

On the creative (re)turn to geography: poetry, politics and passion

The creative (re)turn

Geographers have been researching geographies of creativity and employing creative methodologies in various guises for some time, as the geography discipline has an enduring engagement with the humanities/art world, suggesting a creative (re)turn rather than a creative turn (Hawkins 2012; Tolia-Kelly 2012) . With respect to this creative (re)turn, Hawkins (2011, 465) proposes that there are two key streams of work: those about ‘dialogue’ whereby geographers ‘interpret and analyse art works to make geographical arguments about landscape, urban space or nature’ and those about ‘doing’, in which geographers collaborate with artists or curators to ‘make-work, carry out research, develop exhibitions or practice various different creative techniques’. The first relates to geographies of creativity while the latter refers to the creativity of geography (although it must be recognised that this growing academic landscape is interlinked, reiterative and always in formation).

But there is also a third strand of creative geographical work in which the geographer is a creative geoartist, enacting or creating geographically-orientated aesthetic works themselves, be it through creative writing (Brace and Johns-Putra 2010; Thomas and Abrahamson 2011; see also Cameron 2012), photography (Lombard 2013; Oh 2012), painting (Crouch 2010; Govedare 2011), images and visualizations (Horowitz 2011; Young 2011), film-making/videos (Mistry and Berardi 2012; Simpson 2011), or music (Attoh, 2011; Wood et al, 2007). Generally speaking, there has been a privileging of scriptural and visual multifaceted creative forms over the aural and oral (Pinkerton and Dodds 2009), although more recent work has concerned the

embodied performances/participation involved in multi-sensory encounters with creative works (for example, via mobile methods, rhythmanalysis, kinetic art and inclusive arts practice- see DeLyser and Sui 2013; McPhearson and Bleasdale 2012; Rycroft 2012).

This increasing engagement of geographers with the creative moment has led to a series of insistent questions raised by various authors (for example, Crang 2010; Cresswell in Merriman et al 2006; Foster and Lorimer 2007; Hawkins 2012; 2011; Hulme 2013; Tolia-Kelly 2012). Some of these questions revolve around methodology and evaluation: For example, how might employing a creative bent alter our everyday academic practices of expression and geographical ways of knowing? What challenges might this re-orientation offer to publication spaces, peer review processes and grant application assessments? Who will evaluate the ‘success’ of creative work, in what terms and do we have the necessary skills to do so? Other questions circulate around politics of creative practice and the affective nature of creative forms: How might inclusive arts practice be best instigated and sustained? Can creative work promulgate emotional resonance and what difference might that make, and to whom? Below I explore some of these questions through the lens of a particular creative moment that speaks to and through me: that of poetry.

On poetry

Although geographical work on poetry is a relatively narrow field, poetry has been employed in various different ways in geography. This includes work on poetry and pedagogy (Rawling 2008; 2010; Sekeres and Gregg 2008), the use of poetry as a research methodology (Eshun and Madge 2012) and the analysis of poetry evoking a sense of particular places, spaces or natures. Recent

examples include Hopper's (2008) exploration of north-west Ireland through Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and Van Wijngaarden's (2011) investigation of the role that Homer's 'Odyssey' has played in relation to the 'structuring' of the cultural landscape of the Ionian islands. A particularly compelling and nuanced topoanalytical critique of Pablo Neruda's poem 'Alturas de Macchu Picchu' is given by Cocola (2011) in which he makes a (spatio-temporal) reading of the complex matrix of places involved in this particular poem's 'story'. Other works have focused on the poets themselves, such as Groves' (2011) exploration of how Paul Celan unsettles the literal and figurative ground through his poem 'geological lyric' and Tomaney's (2010) discussion of 'place attachments' and the artistic expression of the 'local' through a reading of the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh and his notion of the 'parochial imagination'.

