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CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY AND AMERICAN STUDIES
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Space is much bigger than it used to be. Over the past two decades, critics working in various disciplines have been wilfully trespassing on terrain normally reserved for geographers. An explosion of interest in space is one of the defining features of contemporary work in literary studies and critical theory, history and philosophy, sociology and economics, film, media and cultural studies. Key words from the geographer's lexicon - 'landscape', 'place', 'space', 'mapping' and 'cartography' - have become common currency throughout the humanities. This renaissance in the geographical imagination has been celebrated as a 'new geography' and critiqued as a 'spatial vogue.'

Whilst various disciplines have been encroaching on its traditional territory, geography has been broadening its own horizon. Human geography has undergone a 'cultural turn'. Across the sub-disciplines of economic, political and social geography, cultural factors have increasingly come to the fore. The cultural turn has been accompanied by a proliferation in handbooks, guides and companions. Despite, or perhaps because of this burgeoning interest, it has become increasingly difficult to define the discipline. The common denominator in contemporary definitions of cultural geography is the desire to resist prescriptive definition. Cultural geography has become a sprawling, restless, migratory discipline and an introductory essay needs to approach this field with caution. My intention here, with this in mind, is to chart in broad brushstroke the key areas that cultural geography now covers before moving on to some working definitions of this expansive and expanding terrain. In conclusion, I will be underlining the special relevance of cultural geography to American Studies and surveying recent contributions in this field.

Mapping the new geographies

'...geography had never been merely something to walk upon.'
William Faulkner, *The Hamlet*¹

It has become increasingly difficult not to find cultural geography. The past twenty years has witnessed an explosive proliferation of *geographies*: geographies of identity, of the body and of power, of smell,

theme parks and madness, shopping and homelessness, cool places and sacred spaces, workplaces and cyberspaces, cities, the wilderness and those nature museums called 'parks' located in-between. The scale of these new geographies ranges from magisterial macro-studies of globalisation to meticulous micro-case studies of specific vernacular localities. Although its boundaries are constantly shifting, there are nonetheless identifiable patterns emerging within this subject area. In particular, cross-fertilisation between geography and critical theory has become commonplace if not compulsory. Much of the work produced in this field utilises paradigms from marxism and postcolonialism, feminism and gender theory, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism in an effort to delineate the shaping or savaging of space by capital and class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, discourse and textuality.

In 'Of Other Spaces' (1967), Foucault contended that whilst 'the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history... [t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.'² The new geographies appear to have confirmed Foucault's prophecy and inherited his profoundly politicised concept of space. Foucault's genealogies of pivotal institutional sites - such as the asylum (*Madness and Civilisation*, 1961) and the prison (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) - delivered a provocative challenge to the orthodox de-politicisation of space: '[I]t is surprising how long the problem of space took to emerge as a historico-political problem. Space used to be dismissed as belonging to 'nature' - that is, the given, the basic conditions, 'physical geography'.'³ The new geographies are founded on a renunciation of the 'physical model' that sees space, or rather fails to see it as anything other than the material context for significant action. Following in Foucault's footsteps, contemporary cultural geography has sought to overturn the privileging of history over geography through a critical archaeology that uncovers space as the site, product and producer of power relations.

The spatial turn is heavily indebted to Foucault, but owes as much, if not more, to the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre. The dramatic upsurge of interest in Lefebvre's work in the 1990s can be traced to the appearance, in 1991, of English translations of *The Production of Space* and *Critique of Everyday Life* shortly after key ideas from these texts had been utilized in Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). The centerpiece to Lefebvre's intricate and ceaselessly suggestive studies of moments and modalities in the lived action of everyday life was a maxim which defined '(social) space as a (social) product.'⁴ Lefebvre, like Foucault, predicted a relocation of critical concentration from historical to spatial relations, but he also introduced a cautionary note:

we are forever hearing about the space of this and/or the space of that; about literary space, ideological space, the space of the dream, psychoanalytic topologies, and so on and so forth. Conspicuous by its absence from supposedly fundamental epistemological studies is not only the idea of 'man' but also that of space - the fact that 'space' is mentioned

on every page notwithstanding... We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitudes of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on.⁵

Lefebvre warned that this multiplicity mirrored the logic of fragmentation and divisibility that dominated the 'abstract spaces' of capitalism. To resist and reverse this dynamic, he insisted on the urgent necessity to conceptualise what he termed the set, or 'space of spaces.'

