain why and how, in any speech community, their use originated. If the Basques spoke Catalan rather than Euskara, would they also have acquired the *seny* needed to realize that violence offers no real

solution to their cultural self-realization? Though purely hypothetical, such a provocative question forces one to sort out the tie between the genius of a particular people and their language.

Catalan solidarity dominates the visual and the auditory landscapes in Olot, to which are added other manifestations with roots in the past. The *sardana*, which has a 150-year old symbolism in Catalunya, is a dance that embraces young and not so young, but as a spectacle, it cannot compare with the *castell.* Rising up to a breathtaking nine layers, these human towers involve an intricate construction and an even more delicate disassemblage. In both the *sardana* and *castell*, musical accompaniment sets the mood of anticipation and multi-generational participation, which in the case of the latter is obligatory. Mature men with solid bone and muscle at the base have to support the multiple higher layers of younger, lighter adolescents and then, at the top, a small, nimble and brave child given the special name of *enxaneta.* The *colla*, the club that provides the organizational structure for this athletic art form, might be seen as a special Catalan metaphor for community, one founded on ideas about teamwork that combines the ludic and serious. The sense of *catalanitat* reinforced by the fact that the *colles* perform at the same time (noon), day (Sunday) and venue (main square) in several other towns and cities in Catalunya.

Hiking, though not so culturally specific, is another Catalan tradition, which, like the sardana, was an organized way to express Catalan solidarity during the Franco regime. Garcia-Ramon and Nogué-Font (1994) described how Catalan geographers and others used the idea of hiking for the intellectual value of sharing landscape observations and, as an ulterior motive, to affirm an affective attachment to the home country. Catalanitat can also find expression in the conscious rejection of "Spanish" customs ("*tradicions espanyolistes*"). Olot has the third oldest *plaça de braus* in Catalunya, which has long held a tauromachian program during Olot's big celebration, the Festes del Tura in September. The movement in Catalunya that contests bullfighting, phrased in such slogans as "*no sigueu còmplices*!" or "*sardanes sí! corrides no*!", is not only or even primarily about animal protection. In June 2004 the Olot municipal government joined several other cities as "*ciutats antitaurines*," which has formed another way to symbolically reject a politico-cultural past that privileged Hispanic traditions.

5.4 Thinking about Catalunya, thinking about America

The ecological, urbanistic, and cultural dimensions of Olot and its hinterland have offered a comparison to think about alternatives. North Americans have created a society with a different kind of nationalism that has included the defeat of Nazism and then Soviet Communism, placement of a man on the moon, and invention of the Internet. However, military power, technolo-

gical prowess and liberal ideals have not created livable cities, stable communities, or, at an individual level, the art of living. The high degree of consumerism, energy-dependent mobility, and atomistic individualism that now dominates American life have not enhanced personal fulfillment, attachment to place, sense of community or a sound environmental future. This town of ca. 30,000 people in its sub-Pyrenean comarca of 47,000 inhabitants offers a counterpoint to certain trans-Atlantic presumptions. The project of recovering Catalan language and tradition has strengthened individual ties to a collective past. Americans live in a society of mobility, assimilation and youth worship that encourages them to cut free from their past.

Much about Olot, its comarca, and the Catalan *Volksgeist* remains for me to absorb: the particularistic inheritance system of *hereu* (and *pubilla*), the idiosyncrasies of *pairalisme*, and the concept of the *català de soca-rel.* Together they provide clues about how much Catalan identity is ascriptive or self-ascriptive and how much has a basis in genetics. Unless a foreign scholar can acquire that sense of the Catalan past in the present the temptation to take short cuts is real. Examples of a missing dimension is apparent in Nash's (1970) study, oblivious to the city's underlying Catalan traditions, of the American expatriate community in Barcelona. More incongruously, Hansen's (1977) book dismissed Catalan nationalism at the very moment it started to explode.

Catalan geographers now working in half a dozen universities and in other sectors have accumulated a storehouse of studies about their own much-loved piece of Europe. With some exceptions, particularly Deffontaines and Chevalier, geographers from the outside have rarely had much to add to knowledge, a situation different from Latin America. That is not to suggest that gaps do not exist, as I think about the origin and spread of the castell, local toponymic changes, rise and decline of bullfighting, and the shifting scriptorial landscapes in different cities. Some might suggest that the biggest task is to ensure a vibrant Catalan future. It would be hazardous, however, to assume long-term cultural stability for any region of the world or to predict that the USA will remain a superpower. Although Catalan culture has manifested a continuity—"*sentit de la pervivència*" (Vicens i Vives 1962, p. 213)— the essentialist position that cultures are immutable or quasi-eternal can not be sustained. In 2060, the world, including Catalunya, may be in a completely different mind set than it is today. More productive is to scrutinize the past to understand the present as suggested in the thesis of Vicens i Vives (1962, p. 23) that much of Catalan *seny* and compromise (*pactisme)* have come from being a cultural corridor (" *poble de passadís*"), open to various European influences.

6. Conclusion

My determined if incomplete unfolding of Olot, La Garrotxa, and Catalunya came from a New World perspective, an uncommon curiosity about the European legacy, and an affinity for Herderian pluralism. My topophilic memory list has assigned a privileged position to these places—-"*espais ben recordats*"—at three nested scales. A fundamental assumption of cultural-historical geography in the Sauerian tradition is that most things worth knowing about are embedded in the past.[7] Grounded observations of concrete places and the indispensability of their history are bolstered by the realization that, in the formulation of knowledge, we stand on the shoulders of giants. My view of knowledge as an accrual does not imply a rejection of representation and social construction as valuable dimensions to enrich our ideas of place. In this essay, the main contribution of postmodern thinking has been the realization of a need to overcome the separation of object and subject.

I have taken my baggage as a geographer grounded in a cultural-historical way of thinking but open to new ideas as accretions rather than replacements to observe a microcosm of Catalunya. That experience stimulated introspection on how these multiscalar entities manifest elements of sustainability and solidarity either lacking or diminished in the United States. Inter-cultural inquiry, especially when accompanied by a sense of the past, can make one a useful critic of his or her own society and in that way stimulate the course of one's individual growth. A reflexive stranger who appreciates that knowledge is as much about awareness as it is information saunters down the path toward geography of the heart.

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[7] In his review of a recent work on the "new cultural geography," Zelinsky (2005, p. 695) has noted the concept implicit in that work that only anglophone geography has something worthwhile to say and that, by extension, only works in English were worth citing. The book's stifling parochialism does not do justice to the words "cultural geography" in its title; more accurately, it should have been titled "A companion to social the-

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