IN THE EVENT: ENGAGING WITH SPACE IN AMERICAN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Conference titles typically narrate a very simple geography. "Engaging the New American Studies: University of Birmingham 11-13 May 2006," for example, defines the event by its edges: it started on May 11th, ended two days later, and took place inside the boundaries of a university campus. Of course, there is no active denial here of the extended geographies of planning, research, thinking, talking, paper-writing, emailing, and traveling that took place before the 3-day meeting; the various ways in which co-presence was differently performed at the meeting have not been actively discounted; the idea that the event continues to unfold across distance and 'take place' in different locations, even today, is not explicitly disallowed. Nevertheless, while entirely conventional, the way in which the title frames and locates the event means that some aspects of its geography are brought into focus--physical proximity, for example, and real-time interaction—while others are not, and in this way the naming and framing affects the ways in which the event becomes experienced, known, and remembered. This is true of many of the ways in which we routinely talk about American studies practice, defining scholarly interaction by reference to fixed locations, named events, and bordered territories. It is also true of many of the ways in which we define and envision, contain, frame, name, and map, our subject matter. Borrowing a useful set of spatial categories from the work of David Harvey, we could say that American studies practice has tended to privilege absolute space at the expense of relative space and relational space, and that this has had significant implications for the way in which the field articulates its subject matter.[i] This was the argument that I wanted to present in my contribution to the Birmingham meeting.[ii]

For some people (in the room, at the time) the argument was too obvious to need making; for others, it was disingenuous; for a few, perhaps, it was useful. Later, of course, and elsewhere, they may all have changed their minds and moved off in different directions like ships that pass in the night. Some reactions were very evident

in the room at the time, others not; now they are almost all invisible to me, stretched out, diffused, uncontained, disconnected. The event-space has changed: the coming-together of difference (different agenda, conventions, expectations, desires and fears) metonymically named " Birmingham 11-13 May 2006" is happening differently now, as it was happening differently a year ago. But this event has been happening, throughout, in different kinds of space, and as we consider the event, by turns, in the contexts of those different aspects of space, different aspects of the event itself will come into view or drop out of sight. In Harvey's terms, the event has not only been happening in the absolute space of a "pre-existing and immoveable grid"—the space of standardized measurement, private property, and bordered territories—but happening also, at the same time, in the relative space of networks and topological relations, a space in which distances have to be measured and mapped differently, for example by reference to ease of communication, or cost, time, and mode of transportation.[iii] Where absolute space enables a sense of overview, objectivity and (as Harvey puts it) "mastery," relative space presumes the validity of multiple observer positions: the position of the observer is critical. Finally, the event can also be understood in the context of a relational space in which "processes do not occur *in* space but define their own spatial frame," which means that the concept of space "is embedded in or internal to process."

> An event or thing at a point in space cannot be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point. . . . A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present and future concentrate and congeal at a certain point to define the nature of that point.[iv]

When I look back at the Birmingham meeting, I can point to a campus map and say "this is where it happened" while still being aware that in doing so I am defining "it" and its geography in a particularly limited way, discounting all the ways in which the event was not and cannot be contained by the borders of the campus, or the edge of the page. The problem is that the commonsense terms and conventions that would make it possible to define it differently or talk of it happening anywhere else are hard to find. It is difficult, for example, to find simple terms with which to describe the ways in which this event, organized by the University of Birmingham's American and Canadian Studies department, happened in and thereby changed North American studies at the University of Tokyo, and more awkward still to find a simple way in

which to describe how it reworked relational distances between the two institutions. To put it another way, it's much easier to locate events *in* space (in certain rooms in certain buildings in a certain city) than it is to work with the ways in which events *make* space.

My point, at the meeting, was that this was generally true of much of what we do in American studies. It is so much easier to work in the dimension of absolute space, with containers and fixed locations, than to work in other spatial dimensions (the relative or the relational, for example, in Harvey's terms), that there is an almost inescapable pull back to fixed geometries even in the naming and mapping of phenomena and events that would make equal, if not greater, sense in the context of geographies of relative distances or relational networks. It seems to me, for example, that border studies is a field in which it would be hugely productive to work in such a way as to keep all three of Harvey's spatial frames in tension. If the spatial range of work on this topic were limited to the absolute, so that it remained tightly focused on areas of land surface which literally coincide, on the ground, with the edge-to-edge conjunctions of national territories, then that would tend to reinforce exactly what was also being disturbed: the universal validity of nation-state boundaries in particular and container space in general.