Despite his own seminal contributions, Lefebvre's paradigmatic science of space has yet to be fully realized. However, the recognition of what Soja terms, after Lefebvre, the 'socio-spatial dialectic' has become axiomatic across the new geographies. Contemporary studies insist on foregrounding the relationship between subjects and space, on the myriad ways in which people form and are formed by the places they make, occupy and move through. According to John Brinckerhoff Jackson, 'we should study landscapes not simply in order to understand (after a fashion) the visible world, but also in order to understand ourselves.'⁶ The shift towards a socio-spatial dialectic and the development of geographies of identity has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in attention to corporeal cartographies. Traditionally, geographers have been preoccupied with the spaces *around* the body, but the new geographies have sought to challenge conventional borders between the spatial and the somatic. And once again we might detect Lefebvre's sensitivity to the biopolitics of space throughout recent attempts to map the body.

Beneath the dramatic upsurge in efforts to uncover relations between space, history, politics, subjectivity and the body there is often a core methodology. Irrespective of its ostensible subject or critical paradigm, the new cultural geographies are united by a tendency to see space as a system of meanings; to see space, in other words, as text. In English studies over the course of the twentieth century, the combined influence of marxism and structuralism, feminism and postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and other critical schools, encouraged increasingly suspicious approaches to the text. Pierre Macherey's assertion, that that 'the text says what it does not say', is almost axiomatic in literary circles and a comparable hermeneutic of suspicion is becoming prevalent throughout the new geographies. The characteristic gesture of the contemporary cultural geographer has been to dig beneath the surface in order to uncover a site's secrets.

The place of geography in American Studies

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now.

Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*⁷

The practice of reading the landscape is of course not new. In America it has a history dating back to the Pilgrim Fathers (and beyond that into the mythologies of the indigenous population). The Puritan world view hinged on the habit of reading the landscape for signs of Divine Pleasure or Wrath. In his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon described the Puritan settlers as 'WASPS in buckled black, who heard God clamouring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn.'⁸ The Puritans dreamt of a New Eden in the New World and were accordingly attuned to potential signs in the spaces around them. For those who followed the Puritans, 'SPACE', as Charles Olson puts it, loomed large. In the early days of the Republic, the writings of explorers, travelers, settlers and natural scientists returns repeatedly to the sheer geographical monumentality of the New World: the vast open spaces of the plains, prairies and deserts, the colossal canyons, forests and lakes. Geography has always played a pivotal role in the American imagination and the imagination of America. Many of the key words connected to American history and definitions of 'national identity' are rooted in geography: Virgin Territory and Land of Plenty, the Frontier and the Wild West, East Coast and West Coast, North and South, Big City, Small Town and the Open Roads between them.

Given the nature of its subject it is hardly surprising that American Studies has evolved as a geocentric discipline, one that exemplifies the readiness of area studies to think culturally about space and spatially about culture. American Studies has offered diverse and challenging contributions to the new geography. One of the most conspicuous strands can be traced to the flowering of the spatial imagination within marxist critical thinking. Building on Lefebvre, Edward Soja's trilogy - *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), *Thirdspace* (1996) and *Postmetropolis* (2000) - maps Los Angeles and seeks to grasp the fully lived spaces of contemporary urban capitalism. Los Angeles, for some the capital of capital, has also featured centrally in Mike Davis' readings of urban space in *City of Quartz* (1992), *Ecology of Fear* (1999), *Magical Urbanism* (2001), *Dead Cities* (2003) and *Heavy Metal Freeway* (2004). In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), Fredric Jameson's issued a clarion-call for new forms of 'cognitive mapping' to chart the complex new 'world space of multinational capital.'⁹ David Harvey has been at the forefront of navigating this new terrain in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Differences* (1996), *Spaces of Hope* (2000), *Spaces of Capital* (2001) and *The New Imperialism* (2003).