The focus in such works is often towards analysing and interpreting well-known classical (male) poets and rural landscapes. So despite Porteous' (1984, 372) call some years ago for geographers to 'express their appreciation of the world in non-traditional forms', such as poetry, there is still only a small (albeit growing) scholarship of geographers using poetry to (re)represent research experiences, fieldwork observations or geographical imaginations¹. These include Sheers' (2008) poems about the Welsh landscape, Attoh's (2011) evocative poem and song 'the bus hub', Boyd's (2013) poems attempting to capture the 'essence' of places and landscapes and Eshun's (2005) expressions of the ambiguities of gender identities. Two recent substantive poetic works are also set to make an important contribution: Cresswell's (2013) 'Soil' and De Leeuw's (2012) 'geographies of a lover'.

Below I add to this corpus of work and present one poem; I do so not to suggest that the poem has particular aesthetic merit but rather I use the poem as a fulcrum to think through some of the questions raised by the creative re(turn). I wrote this poem in bed at night in January 2013, after listening to a World Service news report about two Syrian women who were abducted by a white van as they went out to buy vegetables; their whereabouts was unknown. The news report moved me and I could not stop thinking about these two women and their families, particularly their children waiting for the return of their mother(s). The words below tumbled out of me, fully formed, in the pit of night.

Syrian not-knowing

You went to buy vegetables today

I heard, but never returned...

Bundled into a white van,

screaming; squashed and squelched

as a bruised aubergine.

As the van disappeared through a

grotesque worm-hole

you evaporated too. And in this moment,

from such a lofty distance,

the air sucked out of me, punctured.

Imagine that....

Un-knowing!

Gaping emptiness!

As your child stares at her empty plate

suspended in a petrifying, pitiful, fissure

lingering, longingly, for your return.

Just imagine that....

Below I use this poem as a provocation or pivot to think about three issues in particular:

evaluation of the poetic creative moment; poetry as a means of expressing an embodied, affective geopolitics; and the limitations involved in this particular creative move as a means of empathetic, passionate storytelling.

Methodological musings and evaluating poetry

What exactly *is* a poem and how can I have the audacity to claim the creative words above are indeed a poemⁱⁱ? The word poetry comes from the Greek ‘poiesis’ and it literally translates as ‘a making/a forming/a creating.’ While the meaning and understanding of poetry as a genre has changed through time and varies with place, in essence poetry is a literary art in which language is used to evoke meaning- it is a creative act which uses language. Thus according to Shafi (2010, 87), ‘poetry is a metrical and meaningful language that uses rhythm, rhyme, sound,

imagery, and especially metaphor.’ So is it enough for me to claim that if a poet is simply one who creates using language, and poetry is what the poet creates, then my words above are a poem? This depends on one’s viewpoint : is poetry the expression of a relatively rare, original, ‘high art literary genius’ which has gained valuation through peer-experts, or is poetry a process of creating, of bringing forth, by using language that can be undertaken by anyone- an aesthetic methodology that democratically moves towards everyday ‘good enough poetry’ (Lahman et al 2009, 9)? In this vein, if I am using the ‘poem’ above as a catalyst for creative thinking and debate, as a witness and as a standpoint for my view of an event in the world and my particular expression of world writing (rather than as an example of isolated exemplary craft), is the poem ‘good enough’? And who decides? Does an academic geographer have the skills to make a judgment or should the poem be reviewed by a professional poet? (And if so, should geographical photographs be evaluated by photographers, artworks by artists etc). And, following Lahman et al (2009, 8), why is it that concerns about credibility start to occur as soon as the researcher moves from using prose to more aesthetic creative forms, such as (and it seems to me, especially) poetry? The tension remains: Is poetry a creative *process* of thoughtful making, an act of expressing new and imaginative ideas and feelings that can be undertaken by anyone, or is it an aesthetic *practice* that can only be performed by those with particular skills or formal training?

