

// "TO DRAW A MAP IS TO TELL A STORY":  
INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROBERT T. TALLY JR.  
ON GEOCRITICISM<sup>1</sup>//

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This interview with Dr. Robert T. Tally Jr. (associate professor of English at Texas State University) aims to highlight the strong interrelation between literature and space from the starting point of Geocriticism. With this term, which was coined to define a new discipline able to interact with “literary studies, geography, urbanism and architecture” (Tally 2011: xiv), in fact, Tally offers a theoretical basis for spatiality in relation to literature.

Dr. Robert T. Tally Jr. is the author of six books: *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism* (2014); *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique* (2014); *Spatiality (The New Critical Idiom)* (2013); *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System* (2013); *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (2011); and *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque* (2009). Currently, Tally is working on a study of the spatial imagination in modern world literature.

The translator of Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism*, Tally is also the editor of four collections of essays: *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011); *Kurt Vonnegut: Critical Insights* (2012); *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative* (2014); and *The Geocritical Legacies of Edward W. Said: Spatiality, Critical Humanism, and Comparative Literature* (2015). Another collection, *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies* (co-edited with Christine M. Battista), is forthcoming, as is a larger editorial project, *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*. In 2014, Tally edited two special issues of the journal *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary*

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<sup>1</sup> The title was inspired by Tally 2013: 4.

*Culture* devoted to "Spatial Literary Studies." In addition, Tally serves as the general editor of the Palgrave Macmillan book series *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*.

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### **First, of all, how did your interest in Geocriticism originate?**

As long as I can remember, I have been interested in maps and in the way we make maps, including mental maps, as means of navigating the spaces we occupy and move through. The experience of being "lost," for instance, struck me as both horrifying and typical, and the sense of reassurance that comes with no longer being lost – that is to say, recognizing one's own position with respect to other cognizable points on some sort of spatial diagram – was for me characteristic of a basic human desire. Initially, while in high school, I associated this with a sort of existentialism (Sartre, Camus, etc.), but with heightened attention to space or geography, broadly speaking. At university, I started connecting this to literature and philosophy, including the Nietzschean and French poststructuralist lines of thought (Foucault and Deleuze were especially influential on my development), and more particularly to a Marxist critical tradition that had usually been associated with historical or temporal thinking, but which seemed to me to speak well to the spatial anxiety I'd already been interested in. Fredric Jameson, as a teacher and writer, was quite influential in this regard, and his conception of *cognitive mapping* informs my ideas about literary cartography and geocriticism.

### **What happened later on?**

In graduate school, as part of my PhD project, I coined the term *geocriticism* – or, at least, I thought I'd coined it; the word itself may have been in circulation before then – as a label for the kind of spatially oriented criticism I was arguing for. The term itself was to have been a literary-critical counterpart to Deleuze's "geophilosophy," but I was not interested in a kind of national or even regional basis for literature, so much as in the way that literature forms imaginative maps. So, for me, *literary cartography* named the project, sometimes tacit, of narrative or literature more generally, and *geocriticism* referred to an approach to literary works that would highlight their engagement with spatiality and interpret the "maps" they produced. My dissertation, on Melville and the literary cartography of the world system, focused mostly on the former practice, but implicit in it was the recognition that critics need to be more attuned to matters of space, place, and mapping in literary and cultural studies.

Some years later, in 2007 or so, I encountered Bertrand Westphal's work, and I was understandably intrigued. He had independently come up with the term *géocritique*, to which he had given a somewhat more narrow and specific definition, but it resonated very well with what I was doing. I contacted him, and we made arrangements to have his book *La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace* translated into English. Westphal and I, despite the very real national differences between education in France and in the U.S., share a somewhat similar formation in literature and philosophy. We were both interested in the recent "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences, but we also found that this "turn" had a rich history in Western (and non-Western) civilization long preceding the modernist or postmodernist epochs. Yet, we do believe in what Jameson, Edward Soja, David Harvey, and others have identified as a "new spatiality" implicit in postmodernity, which I would relate to the transformative social, political, economic, cultural, and, yes, spatial changes associated with globalization. My interests in geocriticism as a specific literary-critical practice *and* as a broad-based approach to questions of spatiality and culture derives from this history, and from what Foucault liked to call the history of the present.

