

Thoughts on Geographic Imaginaries for the 21st Century

Diana Sorensen

My thoughts are informed by my five years as Dean for Arts and Humanities at Harvard University, where I have been able to observe the intellectual configurations that have emerged and taken shape in response to the ways in which the world is being reimagined and represented in the first decade of this century. By tracing how the categories of *space*, *materiality* and *movement* are being thought about, I want to understand the institutional and intellectual transformations that are taking place in the humanities and the interpretive social sciences. One of my goals is to reduce the distance that tends to separate the institutional, administrative world from the strictly intellectual one, and to further their coexistence under the larger *academic* umbrella which shelters both.

The present time's *geographic imaginaries* are taking on different shapes, both large and small. The conceptual models we employ to map our global topographies expand, contract, and are organized along shifting, often incommensurate, logics. As Deleuze and Guattari observed, we are "at the crossroads of all kinds of formations,"² in which the ordering patterns produce shifting, fractal terrains. The paradigm of studying specific regional areas established during the Cold War no longer provides the central organizational structure that reflects our institutional cultural mappings, which can be, in Saskia Sassen's words, "contradictory spaces." A crisis of understanding has resulted from the inability of old categories of space to account for our diverse cartographies, as if our geographies had become jumbled up.

In literary and cultural studies, the world is mapped along differing principles of organization: a very capacious World Literature initiative is becoming the prominent paradigm in a number of Comparative Literature departments (including Harvard's); it goes hand in hand with the rising interest in translation studies and bilingual studies. This kind of model has produced significant tensions around the role of vernacular languages, the potentially flattening gaze of translation, and the totalizing force of Anglo-Globalism.

Other—quite different—ways of thinking about contemporary space tend to privilege regional cominglings that may be expansive or contractive in their gravitational force. There are initiatives to further areas of study such as Mediterranean Studies and the Global South—itself seen more as a condition than a place, and, in several ways, an heir to the now outmoded "Third World" as a designation for non-hegemonic areas. Orientations such as "Global South" are parceling up the larger field of Postcolonial Studies, representing a reordering of the geographic in order to focus on the parts of the world marked by the highest degree of political, social and economic upheaval. In a different alignment of forces, North and South are brought together in the Hemispheric Studies of the Americas, which is modifying the configuration of some History and Literature departments. The globe is reshaped in yet other regimes of representation in Transatlantic Studies, whose gravitational pull is West-East, and which are thriving in departments of History, History of Science, English, Comparative Literature, and in Spanish or Lusophone Studies, often ruled by the logic of colonial affiliations. A case in point is Hispanic Transatlantic Studies, generously supported by the Spanish government as it seeks to renew old ties severed by independence movements in the nineteenth century, and by the shift of power alignments that took place in the twentieth century.

Forces of contraction are also at work. Regional studies such as Catalan, Galician, Czech, Mapuche–Huilliche or Aymara studies are taking root across the academic landscape. This is not new in itself, but it is significant as a response to the perceived risk of overgeneralization, homogenization, and the flattening of specificities. The power of local languages is emphasized in these groupings, and they are seen as the backbone of the scholar’s understanding of the cultural world in question. The nation–state is eschewed in favor of the region, the city, or the village—reminding us, with K. Anthony Appiah, that “humans live best on a smaller scale.” In a loosely connected way, I’ve been struck by the rising interest among young linguists in dying languages, which implies studying groups of five or six speakers and their disappearing cultural universe in remote, tightly circumscribed areas.

What is local and vernacular is in constant transformation as our epistemologies respond to the unstable territorial politics of our time. Borders are confounded by diasporic peoples who actually inhabit or make present their vernacular cultures in the midst of a foreign state, so that, for example, within California we may have parts of Mexico or India. Migration is transforming the relationships between the state and its citizens in sending as well as in receiving countries. The modern relationship between the state and its citizens was based upon the assumption that state, territory and population would coincide: as rights are extended to nationals abroad, citizenship ceases to be divorced from territory. Cultural flows in these contexts are both homogenizing and heterogenizing: some groups may share in a global culture regardless of where they might be; they may be alienated from their own hinterlands, or else they may choose to turn back to what may have once been seen as residual, very local cultures which deliberately separate themselves from global culture. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, we need to turn to paradox in order to name the ever rearticulating formulations of our geographic imaginaries: we have coined such oxymoronic phrases as *global village*, *globloc*, *vernacular cosmopolitanisms*, or *transcultural localisms*.