Answers to these questions partly depend on our methodological standpoint. For example, rather than using a positivist notion of reliability and validity of data, we might instead value a poem for its ‘metaphorical generalisability or its ‘imaginative transgression’ to give a poem rigour and credibility. In other words, perhaps a poem should be evaluated for its ability to transfer

meaning, to engage a reader, to penetrate an experience, to bring a place to life, to express multi-sensual worlds – for its ability to ‘do something’ to the reader/listener - rather than whether it conforms to some set metrical pattern (see Hones 2011 and De Leeuw 2011 for more on this). So if meaning is created at the point of contact between the audience and creator of the poem, if poetry provokes, if it causes thought-change, then ‘the validity of a poem lies in its ability to resonate in the reader, to communicate emotional truths in a language that is fresh and engaging’ (Sherry and Schouten 2002, 231). This raises challenges for reviewers of geopoetic works about how legitimacy might be appraised (for example, through affective resonance or through the transference of meaning), how aesthetic worth might be evaluated (for example, through the creative act of making that can be experienced and felt or through the explanatory potential of an aesthetic work) and by whom (for example, by the geopoet, editor, reviewer, reader, audience, ‘subject’ of the poem). Indeed, as Saunders (2010, 439) suggests, creative literary forms do not persist *per se* but are ‘constituted as such by those who receive and manage’ their ‘entry and being within the world’. So in answering the question ‘What is a poem?’, one must recognize that creative geographic practices are always inevitably limited and circumscribed by the conditions and power relations of their production and the value systems in which they are brought into being.

But the value of a poem also depends on our relationship to it. This is because an active encounter is created with the reader/audience of the poem whereby the meaning of the poem is differentially and multiply co-constructed ; different people will (re)read/listen to, create meaning and understand a poem differently depending on (for example) their geographical location, positionality, life experiences, their relationship to the poet and their purpose for

reading the poem (i.e. a reviewer might read and value the poems quite differently to a political activist or a student etc). And that is the beauty of poetry: it allows for hybrid, multiple, simultaneous interpretations- both of different people and the same person (re)interpreting the poem differently at different times and in different places. As such, poems have *potential* to be dialogic, dynamic literary devices- but ones that are indeterminable- for it cannot be predicted how a poem might be heard and understood nor the response it might (or might not) evoke. And this differential, changing and ambivalent nature of poetry creates tricky issues for poetic evaluation. Moreover, while poetry has potential to water down the wall between scribe and audience, it is not necessarily an easy literary device - it can require close and thoughtful reading and re-reading (or listening and re-listening), pushing the audience to engage with their imagination, 'read between lines' and tug at emotional heart strings- which can be a risky place for both poet and audience. Additionally, as 'language transforms when it is heard' (Lorimer 2008, 282) and many poems rearrange conventional language forms and structure to disrupt the linearity of text, meanings must often be 'mined' beyond the literal level, requiring a level of commitment and repeated engagement to think through and reflect upon what the poem demands from the audience (Raghuram, submitted). Thus one can never predict how a particular poem might be read or heard or how its meaning might unfold precisely because it is 'a contextualized and always emerging geographical event' (Hones 2008, 1301). In this emerging event, poetry may hold particular purchase in 'knitting together' the passionate and the political, as discussed below.

Affecting geopolitics through the embodied poetic encounter

Poetry can be a linguistic means to express geopolitics. John Kinsella has termed his activist poetry as ‘linguistic disobedience’ reflecting the idea that poetry can be used as both an instrument of power and as a means to disrupt that power. Poetry has thus played a useful role (albeit often dissenting) in raising and addressing issues of political injustice and socio-cultural inequities and even in empowering individuals. This is quite clear when considering the important disruptive role poetry played in the decolonisation moment throughout many parts of Africa with poets such as Achebe and Ngugi using their creative resources to affirm the humanity of African people in a defiance to colonial authority - although it must also be remembered that poetry was also used in some places to uphold colonial regimes of power (see Eshun and Madge 2012).