**Do you think we still need literature to imagine spaces and, if so, why?**

Yes, I believe so. My thesis about literature as a form of mapping – that is, that all literary works are somehow engaged in a project of literary cartography – maintains that spaces and places are themselves apprehended figuratively. This is not to say that they are not real, only that the relationship between the subject and the space or place is necessarily mediated by other representations. Partly, I am drawing on Henri Lefebvre's distinction between physical, mental, and social spaces, all of which are subject to productions of the imagination; I am also thinking of Yi-Fu Tuan's more phenomenological idea that what constitutes a place as such is its capacity for interpretation, which brings it into the domain of literature or the arts. Literature is not the only way to imagine spaces, of course, but insofar as the literary is peculiarly attuned to matters of interpretation, figuration, and speculative thinking, literature is well suited to the task. The point is that space and place are understood through imaginary or figurative means (the map being one of the most evocative figures), and to the extent that literature is a fundamentally imaginative "science" (I use this in the broadest, nineteenth-century way), then literature becomes a privileged medium through which we can perceive, understand, and explore spaces and places, while also perhaps projecting alternative spaces.

**In 1967, Michel Foucault declares that we are living in the "epoch of space". Is this principle still valid? How has the concept of space changed since then?**

Yes, I think Foucault's point is valid, although it certainly lacks the polemical force, perhaps also the irony, that it must have held at its first utterance. Much like his seemingly anti-Marxist (and anti-Sartrean) comments in *Les Mots et les Choses*, Foucault introduces "the epoch of space" in contradistinction, if not opposition, to a Marxist historical narrative. Of course, Marxists like Harvey and Soja have embraced Foucault's basic premise. If anything, I believe that Foucault's surmise about the way that space has come to dominate not only philosophy and history, but also the general ways in which social thought and practice are structured is even more relevant today. For one thing, the various phenomena constellated around the idea of globalization have only enhanced the prominence of space and spatiality on contemporary thought, whereas in the 1960s these structural relations were still largely invisible or only beginning to take form. Also, relatedly, what we think of as postmodernism was just starting to emerge from its chrysalis, and the profound spatiality of postmodern art, architecture, literature, and philosophy have made Foucault's comment appear truer than ever. Finally (but the list could be prolonged indefinitely, I'm sure), I think of the technological advances. Some have suggested that the Apollo missions were less about exploring outer space than about gaining perspective on our own planet; for example, the famous "Earthrise" photograph, taken on December 24, 1968, by Apollo 8 astronauts who were literally beyond the moon, is now credited with an incipient planetary consciousness, leading to things like "Earth Day," and so on. (For an excellent study of this need for mapping in the contemporary era of globalization, see Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's remarkable new book, *Cartographies of the Absolute*.) If anything, the sense that we are in an "epoch of space" is all the stronger today than in Foucault's own lifetime. But, I also think this makes Foucault's own work, with its profound sense of spatiality, all the more relevant to our own work in our time.