The different movements of expansion and contraction operate with logics of their own, so that the overall effect is similar to the movement of tectonic plates. While this is known to be characteristic of the era of globalization, there may be several interlocking and even contradictory logics at work in these liminal moments, made all the more unstable by the current global financial crisis. I plan to chart the often contradictory and even agonistic constellations of discourses and institutional practices which have been addressing the expansion and contraction of our geographic imaginaries. In these potentially paradoxical configurations, I would claim that rather than the oft-cited process of deterritorialization what we are witnessing is intense territorialization (hyperterritorialization), obtaining in spatial figurations and models which are often incommensurate.

The divergent processes I have sketched unify or fragment the object of study and its explanatory force. It would be interesting to trace the logics of understanding produced by some of the current geographic models, studying the kinds of knowledge they are likely to enable. For example, Transatlantic Studies are predicated on the logic of the colonial and its effects—whether English or Spanish, North or South. Their maritime inflection privileges crossings and exchanges, movement and distances to be traversed, multi-local networks and migration. Their vast geopolitical reach embraces imperial histories, the slave trade, scientific and biomedical exchanges, biogeography and cultural geography, all in multiple directions of movement in space and historical periodicity. We read about the Red Atlantic of revolutions, the Black Atlantic of the slave trade, the Green Atlantic of Irish migrants; Cis-Atlantic and Circum-Atlantic studies are introduced into the broader Transatlantic realm; we see efforts to reinterpret empires like the Portuguese one according to the extent to which the Atlantic might or might not do justice to its holdings beyond Africa and Brazil. In a different, North-South axis, Hemispheric Studies take stock of indigenous commonalities and differences, cross-border exchanges, and the comparative structures that united and separated the Americas with the arrival of the Europeans. The “Hemispheric Turn” in American Studies might be a step towards furthering Inter-American relations, and so far it has operated by tackling such projects as comparing different appropriations of European culture, or by tracing the presence of Spanish-speaking groups in the nineteenth century along borders that separate the US and Mexico today. The Hemispheric turn is receptive to notions of creolization and *mestizaje*, which is especially productive in the study

of the heteroglossic Caribbean. In Hemispheric Studies, considerable tensions exist around the direction of the gaze in a historically fraught North-South relationship. The power alignment it favors is in a relationship of potential rivalry with Transatlantic Studies, where Spain is given greater salience than the U.S.

The oscillation between expansion and contraction that I have been discussing is subject to varying senses of *distance* and *movement* as constitutive of cultural production and understanding. The awareness of distance presents the need for cultural and linguistic specificity: what is understood as being far is different ~linguistically and culturally. Whether it is China as understood in the West, or the Andean nations in Latin America, we oscillate between *distant readings*, as in Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*,³ and the close reading paradigm in which difference and specificity are the guiding principles. In its fullest expression, the focus on difference can provide specificity and contextual richness; it can also produce a certain exhaustion of difference whereby, as Arif Dirlik has pointed out, our recognition of previously ignored aspects of cultural difference, while countervailing the pitfalls of essentialization, may have the undesirable effect of producing a conglomeration of differences which resist naming and the postulation of collective identity. In Arif Dirlik's terms, "The dispersal of culture into many localized encounters renders it elusive both as a phenomenon and as a principle of mapping and historical explanation."⁴ Even when the transnational impulse is arrested, and one nation is studied as a discreet unit, the spatial logic of explanation and the function assigned to distance will produce different accounts of the object of study—that is to say, different *geographic imaginaries*. To help flesh out these concepts, a couple of illustrations may be helpful. One is offered by Arif Dirlik in a study of Chinese culture that rethinks the intersection between space and historical explanation. For Dirlik, distance is not so much a measure between two or more bounded cultural worlds, but a "potentiality, a space of indeterminacy inherent to all processes of mediation, and therefore inherent to the social process per se." When distance is brought into play, new ways of conceiving social and cultural space follow. In the Chinese example, it would call into question the traditional account of the formation of Chinese civilization as radiating from a Han monarchic center towards peripheries in which "barbarism" ruled under the aegis of fifty-six recognized ethnic nationalities. Dirlik sees in the current condition of migration and displacement ("living in a state of flux") an opportunity for relinquishing static, traditional notions of cultural formation, replacing them with paradigms that stress motion and process, distance and mobility over "stable containers." (14) Such alternative spatialities would instantiate a more productive understanding of the role of boundaries in the formation of Chinese culture, which would cease to be unified, and become, instead, the product of "multiple contact zones of a people in constant motion." In this reversal, the Chinese would be global in reach "because they have been formed from the outside... The inside and the outside become inextricably entangled in one another..." (11) What I find interesting is the emplacement of explanation and its bearing on the geographic imaginary it produces: what emanates from a centrally located origin (the Han) is refigured and radically transformed in its explanatory logic when the border becomes the intellectual perch, the place from which the scholar looks.