But poetry has an affective register too. It is important for what it does to your soul- it can challenge your understanding, arouse intensive passions and alter your sensibilities. And it can do this by being evocative, compassionate, angry, painful, funny etc which can produce an empathic response from the reader/audience which can help sensitize them to a particular issue, experience, place or group of people. In this manner, poetry has the *potential* to invoke an empathetic relationship and stimulate a dialogic process between writer/reader/audience because this act of creativity usually involves, at some point, a social dimension that connects people. In the poem above, for example, the invitation to ‘just imagine that’ might evoke an empathetic response (as a woman, a mother, a human being).

As well as an expression of geopolitical world-writing, poetry can therefore also be a particularly useful literary device to locate a researcher emotionally, illustrating how geopolitics affects ‘us’ (Sidaway 2009), presenting a counter-point to detached, disembodied, unemotional geopolitical

accounts (Pain 2009). So here I am making a case for tender, embodied, geographic expression which can ‘breathe life’ into the humanity of a geographical event or situation, allowing for ‘visceral resonance’ (Sherry and Schouten 2002, 218). Poetry can give insight into the multiple (sometimes painful) realities of life - not some sanitized-out emotionally-flattened version. For example, the lines ‘squashed and squelched as a bruised aubergine’ speak directly to the embodied dreadfulness of violent disappearance (and evince a fleshy reaction in me as I repeat the words). And in getting ‘close to the bone’ in its ambiguities and subtleties, poetry can encourage a ‘drilling down’, a deeper introspection, potentially encouraging contemplation of ‘different social and spatial orders which might otherwise remain concealed or suppressed’ (Saunders 2010, 441). Poetry can thus help to write political geography (at its numerous scales of analysis) in a passionate, embodied way. As such, it can be a ‘form of politics in action offering modes of resistance, points of contestation, and playing a part in the dynamic constitution of communities and relations’ (Hawkins 2011, 473). And this is precisely because creating embodied versions of geopolitics suggests that emotions, feelings and passions can have transformative power: ‘we’ can affect geopolitics too.

In theory, then, there is much to be gained from using poetry to express an affective geopolitics: it is a creative format that traverses between the representational and the more-than-representational, a form of ‘embodied storytelling’ (Daya 2011). For example, in the poem above I express my embodied horror (on hearing the news report, my lungs were ‘punctured’) at the (differentially gendered) harsh brutality of the current conflict in Syria. This was a ‘gut reaction’ to the reported disappearance of these two (unknown to me) women and the dreadful uncertainty that their vanishing might have provoked in their (assumed) children’s everyday lives. The poem layers together the everyday mediocrity of shopping for vegetables or eating a meal with the

extraordinary event of violent disappearance, as felt through my body. So as this geopolitical situation moves through my body, the embodied imagination starts to offer potential ‘to live the circumstances and experiences of others’ (Lahman et al 2009, 5), thus enlivening and embodying the geopolitical imagination. This illustrates not only how emotions can ‘travel’ but also how geopolitical events can ‘speak through the body’. As such, the poem is presented not so much ‘a view on the world’ but a ‘point of view in it’ (Hawkins 2011, 466) and it is a means to acknowledge and write the body not only as a social, political and economic location, but also as a sensory agent (Noxolo 2009; see for example the passionate ‘lingering longingly’ in the poem). As the poem traverses between the dualisms of the everyday and the extraordinary, it knits together the geopolitical and the affective, global and intimate relations, entwining mind and body, suggestive of the creative potential of poetry to express the emotional, political and embodied multiplicities and ambiguities of world-writing.

What limits empathy, poetry and passion?