**In which way does the idea of space relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century specifically?**

Space and spatiality have become more prominent in social, cultural, and literary criticism in the last 50 years or so, but that is not surprising given the dramatic changes (social, economic, technological, etc.) during that period. Globalization has brought home to many the degree to which disparate places are crucially interconnected, although the specifics are sometimes still subtle or invisible. In retrospect, various factors – coinciding with

postmodernity as a historical period, as it happens – can be identified, including the breakdown of the Bretton Woods monetary system and the explosion in the use of financial derivatives in cross-border transactions, “outsourcing” in manufacturing, the rise of multinationals and the displacement of workforces, high tech innovations, the World-Wide-Web, an increasingly global culture industry, and so forth. The cartographic anxiety one associated with the bewildering spatiotemporal transformations of modern capitalism – “all that is solid melts into air,” as Marx put it – expands exponentially in a world in which electronic transactions executed largely by computers using mathematical trading formulae can have more dramatic and lasting effects on a given socioeconomic order than entire national industries once did. Space is, in a sense, less real and more urgent in such a world, which is partly why I think that literature and literary criticism, in their fundamental commitment to an educated imagination (as Northrop Frye called it), may be especially well placed to deal with the overwhelming crises of representation and of the imagination in contemporary culture. An empowered imagination is necessary for engaging the spatial and social confusions created and fostered by the conditions of the present world system. All criticism, in a way, partakes of spatially oriented criticism under such circumstances.

### **How has Postmodernism influenced and (perhaps) produced the Spatial Turn?**

As I’ve suggested, the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies is partly a response to the various phenomena associated with postmodernism, which (following Jameson) I take to be the cultural logic of late capitalism or of globalization. I do not mean to suggest that all of this can be attributed to post-1960s or post-World War II culture, obviously. As I noted in my *Spatiality* book, the “spatial turn” is a more-or-less helpful label for the recent reassertion of space in criticism and theory, but much of what is discussed under its banner could be rightly associated with much earlier forms of theory and practice. Indeed, in my own sort of old-fashioned way, I have connected the mapping figure to such modernist figures as Auerbach, Bakhtin, and Lukács, as well as to more obviously spatial critics such as Jameson or Edward Said. Moreover, there is a long history in various disciplines of bringing space, place, and geography to bear on the subjects. However, many of these ideas crystallized in new and interesting ways around the ideas of postmodernity and postmodernism, and the historical specificity of this is significant. It may be true that every culture, society, and historical period has had its own uniquely spatial problems, but then none has had exactly the sort of spatial problems that we experience today, in this postmodern epoch of globalization. Hence, even as we critics delve into the historical past or extrapolate towards some unimaginable future, our present is powerfully spatial in some unescapable ways, so criticism (or geocriticism) must necessarily engage with this spatiality.

### **Are postmodern spaces fragmented spaces? How?**

Yes, in a way, although it would be better to observe the ways in which spaces or places are formed into imaginary wholes that could then be subject to fissure, fragmentation, or dissolution. There’s a sort of modernist sensibility – not shared by all modernists, of course – that strikes an elegiac note in suggesting that the formerly whole or integrated societies or forms have faded away or been actively destroyed, and what is left is broken. This was a powerful theme in early twentieth-century writing, from poetry (“The Waste Land”) to philosophy (like Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*). Arguably, the reconstellating or reformatory project of shoring up these fragmentary ruins into a new whole is itself a modernist project. (Jameson has suggested that cognitive mapping was itself a modernist strategy in this sense, for it ostensible creates an imaginary whole, albeit a provisional one, out of the disconnected parts.) Postmodernism, supposedly, celebrated the fragmentary, and rather than reforming the parts into a new whole, postmodernists are thought to revel in the impossibility of *grand récits*, for instance. However, I think it more fruitful to imagine the

ways that disparate or discrete elements are formed into imaginary wholes, *ensembles*, that can then be analysed in their apparent wholeness or subsequent fragmentarity. That is, I believe that we find or create patterns amid the chaos, but that we also take things apart in such ways as to exemplify or enact a sort of chaos, as well. This is part of why I like the Benjaminian figure of the constellation, also well suited for mapping, since it involves a completely artificial and imaginary ensemble, yet one that (like a map) is exceedingly useful, practical for geolocation and navigation, for example. The fragments and the wholes work together in a dynamic fashion to form and reform intelligible ensembles that can then be put to use.