Naming and mapping and the problems of container space have, of course, long been at the heart of disciplinary reinvention in American studies, as they clearly were during the period of intense discussion provoked by Janice Radway's challenge to the annual meeting of the ASA in 1998: "what's in a name?"[v] It was the question of the "name" that took the heat in subsequent discussion, but the "in" here, too, deserves attention because of the way in which it allows that name, "American studies," to function as a container. Radway's challenge sets off a chain of questions about "in-ness" and "out-ness" in American studies subjects and practices. What's in *that* name? What's *in* American studies? What's *in* America? This reinforcement of the idea that disciplinary space and disciplinary subject matter can be understood in terms of inclusion within the literal or metaphorical grid space of a bordered territory runs counter to the way in which the question invokes, at the same time, the idea that neither the subject nor the practice of American studies can be definitively centered within the sharply-drawn edges of an inherently exceptional place.

The history of interest in American studies with the naming and mapping of its spaces of engagement surely testifies to an awareness that the unique place 'America' has come into being at the intersection of all kinds of flows and influences and interactions: an acknowledgment that while America (like any other place) is unique it is not exceptional in being unique. Like any other place, America (however defined) is the ongoing, always emerging production of intersecting trajectories.[vi] In the context of this understanding, it seems paradoxical that in recent years Americanists have been moving towards a more open definition of the geography of their subject matter while tending to articulate this move in the reworking and expanding of container-names: America, North America, the Americas, the transatlantic, the American hemisphere. While this reworking has been productive in many ways, the practice of drawing borders around the perceived edges of interaction, thereby producing yet more containers, has not really shifted the frame of reference very far in the direction of relative or relational space-time. The habit of visualizing space in terms of surface areas of different sizes, together able to make up a multi-layer global jigsaw, may well still be blocking the development of alternative approaches to the visualizing of America and the spatializing of American studies.

GEO-GRAPHY

The problem of articulation remains, however: no matter how convinced we are that different kinds of space coexist in tension--that distances can be relative as well as absolute and that events not only take place but also make space—we will almost inevitably have difficulty, nonetheless, in putting that knowledge into practice, working with space not only as a given context within which people live, but also as something actively produced by the living. My proposal at the Birmingham meeting was that as this difficulty can be understood at least in part as the product of conventions in naming and mapping, one strategy for working through the problem might be to take up and engage with alternative (unfamiliar, even alarming) cartographies. I focused on cartography in the Birmingham presentation in the hope that by comparing conventional maps (representations of quantifiable, grid space) with less conventional maps (designed to represent relational space and relative distances) we might be able to start engaging with the reasons behind the fact that the maps framed in absolute space tended to seem "natural" while others, articulating other kinds of space, tended to look "distorted." I thought this might help us to think

about the ways in which people create and normalize and take for granted particular ways of thinking about space, place, location, and distance. What I was hoping to suggest was that if we could defamiliarize the ways we literally draw space on flat surfaces, on paper and on screens, then we might, in the process of doing that, enable the productive defamiliarization of the neat and ironed-flat ways in which we think of space in the abstract.

"Graphing the geo" is the term geographer Matthew Sparke uses to refer to the process through which people individually and collectively generate inevitably limited understandings of the world, and then go about naturalizing those understandings. Sparke argues that people do this firstly by imprinting these understandings in their own and other people's minds as commonsense worldviews, secondly in the practice of cartography, and thirdly by quite literally inscribing them on to their physical surroundings. Any kind of geo-graphing, Sparke insists, is a practice that occludes as much as it includes and renders as many kinds of data and knowledge invisible as it renders others visible. Sparke writes:

> The . . . radical and far-reaching implication of the argument that the "geo" is constantly being "graphed" is that any assumption about geography either as a result of (or as a basis or container for) other social relations always risks fetishizing a particular spatial arrangement and ignoring ongoing processes of spatial production, negotiation, and contestation.[vii]

When sketching out, even mentally, the geography of a topic in American studies, it is probably conventional to start with some kind of a blank outline map already in mind, if not already on paper. In fact, in general commonsense terms "mapping" is often assumed to mean "locating information on a map," not literally drawing a map at all. But this inevitably means that the geo has already been graphed, the shape chosen, and the kind of space within which the topic is going to be framed set. Sparke highlights the importance of this point in his discussion of a Canadian court case in which the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en nations took the governments of Canada and British Columbia to court in a trial "that hinged predominantly on the ways in which all the nations involved, both native and colonial, mapped, which is say cartographed, the geo of national territory."[viii] In the course of his analysis, Sparke develops the link established by Brian Harley between cartography and the rise of the

nation-state into the proposal that, "as technologies of spatial abstraction," maps are in fact actually "*constitutive* of the state."[ix]