However, employing poetry to express an affective geopolitics is far from straightforward; indeed, it is beset with complexities. One of these difficulties revolves around the limits to empathy and the affective response. For example, how possible is it to evoke some understanding of the horror of violence, disappearance and displacement that some Syrian people have suffered (are suffering)? How possible is it for me to even begin to imagine, even in the poetic form, what this might be like and what audacity, epistemic appropriation, imperialistic projections and stereotypical assumptions do I display in even trying to do so (for example, in assuming that the women had children, that they ate aubergines etc)? How possible is it for this poetic moment to move beyond appropriation and ‘speaking for’ when the complex evolving

political, economic and social connections associated with British ‘influence’ in Syria have been ‘written out of the script’? And how dialogic/relational is this creative move really, when there is such little space within the academy for (different) Syrian (and other) women to ‘speak back’ and present their agentic version of events, or refuse mine, or even be (possible to be) interested in them? There is a case to be made that the poem does little to move beyond my subject-centered, self-referential catharsis of how hearing this news event affected me, lying in ‘lofty distance’, while unspeakable horrors may have been being perpetrated against the women in the poem, or whom indeed may have been making an active escape from their captors. Thus in a paradoxical move, by invoking the affective register through my body but by not recognizing the limits to empathy and the complex politics of disconnection (Noxolo et al, 2012), have I presented an individualised and depoliticised account (see Mitchell and Elwood forthcoming)?

In other words, there must be recognition of the limitations (in this poetic encounter, at least) of ‘speaking for’ through an affective geopolitics - for emotional relations are complicated and can be challenging, refused, withdrawn or refuted and unspoken silences can reign (Bennett 2009; Noxolo et al 2012). So as well as flowing and spreading, the affective moment can be (come) solidified and ossified too (sometimes as an active denial, other times as a form of resistance or resilience); and sometimes this perceived absence of emotion can be very productive too for it enables one to endure and survive. Moreover, empathy can never be guaranteed: there is no automatic way of feeling or knowing another person’s lifeworld- this has to be laboured for (see, for example, Evans 2012 and Jones and Ficklin 2012). And this is precisely because the emotional landscape is not simply a personal, subjective, individual experience (Bondi 2005); rather it is relational and shaped by broader historical, social, cultural, economic, political structural conditions as well as ‘more-than-social’ non-human, biosocial and atmospheric

influences (Kraftl in press). And these are driven through with historically embedded power inequalities and injustices, so the emotional landscape is never played out on an even sociopolitical playing field: in other words, there are often limits to what emotions can 'do' and to the connections that can be formed through them. So it is not simply a matter of evoking empathy but rather 'working through' (often in small, enduring ways) what 'happens to' that empathic opening and being receptive to getting a surprising and unexpected response (or indeed, no response) from an as yet unknown audience. In other words, although empathy played out through the poetic frame has potential (mediated, circumscribed) agency, we cannot predict what this might be, what it might mean nor how it might matter to different people: emotional relations too are an 'emerging geographical event' (cf Hones 2008).

So in failing to challenge the self/other binary in any significant way (Closs, 2011), should the topic be left 'well alone' because of its intensely troubling and difficult nature? This is a tricky question.....but just because using poetry as a form of world-writing is difficult, does not mean that we should not try to engage with the poetic moment (afterall, all forms of geographical expression are beset with the politics of their production). However, I should make myself clear: in presenting the poem I am not simply suggesting that the (assumed) intense, protracted, suffering of two Syrian women and (their assumed) children is something that I can straightforwardly and uncomplicatedly empathise with through some creative words. But what I am proposing is that despite the inherent difficulties, perhaps poetry is one of the more useful linguistic tools available to the geographer to attempt to express an affective geopolitics- if it is used thoughtfully and attentively. The academic geographer must not shy away from the painful and disturbing terrain of our multi-polar world to reinvigorate Anglo-American provincialisation nor only attempt to deal with 'safe' comfortable and comforting topics. Awkward emotions and

troubling geographies cannot (and must not) be denied - they must be worked through - even if (and actually precisely because) self-critique might unsettle our very own position. And it is this vulnerability, this position of unknowing, that might form a bridge upon which a dialogue of mutuality *might* begin, to be beside one another in pain. It was precisely this sense of compassionate unknowing that erupted out of me as I wrote the poem, as the women ‘disappeared through a grotesque worm hole’ into ‘gaping emptiness’ leaving their children ‘suspended in a petrifying, pitiful, fissure’.

