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Cultural Geography: By Whom, For Whom?

Lily Kong

THE RISE (AND RISE?) OF CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

The "cultural turn," coupled by the "spatial turn" in recent years has drawn significant attention to cultural geography from those in other subdisciplines and disciplines. One might forgive those who sometimes mistake particular research as cultural geography which is in fact conducted by non-geographers or geographers who would not ordinarily identify themselves as cultural geographers. A pointed moment that illustrated this to me was when a sociology colleague insisted that he had read cultural geography, and when asked, indicated that he had read Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin. One interpretation of this is, as Shurmer-Smith (1996) offered through her title of a collection of postgraduate papers, that cultural geography is "all over the place." Another more positive interpretation is that the important questions and perspectives of cultural geography have become appropriately influential across geography and other disciplines.

My reading of the multiple cultural geographies that have mushroomed over the last decade prompts me to sort out specific priorities that I believe deserve fuller attention and identify particular discomforts over other developments. By no means are all these priorities and concerns unique. However, the emphasis I place on these particular issues does reflect my positionality, a Chinese Singaporean educated in Singapore and Britain, teaching now in a Singapore university that aspires to compete in the first league, and appointed to the role of an academic administrator overseeing educational matters in my university.

DECENTERING ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES

So much of contemporary cultural geography is written from and about Anglo-America, and to a smaller extent, Australia and

Canada. While the Sauerian tradition emphasized fieldwork in antiquarian and rural settings, and took cultural geographers to places such as Latin and Middle America, this tradition has shifted over the years such that a certain Anglo-American dominance is now evident. Whereas much of cultural geography tended to be atheoretical, much of current theorizing occurs as a consequence of Anglo-American empirical observations. These "western" ideas are subsequently imported into other contexts, with empirical studies often constituting "another case study" illustrating the theoretical logics established in "western" settings.

Reflecting on this, I would urge three priorities, all of which may be traced to my own positionality. The first priority is to encourage a more diverse geography, including an interrogation of the cultural geographies of "Asia" which would yield helpful and potentially divergent theoretical insights from those developed in the "west" while acknowledging that the space called "Asia" is far from monolithic. The decentering that cultural geographers have argued for through recognition of the "other" (in race, gender, class) deserves to take place in the practice of our own discipline so that we decenter Anglo-American theoretical ideas. My second priority is an acknowledgment of the value of in-betweenness in raising political and epistemological questions. My own location "in-between" Anglo-American social and cultural geographies (given my own education in Britain) and "the region" (given my current location and given that I have spent much of my life in Singapore) has informed my perspectives, and I strongly encourage that we allow our in-between positionality to inform our work. Third, while writing cultural geographies of "Asia" or elsewhere outside the Anglo-American world, and while acknowledging the in-betweenness of locations (hence perspectives), I am concerned that we are, more often than not, writing back to the (Anglo-American) "center." My third priority would be to extend our subdisciplinary debates to new audiences, using vernacular languages for publication, thus engaging other academic/linguistic communities and opening up opportunities for other potential voices to enter the dialogues (see Bunnell, Kong and Law, forthcoming). All of this does require universities outside Anglo-America to develop a confidence that does not entirely privilege measures of research quality and performance developed by and meaningful in the context of Anglo-America (such as whether a journal is an ISI journal with impact factors and citation records).

Vernacular language journals fall outside the American-based ISI's reach).

WRITING FOR OUR "COMMUNITY" AND SOCIETY

Turning to another broad area of concern from which I derive my preferred priority area for cultural geography, I take issue with some of the "indulgently theoretical" (Marcus 2004, 13) work in recent cultural geography and the "theoretical playground" within which geographers "stimulate or entertain themselves and a handful of readers, but in the process become increasingly detached from contemporary social issues and debates" (Hamnett 2003). While referring to geography in general, Hamnett's observation is certainly true of cultural geography in particular. Similarly, Waterstore (2004) warns against "further theoretical reformulation, to the extent that it keeps us (pre)occupied with 'theory building' at the expense of moving theory into practice."

It does not need someone heavily involved as I am in policy and praxis as an academic administrator or someone deeply engaged in community action to react against indulgent theorizing and to prefer to see cultural geographers re-committing to "the analysis of and intervention in social and political struggles, and use theory to that end" (Mitchell 2000, xvii). I do observe though that, in my own growth as a scholar, my work as Dean and then Vice-Provost has evoked my preference for "practical intelligences" over rarefied academic over-intellectualizing. I find affinity with those who seek to move cultural geography "to the coalface" and to redress our relative impotence in policy making and academic activism. I believe there is not enough of that, and that as cultural geographers, we need to do more and better to demonstrate the relevance and centrality of our subdiscipline to our community and society.

Related to critiques about over-theorizing are critiques about the tendency of some amongst us to write for one another in the academy in hyper-postmodern thickets of jargon. There are several problems here. For one, these works are simply unintelligible. Worse, we lose our ability to speak to the community within which we live and act, to the non-academic everyday individuals we observe, analyze, and reflect on. We write for an academic in-group, speak the language of key academic gatekeepers and seek their consent, pressured by the need to publish or perish. For some, it breeds academic careerism rather than intellectual merit and social concern. And we sometimes forget to write back to the community with which we interact and analyze.

If some of the above concerns are addressed and priorities pursued in the years ahead, I believe cultural geography will be the richer for it.

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