It is now almost a commonplace to say that maps produce geographies as much as geographies produce maps, but still, and despite the rise of critical cartography, it also remains quite conventional to *start* with an imaginary outline map of some familiar territory, at what seems like an appropriate scale (global, or national, or relatively local) and then to proceed to fill it in with located data. This means that from the very beginning of the process a familiar two-dimensional map outline is in position, ready to perform its function as a spatialized data container. The assumption that "mapping" refers to the act of positioning things and events and people on to such a two-dimensional surface, and inside such a container, naturalizes the corresponding idea that the obvious way to understand events and histories and phenomena spatially is to flag them as fixed locations inside the borders of conventional maps.

In the Birmingham presentation, I tried to show how such an approach to mapping tends to shape the way in which subjects are visualized and organized. In order to show, for example, how conventional maps commonly privilege the idea of space as a "pre-existing grid" or "a structure which we can use to pigeon-hole or individuate phenomena," I opened my slide show of cartographic styles with some conventional geopolitical maps being used as data frames.[x] To give a contrasting idea of how maps might be used to express relative and relational space, I also included some three-dimensional "aquarium" maps of space-time paths and a cartogram designed to represent relative distances. My point was not that conventional maps are bad or that representations of relative space are liberating; what I wanted to show was that different styles of map enable the representation of different kinds of information and the recognition of different kinds of spatial knowledge. What Sparke says of geographies in general is true in the particular of maps: any geography and any map is available to deconstructive rereading, "a worldly and nonmoralistic form of geographical critique: a spur to respond ethically to the erasures presented by any particular geography." Sparke argues that geography interpreted in this way becomes

> a call to map persistently without totalization or finalization *the fundamentally heterogeneous* graphing of the geo (always knowing that we will fail, always subjecting that failure to the collective critique of others). Every geography . . . every mapping, picturing, visualization, landscaping, theorization, and

> metaphorization of space becomes rereadable in this sense not just for what it includes, but also for what it overwrites and covers up.[xi]

MAPS, AQUARIA, CARTOGRAMS

The first map I showed was taken from the website of The World Resources Institute. A representation of global corruption, the map showed the outlines of different nations filled in with different colors representing assessed levels of corruption control. This map is typical of the kind used by international financial institutions and anti-corruption agencies to represent a geography of global corruption; by sorting and representing data according to national borders, these maps reinforce the idea that corruption is a phenomenon that occurs within corrupt nations, not a phenomenon produced by interactions across space.[xii] The map used by the World Resources Institute color-codes the United States as a place in which corruption is well under control, while Guatemala and Nicaragua are identified as having corruption under control only at the lowest possible level. According to the system used to collect the data and the way in which that system is mirrored in the design of the map, nations are assessed as single homogeneous units: the whole of the United States is therefore green; the whole of Nicaragua is orange. The fact that corruption depends upon literal and virtual flows of currency and power, that these flows group and disperse unevenly across territories, and that Nicaragua and the United States are tightly networked together by these flows, is rendered invisible by this jigsaw mapping, which follows conventions in data-sorting and rhetoric in the discourse of IFI and anti-corruption agencies in locating and situating corruption in specific bordered territories despite the fact that it is an inherently relational outcome of financial interactions.[xiii]

As critical geographers Ed Brown and Jon Cloke have argued, corruption is not a situated phenomenon that can be mapped responsibly in this kind of color-coded jigsaw.[xiv] A container-space map is unable to make visible the relevant information. Brown and Cloke argue that this kind of spatial purification, by which some zones are labeled uniformly corrupt and others uniformly clean, ignores the roles and responsibilities of the networks of business, governments and supra-national institutions. It also clearly ignores the effects of literally traveling individual people as they shuttle across borders embodying variously-networked practices. Brown and

Cloke suggest that one of the key things that this kind of mapping by aid agencies achieves is the assignment of responsibility for corruption to various categories of 'other' thereby, among other things, disabling recognition of the part played by rich, 'moral' countries in fostering what they define as corrupt (but always distant) practices.