In fact, the border is not only the focus of current Border Studies; it is also the nodal point which represents the convergence of geography and mobility. It is emblematic of new identity formations, and, at the same time, of the current politics of national security, surveillance and containment. The border is not exclusively situated in the national periphery: boundaries are dispersed in cosmopolitan cities, marking exchanges of technology, objects and persons. Their plurality contains the dilemma of contemporary citizenship and belonging. The subject position that stems from the boundary is the immigrant, who tends to represent the reality of internal exclusion.

Shifting from the center to the border produces an alternative geographic epistemology; so does an explanatory logic displaced from a territorial center to the sea. Consider the role of the "heartland" in an agrarian American tradition invented in the nineteenth century, when the notion of Manifest Destiny evoked a drive west and the move of the European settlers towards the interior, with its rolling, grain-producing plains and its imposing mountains. There is an emerging countervailing model which does not emanate from the heartland: it displaces its stable centrality and opts, instead, for maritime studies as fluid spaces of movement and multiple

engagements that eschew closure and operate with different causal systems. As Gary Okhiro explains it, “The sea, before Europeans, had no exclusionary laws, fences, or border patrols or imaginary cartographic lines, but rather ‘points of entry that were constantly negotiated and even contested. The sea was open to anyone who could navigate a way through.’” Within the fluid parameters of the maritime imaginary we would have to make distinctions between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the North and the South. If the border or contact zone—be it China or the US-Mexico border—de-essentializes the logic of explanation by taking stock of transborder forces and assailing notions of cultural homogeneity, the fluid notion of the seas eschews confinement and tracks multiple directions of contacts and crossings. My point is that there are important distinctions emanating from each epistemological location—whether it settles on the sea or the interior, the North or the South, the East or the West, the center or the border.

Different explanations stem from the geographic imaginaries produced in the very locational impulse, in the direction of the gaze. In the contemporary intellectual scene there are multiple and shifting geographic logics at work; the institutional mappings they are producing override national borders and replace them with potentially contradictory, frequently interstitial, always dynamic configurations. There is no outside to the global system, but it can be mapped from different locations, and it is being drawn and redrawn in structures of various kinds both within the academy and in the geopolitical order.⁵ It is no longer enough to echo Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* and quote the deterritorializing effects of capitalism, as has been done since postmodern theory re-read this passage. As I observed above, whether global or local, our intellectual projects are hyperterritorial in a manner that shapes our understandings of history and culture, and that are in constant transformation.

Connected with the shifting regional, global, interstitial and liminal mappings, there is great interest now in theorizing materiality in literature, history, anthropology, and art-history departments. *Thingness* appears in a variety of contexts, as if anchoring so much geopolitical fluidity and counterbalancing the digital world. Objects in fiction, in anthropology, or in the visual arts might help make contact with the real, seeming to provide compensatory materiality in the face of discourse and the digital world. They are studied in their ability to organize our relationships with matter, desire, and the phenomenal world. Things occupy space; they inscribe memory as well as temporality: as Heidegger notes, “the question ‘What is a thing?’ includes in itself the question: ‘What is *Zeitraum* (time-span)?’, the puzzling unity of space and time within which, as it seems, the basic character of things, to be only this one, is determined.”⁶ And, indeed, Heidegger insists on the determinative power of quality, extension, relation, place and time in our study of the thing.

