



My Taxi Driver Spoke Swahili: American Dreams and Las Vegas Nightmares

**One Geographer's Reflections on Las Vegas
and the 2009 Annual meeting of
the Association of American Geographers**

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My taxi driver spoke Swahili. Samuel is a trained electrician who had been working in construction until the economic downturn. He'd struggled to get his Kenyan certificates accepted in the union hall and had been doing all right, even at only sixty-five percent of what his years of experience would net an American worker. His wife works as a nurse in a hospital. Two sons are at University of Las Vegas, and his daughter is in high school. Now he drives a taxi. This is the American dream for Samuel and for other construction workers, despite the economic downturn.

Other dreams were evident in Las Vegas. One is the infantile fantasy of universal and unlimited consumption. As in Philip Jose Farmer's *Riverworld*, the world is laid out linearly along The Strip for hygienic, instant, risk-free experience: Paris, Venice, Rome, the New York skyline, not to mention upscale shops like Neiman Marcus. Gargantuan MGM lions and Peanut M&M candies vie with replicas of a Persian winged lion, Roman statuary, and the Trevi Fountain—altogether making up an outdoor gallery of simulacra. In daylight and back a block from The Strip the underbelly of the dream is as mundane and blighted as it gets:



huge expanses of asphalt parking, marshalling yards filled with construction material, air conditioning, windowless blank walls of the utilitarian side of the casino hotels, a few blighted trees (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Las Vegas Underbelly



Source: Author's photograph

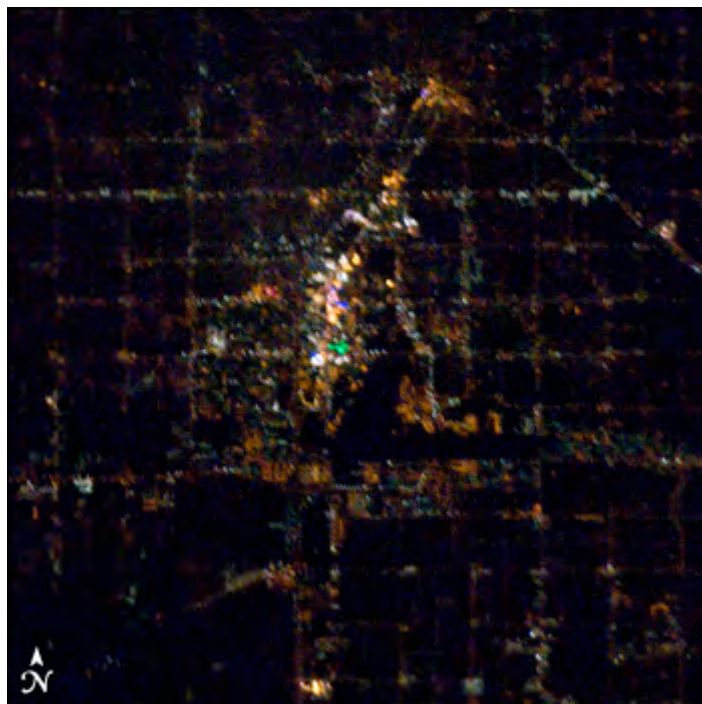
Other dreams border on the nightmarish, still others seem forlorn hopes, such as the “greening” of Las Vegas. Water is a limit to any human activity. Until now the city has depended on the Colorado River, but reservoir levels have been dropping, and stood at fifty percent of capacity in the summer of 2008. Nevada’s share of the river is much smaller than California’s, and historical modeling of river flow shows that the water agreement overestimated the amount of water available (MacDonald, 2009). An ambitious plan to pipe water from the North of Nevada has been debated for years, and some compare it to the “water grab” that devastated the Owens Valley in California for the benefit of developers in Los Angeles. To date there is still litigation underway that would block that water transfer (Ritter, 2009). So will Las Vegas become a waterless ghost town?

There is another, pleasanter dreamscape one finds discussed a good deal by business groups, non-profits, utilities, and state and city officials: a green Las Vegas that conserves water and energy. Cash incentives have been provided to

home owners to remove turf and to xeriscape their home gardens. Casinos and hotels are using solar energy. One environmental research group believes still much more could be done, and that up to forty percent of current water consumption could be cut, a potential saving that amounts to a 'hidden oasis.'

But in an era of global warming and, according to some, of peak oil, is there any water and energy strategy that could preserve a city of two million based on the coming and going of tourists and punters by kerosene-guzzling jet aircraft? Nevada has the highest per capita energy consumption in the West of the U.S. (Berzon, 2009), and one can believe it when viewing the neon fantasies, reminiscent of Tokyo's famous Ginza quarter, lining The Strip at night (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Las Vegas Strip at Night from Space



Source: NASA <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/CitiesAtNight/> .

Anchored in, and ultimately dependent on, tourism and entertainment, Las Vegas has a surprisingly diverse economic structure. Besides the 248,000 who work in the hotels and casinos, 140,000 serve trade, transportation and utilities, and 95,000 provide business and professional services. The construction industry absorbs another 88,000, health and education 54,000, and financial services some 46,000 (City-Data.com, 2009).