**Today, we are exposed to many kind of realities, virtual, semi-virtual, augmented ones: will these new realities cause new mental mappings or has it already happened?**

Yes, I think that one cannot overlook the transformative effects of technology, which do more than merely enhance our senses of space or place, but alter them in real ways. Virtuality, or virtual reality, is a good example of this. Although a certain basic form of cognitive mapping is clearly part of what used to be called human nature, inasmuch as individual subjects moving through space necessarily orientate themselves according to processes and practices we would associate with mapmaking, the specific conditions – including the technological conditions – of the present undoubtedly affect how such mappings happen. The avatar in a video game, for example, is a completely different figure, a weird conglomeration of subjectivity and objectivity, from those that may have been found in epic storytelling. Such audio-visual technologies have affected the way we imagine maps themselves, with GIS and other tools. Yet the maps remain imaginary, just as the effects are all too real, so the *real-and-imagined* places (as Soja calls them) become even more insistent in their significance in our day-to-day existence.

**Can the human need of maps and map making be associated with a condition of constant disorientation (Tally, 2013: 43) and a feeling of being lost so that, paradoxically, the more we use a map, the more we may feel lost?**

There is a hilarious scene in one of Melville's early novels, *Redburn*, in which the titular hero arrives at last in Liverpool, a city he's dreamed of visiting. He has with him his father's old guidebook, which we learn is years out-of-date, but even apart from the untimeliness, we see the innocent Redburn holding up his map and comparing it to the skyline seen from the harbour. Of course, a city map looks nothing like a view from the outskirts of town, and Redburn's frustration that the map did not bear "the slightest resemblance" to "the identical place itself" is humorous. But it is also a bit telling: One uses a map because one already feels disoriented, and – even though the map is a tremendously useful tool – the map-gazer does not always find his or her way simply by regarding this map, and one is often still lost or confused after consulting it.

**Can you tell us about the *Cartographies of the Absolute* and the condition of "being lost"?**

I mentioned Toscano and Kinkle's *Cartographies of the Absolute* above, and they rightly note that, "among the first products of a genuine striving for orientation is disorientation, as proximal coordinates come to be troubled by wider, and at times overwhelming vistas" (p. 25). I like this point, and I think it is true that, to the degree to which we attempt to overcome our sense of alienation by real or figurative mapping, we are often placed in an even more bewildering territory as we come to recognize the complexity and dynamism of the spaces. Jameson discusses this with respect to the conspiracy film in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, where the conspiracy becomes a map-like explanation for how things "really"

work, but each conspiracy becomes its own maze, ever more complicated and bizarre. It's true that, in mapping, we are already responding to a condition of "being lost," and the map provides at best only a provisional and temporary solution. At worst, it can enhance our own spatial confusion or cartographic anxiety. However, I think it is also clear that *not mapping* is never an option. The imaginary, cartographic activity may often, or always, lead to failure, but we cannot help doing it all the time anyway. The process of mapping and remapping continues.

**How much does map-making have to do with descriptions in novels? Traditionally, the description of places in novels was considered by literary criticism as an interruption within a narration, a suspension of the action that the reader may decide to skip. In an essay titled "Description, world building and narrative time" Mieke Bal (2002: 191-224) presents the description as the "narrative engine" of a novel, assigning to it the crucial status of complementing the action. What is your opinion in this respect?**