We need to think about the intersection between mobility and materiality in the geographic context described above. My claim is that the deeper the anchor materiality seems to provide, the denser are the pathways of movement and transmission it inscribes. Take Timothy Brook’s latest book, the charming *Vermeer’s Hat. The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*,⁷ in which the hat in question inscribes the history of its manufacture, and it traces a series of routes which take us to Champlain’s adventures in North America and the search for beaver pelts. From there we move to cultural and economic history, as Brook narrates the effect on fashion and status of the arrival of pelts from Canada into European markets in the late sixteenth century. His narrative logic derives from the conjuring of distance, mobility and materiality to suggest a new understanding of the invisible ties that link places as distant as Delft and what would later become Canada. Brooks draws on the discourse of globalization to show what others before him had anticipated: that globalization has always already been with us, but that it now provides a structure of understanding and a kind of interpretive teleology which thrives on movement across vast spaces, following things and their transformations (say from beaver pelt to hat to the suitor in Vermeer’s painting). The hat as thing condenses disparate orders of knowledge: the history of early North American settlers, the qualities of beaver pelts and the effects of glue on the mental health of hat makers, the travel narratives of Marco Polo and the search for China in the early explorations of America, the development of the arquebus, the inventory of Vermeer’s possessions drawn up by his bankrupt wife after his death. As Heidegger explained it, “the determinations name the respects in which things exhibit themselves to us in the assertion and talk about them, the perspectives from which we view things, in which they show

themselves.”⁸

In the study of things we deploy multiple regimes of signification, endowing materiality with the power to contain the same epistemological diversity I discussed above in relation to geographic imaginaries. In art history, the study of objects is standard practice, but inserting a consideration of their mobility within a geographic context implies a significant departure from the autonomy and anchored materiality of the object at rest. Motion and distance are constitutive: they intervene proleptically in the production of a work of art, whose materiality can be partly determined by the anticipation of movement and transportation.

I think we should be exploring how interpretation is transformed by the geographic imaginary in which it is located. How would insertion into a Transatlantic corpus transform our understanding of a given author or group of works? What interpretive insights would be derived from such a conceptual model, and how would they be transformed by a Hemispheric one, or a World-literary one? What questions of translatability (broadly construed) would have to be considered? Would such critical geographies allow for interdisciplinary transformations that transcended our conventional departmental arrangements? What would be the intellectual and institutional effects of grouping together areas of study along new geographic principles of organization? For example, gathering the study of the ancient world around the Mediterranean would lead to assembling the Classics, Egyptology, and the Middle (or Near) East, and this would have profound effects in terms of cultural affiliations and understanding, on notions of influence and origin. Some institutions are considering grouping German and Slavic: is that more productive than a possible French-Slavic alignment? What relationships of belonging and family resemblances are presupposed and generated by each assemblage? Has the time come to rearrange the area studies paradigm inherited from the Cold War era? Could we turn to material objects to ground our spatial displacements, while, at the same time, allowing for the tracing of their pathways and the avatars of their historical transmission? Colonial art, for example, needs to be understood in the light of distant destinations anticipated in the very crafting of an object: a gift for Philip II of Spain would bear the traces of its future transit even before it was sent across the Atlantic to Spain. Such traces would include size and scale, and the tensions inherent in the question of cultural translatability from Precolumbian to colonial frames of understanding. Such studies would encapsulate the role played by geography, distance, materiality and mutability in cultural construction and reception. In dialogue with new models for thinking about time, we may be ushering in profound and productive transformations in the ways in which we imagine time and space in this liminal moment which we inhabit.

Endnotes

1. This Lecture was presented at the first Latin American and Latino Studies Teaching Workshop held at Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wisconsin, on April 26 - 27, 2010.
2. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
3. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).
4. Arif Derlik, “Timespace, Social Space, and the Question of Chinese Culture.” *Boundary2* 35:1 (2008), 5
5. An interesting geopolitical illustration would be the different configurations of Groups which gather to discuss the world financial crisis that began in 2008. Aside from the Group of 8, we have a new Group of 20 which reflects divergent notions of emerging power, as well as an array of local trade organizations such as Asean and Mercosur. A revealing new group of very recent formation is BRIC, constituted by Brazil, Russia, India and China. Its agenda included an attempt to go beyond the dollar as the international currency.
6. Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1967), 17.
7. Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat. The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York, Berlin, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).
8. Heidegger, 63.

Address Correspondences to:

Diana Sorensen
Harvard University
e-mail: Sorensen@fas.harvard.edu