While the color-coded map of corruption control in the Americas enables a place-based reading of the local results of global practice, it simultaneously disables an equal amount of at least equally relevant knowledge. In this way it is a good example of the tendency landscape architect and cartographer James Corner refers to in remarking, apropos cartography, that "order is the outcome of the act of ordering."[xv] In Birmingham I proposed two sets of cartographic representations as sample outcomes of acts of ordering which, unlike the corruption map, focused on the articulation of relative and relational space. One set came from the Mei-Po Kwan's work in critical feminist cartography, and the other came from the work of the Globalization and World Cities research group at the University of Loughborough.[xvi] The maps I borrowed from these two sources had in common the fact that they both go beyond the convention of locating the fluid and the interactive in static containers to experiment with alternative cartographic methods developed to present research results achieved in the study of relational space and relative distances. My point was not that these maps demonstrated how creative cartography can fold and stretch the fixed absolutes of 'real' space or 'real' geography, or that they were unusual ways of imagining space, but that these unfamiliar visualizations of space, place, and distance were just as real (and, equally, just as imaginary) as the more familiar arrangements we unconsciously rely upon in our habits of spatial visualization. So the point was not how "distorted" these maps were, but how maps like these might help us to see and talk about the geography of our subject matter in new ways.

In an article published in *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in 2002 the geographer Mei-Po Kwan explains that in creating her three-dimensional "aquarium" maps she set out to "examine whether GIS methods are inherently incompatible with feminist epistemologies" by "interrogating their connection with positivist scientific practices and visualization technologies":

> I propose to reimagine GIS as a method in feminist geography and describe feminist visualization as a possible critical practice in feminist research. I argue

> that GIS can be re-envisioned and used in feminist geography in ways that are congenial to feminist epistemologies and politics. These alternative practices represent a new kind of critical engagement with GIS that is grounded on the critical agency of the GIS user/researcher.[xvii]

Kwan's work with GIS thus challenges and undercuts the presumption of neutrality in mapmaking, even mapmaking using GIS technology, and in this way it functions as a useful reminder that the world of absolute, quantifiable space from which "all uncertainties and ambiguities could in principle be banished and in which human calculation could uninhibitedly flourish" is, as Harvey notes, only one view of space, not some kind of bedrock, ultimate reality.[xviii] Kwan not only maps data on to existing spatial arrangements but also utilizes three-dimensional geovisualization strategies to make new kinds of spatial knowledge suddenly visible. In one computer generated aquarium, Kwan shows the daily space-time path of a woman living in Columbus, Ohio. She notes that

> a space-time path, as a continuous trajectory in 3D space, is a useful means for visualizing a person's daily movement in space and time. In this figure, the vertical axis represents the temporal progression of such movement, while the horizontal plane represents the geographical extent of a person's activity space. This path shows a woman's feeling (color coded) about the urban environment while traveling outside her home.[xix]

While Mei-Po Kwan has been working on computer-supported feminist visualizations of lived urban space, the Globalization and World Cities research team at the University of Loughborough have been engaged in an attempt to generate alternative ways of visualizing the spaces and flows of global business and finance world city networks. This is a radically different global geography to the geopolitical mosaic metageography that is the default world map for most of us, replacing the conventional emphasis on measurable surface distance with an emphasis on connectivity. In other words, where a conventional map projection shows physical distances, the maps produced by the GaWC team articulate relational distances. In mapping the relational space of the 123 cities they identify as "world cities" the GaWC team have been rendering world city space in terms of networks of accountancy, advertising, banking/finance, insurance, law, and management consultancy firms. The focus is not, therefore, on the physical location of the cities or even the cities themselves, but on the relative distances between the cities as they are variously positioned within specific kinds of networks. A cartogram showing the

relative network proximity of New York to other world cities makes it clear, for example, that in the terms of the GaWC study New York is at the same relational distance from Rio de Janiero as it is from Detroit. It is equally close to Boston and Tokyo. It is close to Calgary but distant from Vancouver.[xx] This cartogram is a good example of the way in which relative space-time mappings can make suddenly visible to the eye previously abstract geographical knowledge. In an article in *The Geographical Journal* P.J. Taylor summarizes what the GaWC team is trying to do with its service space maps:

> A new mapping of the world derived from connections between cities is presented as a complement to the traditional world map of countries. . . . Connections are converted into measures of network proximity and a multidimensional scaling is applied to these 'distances' to create a 'global service space' of cities.[xxi]

As Harvey notes in regard to the kind of relative space made visible by the GaWC team, "the spatial frame depends crucially upon what it is that is being relativized and by whom."[xxii] GaWC's innovative maps are not necessarily easy to read, but their difficulty usefully emphasizes their positionality: while a conventional geopolitical Mercator projection may feel much more natural than a GaWC cartogram, at least the cartogram ensures that we are conscious of the way in which it pulls us in to its spatial logic and trains us to make sense of its point of view.