The risks of water shortage connected to climate change are not at the top of most of these people's list of worries in Las Vegas. What concerns working people

in Las Vegas is the risk of losing their home, of joblessness, and of hunger. The city leads the national list of places with the most home foreclosures due to the mortgage crisis that triggered a worldwide financial crisis. Eight of Las Vegas' zip codes lead the list of the top 100 for foreclosures in the nation (Christie, 2008). Unemployment has doubled from 5% in August 2007 to 10.1% in February 2009 (Economic.com, 2009). During 2002, when unemployment was only 5-6%, more than 9% of Nevada households were judged to be food insecure by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (PBS, 2004). In 2006, the eleven pantries run by Southern Baptists in Las Vegas alone fed 46,000 people (Scoles, 2006). In March of 2009 the Religious Alliance in Nevada reported to the state legislature that half of children in southern Nevada lived with hunger (Religious Alliance in Nevada, 2009). So, the "happy face" greeting the tourist masks suffering and hardship. Geographer Joe Doherty told me he visited a tented camp of homeless people within a short bus ride of The Strip.

In light of the above, what do geographers recently congregated in Las Vegas do? The annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Las Vegas this year had several thousand participants and dozens of parallel sessions. Little of the official academic discussion (as judged from the published program) touched on the normal life of the city that hosted the meeting. These seamier, quotidian aspects of life of the two million people who live in greater Las Vegas-Paradise County eluded official, programmatic scrutiny. The risks and opportunities discussed by ordinary people in the 84 languages spoken in Las Vegas were not the subject of panels and round tables, not even those claiming to be "critical" or "radical." Individuals and groups informally discussed the vivid contrast between the iconic Strip and the rest of Las Vegas, but not as part of the official program.

One salient example comes from the keynote speech on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the academic journal *Antipode*, celebrated in Las Vegas. The journal's full name includes the phrase "A Radical Journal of Geography." The birthday keynote speech was given by Katharyne Mitchell on the subject of "Dangerous Futures: Speculative Capital, Race and War" (Mitchell, 2009). One might have expected the fate of working-class people in Las Vegas to feature among these dangerous futures. But the risks and dangers Mitchell dealt were only a small sub-set of what affects the lives of such people and the rest of the 6.5 billion humans on the planet.

The credibility of governments depends minimally on their ability to protect people from a range of risks beyond the ability of personal protection. Historically, social movements have demanded ever more social protection—hence the creation of systems such as social security, occupational health and safety, transportation safety, public health, banking regulation, etc. As the gap between rich and poor increased from the 1980s onwards there was also a simultaneous ideological shift away from social protection and market regulation, beginning with Reagan and

Thatcher. A whole range of risks that had previously been buffered by state systems became more acute in industrial countries, especially the U.S. and UK. Other risks are increasing in low-income countries linked to resource wars, corruption and destabilization. In these countries one also finds increasing rates of hunger and disease and an increase of people's vulnerability to extreme natural events and violent conflict. In order to deflect public attention from the risks created and accelerated by de-regulation at home, global trade and financial de-regulation, and expeditionary resource wars and associated military occupations, the U.S. government has focused media and scholarly attention on the sort of risk/dangers Mitchell lectured about: terrorism and crime.

Mitchell's treatment was sophisticated and interesting. She argued that the logic of permanent war requires methods for predicting and preempting terror attacks and crime (and by association, school failure). Using Spielberg's movie, "Minority Report" as a clever foil, she adapted the notion of "pre-crime" to explain how surveillance and a host of security measures have come to be implemented. What terror attack, school failure, and misuse of public space have in common is fear of the Other. Oddly, this suite of risks is a mirror of military occupation overseas (Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza), where the occupier is also the Other. When the Other (however perceived and constructed) is present in a shopping mall, public park, or residential area, 'we' are supposed to be uneasy. The ill ease is generic and non-specific, although in terms of so-called offences to quality of life, concrete forms of behavior have been proscribed. Those who are judged likely to fail in school are young Others (thus prone to crime or worse). It is the virulent and deadly Other who commits acts of terrorism. In these cases, the normal if-then logic of risk assessment has shifted to the when-then mode of thought, and a variety of tests in school, forms of gated community, trespass ordinances, surveillance technologies, and counter-terrorism laws have been created in order to pre-empt offences and outrages by the Other (and potential Other).

The lecture was thought-provoking. Yet where does the dangerous future for two million mostly working-class and lower-middle-class people in Las Vegas fit into this analysis? Despite Mitchell's deconstruction and exposure of the state's communicative strategy, indeed, because of it, her gaze was deflected away from the failure of financial regulation that has brought life-changing hardship to people who have lost their homes and jobs—a collapse that began in places like Las Vegas. What of the dangers to fifty million Americans without health insurance or to the one billion who are food-insecure worldwide, or of risks that climate change is already bringing?

By contrast, radical geography was visible at its best in a sparsely attended session held in a far corner of the Las Vegas Convention Center. There Clark Akatiff (aka Dr. Ack) pondered the meaning of "critical" from the vantage point of someone who once tried to levitate the Pentagon and has spent his career managing

the trash of Palo Alto, California. He finished up by getting the audience to sing along to an 1855 ballad by Stephen Foster about worker hardship and hope as he plucked his banjo (Figure 3).

Though we seek mirth and beauty and music bright and gay

They're old frail forms waiting by our door

Though their voices are silent their pleading seems to say

Oh hard times come again no more.

Figure 3: Clark Akatiff Playing “Dr. Ack’s” Banjo at AAG



Source: Author's photograph

This is a song that still has meaning for thousands struggling to make it day to day in Las Vegas, including one Kenyan taxi driver whose original home's natural surroundings could not be more different than the landscape of southern Nevada. Despite distance and contrasting landscape, Samuel's kin in Kenya are feeling the impact of the slowdown in exports to the U.S., Europe, China, and Japan, as their economies shrink. This taxi driver/electrician's remittances are a lifeline from the very epicenter of the mortgage meltdown that began worldwide recession. These are Kenyan and American realities, not dreams.

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