US cultural imperialism and globalisation has made the study of America and space ever more urgent and demanding. In the twentieth, or 'American' century, it has become increasingly difficult to fix the

boundaries of America. Where does American culture, American space, stop? These questions are eloquently addressed in Paul Adams' collection of essays on the *Textures of Place* (2001). This volume offers diverse methodological perspectives - feminism and philosophy, ecocriticism and ethnography, social history and poststructuralism - but the essays are united by a sense that the pressures produced by globalisation make it ever more imperative that we comprehend, cherish and fight for individual localities. The new geography in American Studies has spearheaded the mapping of dialectical conflicts between globalisation and local places, between, in Lefebvre's terms, the 'abstract space' of capitalism and 'counter-' or 'differential space.' George Ritzer's analyses of hegemony and homogenization in *The McDonaldisation of Society* (2000) and *The Globalization of Nothing* (2003) extend Edward Relph's pioneering work on *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and John Miller's *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape* (1999). The theme park has emerged as a key location for critics of globalisation. Sharon Zukin's *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland* (1993) and Mark Gottdiener's *The Theming of America* (2001), offer substantial development of Baudrillard's sly suggestion, in *Simulation and Simulacra* (1988), that 'Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland.'¹⁰ Work on globalisation and standardisation has been augmented by case studies of the particular and quotidian. Building on John Brinckerhoff Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984), the late 90s saw collections by Paul Groth and Todd Bressi (*Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (1997)) and Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (*Architecture of the Everyday* (1997)), as well as Luch Lippard's *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society* (1998) and John Stilgoe's *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (1999).

A renaissance in regional studies is another facet of the new geography in American Studies with the West threatening to eclipse the traditional pre-eminence of the South. Neil Campbell's *Cultures of the New West* (2000) offers an excellent interdisciplinary introduction to the key debates in this burgeoning field whilst Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West* (1999) is essential reading. Comer's provocative challenge to patriarchal prejudice rewrites the 'West's' discursive terrain and uncovers new narratives of nature, individual and national identity. Through close readings of fiction by contemporary American women (including Gloria Anzaldúa, Wanda Coleman, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko), Comer asserts that a 'new female regionalism' has been emerging in women's writing since the 1970s that is distinctively feminist, postnational, antiracist and queer. *Landscapes of the New West* enlarges on work in the mid to late 90s on nature, such as William Cronon's collection of essays on *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1997), and Jennifer Price's *Flight Maps: Encounters with Nature in Modern America* (1999) as well as the spatial turn in queer theory illustrated by David Bell and Gill Valentine's *Mapping Desire* (1995) and Aaron Betsky's *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (1997).

According to Lefebvre, '[a] revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential.... A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space.'¹¹ In the new textual spaces of cultural geography, we are offered ways of understanding, cherishing and challenging local and global geographies.

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¹ William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (Random House; New York, 1940), p.242.

² Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), p.23.

³ Michel Foucault, 'The Eye of Power', in *Power/Knowledge* (Harvester Wheatsheaf; London, 1980), p.149.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell; Oxford, 1991), p.68.

⁵ Ibid. p.7-8.

⁶ J.B Jackson, 'Teaching the Landscape', *Journal of Architectural Education*, XXX, 1, 1978, p.1.

⁷ Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (Jonathan Cape; London, 1967, first published 1940), p.3.

⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Picador; London, 1975, first published in 1973), p.281.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso; London, 1993), p.54.

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.173.

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.54.