CONCLUSION

Locating events and themes inside a 'container-space' of fixed distances and clear borders is only one of the many spatialization strategies available to Americanists; in order to engage with the full potential of the "new American studies" we need to deprive absolute space of its special status and start to see it as one aspect of space functioning in tension with others. Our recent concern with the ins and outs of what 'America' is and should be, where it starts and where it finishes, may well turn out to have been an attempt to map new kinds of space on the same old map. While it is clearly important to continue to ask ourselves "what's in a name?" and to keep working with the issue of what the taken-for-granted subject matter of American studies implies, includes, excludes, and erases, it will also be important not to frame this concern with the geography of American studies solely in terms of container names and standardized measurement. Networks and interactions, like places and

events, come into being and exist spatially in such a complex variety of ways that they cannot be adequately visualized in terms of quantifiable grid space alone. Different approaches to space, different ways of naming, framing and mapping, will inevitably make different aspects of both the subject matter and the practice of American studies visible and knowable. If recent developments in American studies can be understood to have been inspired at least in part by a sense that the field needs a new spatial vocabulary, then perhaps we could take this as our cue to develop approaches to the geography of our subject matter which allow more time and give more credibility to work that deliberately situates its subject matter in the difficult context of various kinds of space functioning in dialectic tension.

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[i] David Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," in Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (eds), *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 270-93. Harvey first proposed this tripartite division in *Social Justice and the City*, 1973, and while he also uses Henri Lefebvre's configuration of material space, the representation of space, and spaces of representation, he notes that he does so for reasons of convenience and "not because, as so many now suppose . . . Lefebvre provides the originary moment from which all thinking about the production of space derives."

[ii] This is a revised and shortened version of that paper, which was written specifically for oral delivery with an accompanying visual presentation. I would like to thank the organizers of the Birmingham conference for providing me with the opportunity to participate in the event, and also Danielle Fuller, Paul Giles, Julia Leyda, Eva Rus, and Yujin Yaguchi for their comments on the conference paper.

[iii] Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," 272-3.

[iv] Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," 273.

[v] Janice Radway, 'What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998', *American Quarterly*, 51, 1 (March 1999), 1-32.

[vi] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; *For Space*, London: Sage, 2005.

[vii] Matthew Sparke, *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, xiv.

[viii] Sparke, *In the Space of Theory*, xviii.

[ix] Sparke, *In the Space of Theory*, 9, emphasis in the original.

[x] Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, 1973, quoted in "Space as a Keyword," 271.

[xi] Sparke, *In the Space of Theory*, xv-xvi, emphasis in the original.

[xii] See, for example, Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index 2005 World Map" http://ww1.transparency.org/cpi/2005/cpi2005_infocus.html#worldmap

[xiii] http://pubs.wri.org/pubs_maps_description.cfm?ImageID=1780, from Miranda Marta et al, *Mining and Critical Ecosystems: Mapping the Risks*, World Resources Institute, 2003, http://www.eireview.org/pdf/WRI_RR-Mining-Oct03.pdf.

[xiv] See Ed Brown and Jon Cloke, "Neoliberal Reform, Governance and Corruption in the South: Assessing the International Anti-Corruption Crusade," *Antipode* 36, 2 (2004), 272-294; and "Neoliberal reform, Governance and Corruption in Central America: Exploring the Nicaraguan case," *Political Geography* 24 (2005), 601-630.

[xv] James Corner, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention," in Denis Cosgrove (ed), *Mappings*, London: Reaktion, 1999, 229.

[xvi] See Mei-Po Kwan's gallery of 3D GIS maps at http://geog-www.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/mkwan/Gallery/3DGIS.htm and the visualization gateway for the Loughborough research project at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/

[xvii] Mei-Po Kwan, "Feminist Visualization: Re-envisioning GIS as a Method in Feminist Geographic Research," *The Annals of the Association of American Geography*, 92 (4), 2002, 645-661.

[xviii] Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," 272.

[xix] http://geog-www.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/mkwan/Gallery/STPaths.htm

[xx] http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/visual/hw_ny.html

[xxi] P.J. Taylor, "Visualizing a New Metageography: Explorations in World-City Space," in G. Dijkink and H. Knippenberg (eds) *The Territorial Factor: Political Geography in a Globalising World*, Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2001, 113-28.

[xxii] Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," 272.