I'm glad you asked, because Professor Bal's narratological work is very important to my thinking on this matter, even though she has been something of an "absent presence" in my own writings. I agree with her point here. In my first book, on Melville, I discussed the tension between narrative and description in literary cartography, specifically using Lukács's distinction between the modes as used in realism versus naturalism in "Narrate or Describe." I talk about this a bit in a forthcoming essay, "Adventures in Literary Cartography," where I discuss how this functions in the adventure tale. Both narrative and description are necessary, and Bal is absolutely right in showing how the use of a descriptive mode in a novel is not an interruption of the story, but a crucial element in making that story happen. Again, we see this quite clearly in *Moby-Dick*, which famously includes "digressions" on whaling and whale craft, taking the reader away from the "main story," which presumably involves either a pseudonymous Ishmael's first whaling voyage or one Ahab's monomaniacal hunt for the white whale. (Even Moretti, who knows better, characterizes these sections in this way.) But the "cetological centre" of the novel, as it has been called, is absolutely essential to the narrative, whose plot is, if anything, rather boring (a mock-epic in which St. George faces the dragon, and the dragon kills him, as Jonathan Arac once characterized it). The *substance* of the novel lies in the relationship between the two discourses, which intertwine to help form the literary cartography as a whole. To call certain sections "digressions" is to imagine a different novel in which those sections do not appear. (One entrepreneurial artist, Damion Searls, has actually done this by publishing a book – titled "*or, the Whale*" – that only includes supposedly non-narrative parts of Melville's novel, a satirical send-up of another abridged edition which had cut out these sections.)

We tend to think of maps as descriptive, since they are a spatial representation, as opposed to narrative, which goes from beginning to middle to end in a relentlessly temporal movement. But the novel, along with other narrative forms, always includes both, more or less combining the two discursive modes in creating a larger literary cartography.

**How does the cultural industry, positively or negatively, influence our representation of literary worlds? I'm thinking, for instance, about the tours of Rome organized according to the cartography in Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*. Isn't the guided tour itself an interpretation that alters the reader's interpretation, creating a new narrative and consequently a new imaginary? Can the guided tour be considered the "something new" produced by the storyteller or "the one who weaves"? (Tally, 2013: 48; 149).**

Yes, definitely! Just this year, at a Modern Language Association panel organized by Moacir P. de Sá Pereira, I spoke on the topic of the “Westeros Tourism Board,” a tongue-in-cheek title based on the popularity of *Game of Thrones*-based tours. The popular television show is filmed in various places – Ireland, Morocco, Iceland, Croatia, Spain – and each site has now become a tourist attraction. One website invited guests to explore a “beautiful 11<sup>th</sup>-century castle” from which one can “gaze down at the fictional Blackwater Bay.” Five years ago, tourists would not have imagined that this “real” medieval castle had anything to do with a “fictional” battlefield, but now, thanks to a globally popular television series (adapting a series of fantasy novels), Lovrijenac Fortress in Croatia will be forever associated with King’s Landing in Westeros.

But, how is that much different than the walking tours of Dublin that celebrate Bloomsday and Joyce’s *Ulysses*? Literary pilgrims have always wished to visit these imaginary places, it seems, even when they know better. (I cite Umberto Eco’s mild embarrassment about his own literary fandom in my *Spatiality* book.) The guided tour in this case functions as a kind of geocritical reading of the text. Indeed, Westphal and his research team have paid a great deal of attention to tourism and other “non-literary” texts in analysing places and their representation. I would add that an analysis of such representational media would need to look at the material conditions of their possibility, including the mass cultural industry that can create a desire for such tourism, a certain level of capitalist investment in discrete places that can transform them from temporary backdrops in a film or television show into ongoing commercial enterprises in their own right, a class of international travellers understood as “tourists” (as opposed to refugees, for example), and so forth. But the fact that a given place gains new meanings, accretes significance, through textual interventions is both revealing and unsurprising.

**Geocriticism is definitely an interdisciplinary field. What is the relationship between Geocriticism and World Literature?**

I’m glad that you ask this, for I think that the emergence of something like *geocriticism* – or more generally, perhaps, *spatial literary studies* – in an era of globalization is not merely coincidental, and I have argued that a geocritical approach is particularly well suited to any discussion of world literature. I recently published a brief article, “World Literature and Its Discontents,” in which I noted both the problems and opportunities afforded by the conception of *world literature*. We’ve been aware of *Weltliteratur* since Goethe at least, but can it really be accidental that “world literature” as an object of study is really only 30 or 40 years old, and as a marketing category for textbooks or a name for university courses, it may be even more recent. The rising importance of what used to be called “Third World Literature” is part of the explanation, but globalization, multi- or transnationalism, and other forms of cultural border-crossing in recent decades must explain the rising interest in world literature today. Hence, it is a spatial matter, and geocriticism, broadly conceived, is well positioned, in its focus but also in its flexibility, to address world literature.