Conclusions: A critical moment for (creative) reflection?

As a creative agent, as a creator of poetry, I have attempted to initiate some discussion of the potentialities and limitations of geopoetics to contribute to the debate about geocreativity. But while this is an approach that aims to ‘open up’ publishing space to normalise and make more acceptable a broader variety of ways of doing and expressing geography, it is also an approach that considers the pitfalls, risks and difficulties of doing so. The paper thus particularly responds (somewhat belatedly) to Lorimer’s (2008) plea (and Porteous 1984 before him) for geographers to pay more attention to various creative writing activities.

A consideration of this nexus between creativity and geography is particularly important at this moment in time in the British context as the Conservative-Liberal coalition makes significant cuts in Arts funding and organisations. As political discourses shift from creative to cultural education (see, for example, the Henley Review DCMS 2012 which although espousing the relevance of cultural education to young people, paradoxically runs in tandem with the striking drop in funding for local authority children's and cultural services), the future outcomes of these

policies for the active creative agency of young scholars can be questioned. This is also time of huge changes to the British Higher Education scene, with privatisation coming in through the front door, and daily pressures cranking up, forcing academics into a student-surveyed shaped hole which might squash and flatten the creative energies of academics.

But such points of retrenchment can also represent a moment of outburst, to call for a voice in geography that speaks out and transgresses such pressures and opens up new spaces for critical enquiry and decisive expression. So while geographers have had a long-standing engagement with creativity, (indeed, most geographical research is to some extent creative- even the most quantitatively scientifically driven sorts), one can question whether this renewed focus on the creative will lead to surprising, challenging geographies which might push at the enduring hierarchical, power-laden boundaries of geographical power, in all its complex manifestations, or just result in ‘lip service’ being paid to ‘thinking outside the box’? Questions arise such as will the creative (re)turn enable geographers from multiple centers to speak, be listened to, and be heard, and on whose terms? Creativity is a highly contested and hydra-headed term, so how (and whom) decides what is and what is not creative? Who might be excluded by this push towards creativity? Which people in which places, which sub-disciplines of geography, which creative practices? What risks might be at stake in valorising creativity? Is it ever possible to avoid (eventual) lip-service, entropy and co-option of the creative (re)turn so its radical potential inevitably transforms into the intellectual establishment?

These questions should be seen in the light of Massey’s (2002) suggestion that the ‘push to publication’ promulgated through the shifting market-based neoliberal regulatory governance

(and ensuing variously termed zombie/post-neoliberal managed capitalism) of British Higher Education, the audit culture of the RAE and REF and other wider cultural shifts in working practices in the UK and beyond (in which academics are variously called upon to become entrepreneurs to gain funding or border regulators for ‘international’ students), can curtail the ability of academics to do ‘blue-skies’ research that is unusual, unanticipated, shocking or amazing (and unfunded) rather than research which is ‘contained’ by policy agendas or programmes of research of grant awarding bodies. More recently, Schuurman (2009, 311) has revealed an intensification of these trends, suggesting that ‘the greatest loss is, perhaps, creativity.’ Moreover, according to Gibson-Graham (2006, xxviii), creativity can be further undermined by academic thinking which often relies on a critical and judgmental stance, which can shut down possibilities for novelty and ‘half-baked ideas’. This is because, as Cameron et al (2009, 272) suggest, academic writers’ own critical voice ‘tends to be far stronger than their creative voice.’ Gibson-Graham (2006: x, xxvii, xxxvi) thus urge us towards creative practices to construct opportunities for other possibilities of thinking and becoming. This paper is one (attempted) move in that direction.

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Notes

ⁱ This may be partly because the Humanities approach promotes a concern with ‘interpretation and criticism rather than creativity’ (Crosgrove 2011, xx11).

ⁱⁱ It must be acknowledged that poeticism is not just unique to poetry but much geographical academic writing is broadly speaking poetic.