

Scare quotes

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 74, No. 11, 19 November 2008

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“The relationship between place and power and the idea of being ‘out of place’ is truly fascinating from a post-colonial point of view, focussing on colonial re-inventions and subsequent representations of land and place as a strategy in establishing notions of ‘rightful’ ownership. The gendered representation of ‘place’ and ‘land’ is often tied closely with this colonial project. I have examined this in relation to the 1930-50 governmentally sponsored ‘Nation Building’ projects in South Africa, and focused on the representations of the gendered landscape in Afrikaans literature and painting.”

Not all academics write well. There—that cat’s out of the bag. The short passage above contains more than a few of the flaws typical of academic writing, and it’s a passage clearer and more readable than a lot of what academics commit to paper. But I want to talk specifically about scare quotes, about the practice of distancing oneself from a word or phrase by putting it between quotation marks.

Each of “out of place,” “rightful,” “place,” “land,” and “Nation Building” finds itself within quotation marks. But the author isn’t quoting any particular person who has used these words. He’s quoting, we must assume, what people in general say. He’s indicating that despite their popularity, these words are not his words. They are the words of unspecified other people.

In declaring that they are not his, but those of others, he tells us that there is something wrong with these words, something suspicious or distasteful about them. He doesn’t like them. There’s a hint that he is sneering at them, and at those who use them.

Now perhaps they are the wrong words. Perhaps they don’t convey the author’s own position on the topic. And yet the author doesn’t use his own words. He doesn’t tell us what, for instance, he would substitute for “out of place” that would present his meaning accurately. The author leaves us with “out of place,” though he instructs us that being out of place isn’t really what he has in mind.

When one says that something is out of place, and does so in just those words, one is using the phrase “out of place.” When one puts the phrase “out of place” within quotation marks, though, one is not using the phrase; rather, one is mentioning it. By putting scare quotes around the phrase “out of place” while letting it stand in for his own meaning, the author of the passage above is both using and mentioning that phrase at the same time.

Our author, then, is both saying that something is out of place and, yet, not saying that it is. That amounts to using the phrase while disavowing responsibility for using it.

Sometimes we can see through a piece of writing to a bit of rot within the writer.