Geocriticism is interdisciplinary, I confess, although my own vision of it is probably more limited, on the one hand, and more expansive, on the other, since I believe that the discipline of literary studies is itself better capable of dealing with these matters than some others. It may sound odd to say this, particularly since geocriticism inevitably draws from multiple academic disciplines (notably geography, but also architecture, art history, cinema studies, philosophy, urbanism, and a range of social sciences), but I tend to be quite sceptical of interdisciplinarity. Part of this is political, as I fear that interdisciplinarity is a convenient marketing strategy designed to offer an array of easily consumable commodities to customers who will then lack the ability to discern differences among them, but partly it is pedagogical, as I think the development and evolution of disciplines relate to the hard

work being performed by those working in the fields. This is not to say we limit ourselves or our readings, only that a literary critic approaches a text differently than a philosopher or architect might. Therefore, a geocritic must examine texts and contexts from a variety of areas, but does so as a critic, one who is attuned to the specific problems associated with literary representation and interpretation, which are then made manifest in any number of cultural and social texts.

**Quoting an extract from Karen Blixen, the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero stresses on the relation between life and mapping through storytelling (1998: 7). In her *Out of Africa*, the Danish writer tells the story of a man who, trying to understand the origin of a weird noise in his garden at night, walks back and forth in the dark in order to fix what causes it. The following morning the man wakes up and, watching his garden through the window of the upper floor of his house, realizes that the track of his night steps composed the drawing of a stork. My question is: how much storytelling has to do with our connatural need of drawing the map of our everyday world?**

This is an interesting figure. The idea that the itinerary's tracings produce the image offers resonant theme for those wishing to connect-up movement and mapping. It also raises questions about the old rivalry between text and image, as the image is produced through storytelling, but the story is somehow retold in the image. It may be another example of the "natural" cartographic imperative with which humans are burdened, as well as the impulse toward creativity or art.

**What space is given Geocriticism in the universities of the USA? Since often what is popular in the USA is precursory of what gets to be the trend in Europe, it is interesting for us to know what is happening in your country.**

I think that we are seeing more attention being paid to matters of space, place, and mapping in different disciplinary fields or departments at various universities. I doubt that we will see a lot of courses specifically devoted to geocriticism; however, I expect more and more courses, as well as theses and dissertations, will bring geocritical work to bear on their subjects. For example, standard courses on, say, modernism might focus increasing attention on space, place, mobility, and other matters (see, e.g., Andrew Thacker's *Moving through Modernity*, a wonderful exploration of spatiality in British modernism) that may have previously focused attention on temporality or form, not that these wouldn't also be considered by geocritics, of course. As more scholars pay attention to matters of literary spatiality, the curriculum in general may reflect the discipline's (or multiple disciplines') concerns with space, place, and mapping.

**Are you preparing a new book?**

Yes, I am working on several things at present. I am hoping to put together a collection of my essays, some revised and expanded, which is tentatively titled *Topophobia*, and I am writing a new monograph on the spatial imagination in modern literature. With Christine M. Battista, I have co-edited a collection of essays, *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*, which should appear in late 2015. It will be part of the Palgrave Macmillan book series I edit, *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*. Also, I am working on the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Space*, a massive collection of essays from an impressive roster of scholars that, I hope, will offer a grand overview of spatial literary studies at the present time, while also suggesting the directions such work may take in the future. I am also preparing to edit a volume on teaching space, place, and literature for the MLA's prestigious Options for Teaching book series.

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