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Lost and Found: The Imagined Geographies of American Studies

CINDI KATZ

GEOGRAPHY AND POWER

IN THE DAYS after September 11th, 2001, and continuing until now, the national guard and other military personnel fanned out around New York City. Automatic rifles slung over their camouflaged shoulders, they “guarded” New York City’s transportation stations, vital corners and thoroughfares, marquee buildings, and each and every bridge and tunnel entrance. Their comportment was usually cordial and rarely vigilant. Exuding the antithesis of an urban sensibility, they complemented the beefy boredom of the police who usually stood nearby with an almost surreal sense of incredulity; not just “Why am I here?” but a sort of bafflement that anyone would even think they knew how to get to an uptown train. I’ve grown accustomed to their presence – frighteningly so – but still can’t get over their costumes. Green, woody camouflage. To blend with Penn Station?!

There is of course an exacting science (and art) of camouflage that involves close study of particular landscapes and the production of patterns that will fade into them so that they may be inhabited by stealth. The U.S. military has dozens of camouflage variants for all manner of apparel, equipment, vessels, and vehicles. But in New York City the military dresses not like bricks or pizza or granite, but in forest and jungle and sometimes Desert Storm fatigues. I walk around wondering why.

In the security state authorized and reinforced (but not ushered in) by September 11th, there has been an explosion of surveillance cameras and other mechanisms of vigilance in and around New York City. All bridge and tunnel entrances are under the watchful gaze of those cameras and the always-nearby police and military. In the spring of 2003 my British colleague and his Turkish partner were shooting video in a desolate stretch of Queens near their house, right where the number 7 subway enters the tunnel to Manhattan. Within minutes of the camera coming out a couple of cops zoomed up to investigate and thwart this critical security breach – as though al Qaeda couldn’t figure out the route of the 7 train otherwise. Gruffly informing them that all filming and photography of public transportation in New York was forbidden, the police officer demanded the camera from them. The filmmaker quickly and furtively rewound the tape, insisting all the while that they had not yet shot anything at that location. Forced to stop rewinding as the cop grabbed the camera, she hoped that she had rewound past the footage of the subway tunnel. She

had. What the officer saw was a map – of the Middle East. “What’s this a map of?” the (obviously U.S. educated) cop demanded to know. “Europe!” my colleague – a geographer – quickly and decisively responded. Tempered, but still riled up, the policeman demanded to know where the two of them were from. Paternalistically leaping into the void, my colleague strategically responded for himself as if it were for the two of them, “England and the U.S.” Finally the cop left them alone with the offending camera (and tape) still in their possession.

I start with these two stories because they reveal the intertwining of geography and power, but not in a singular sense. In the first case the power of the state is expressed in part through the willful ignorance of geography: camouflage without any reference to landscape. In the second case geographic ignorance (along with patriarchal assumptions) were exploited to resist the power of the state. This contradiction crystallizes something of the significance of the relationship between geography (and well-developed geographic sensibilities) and the deployments of power.

In this piece I gesture to what is at stake in the continued effacement of the historical geographies of contemporary capitalist globalism. These geographies, most commonly produced and centered in the United States, promulgate an imperialist neoliberal agenda both in the United States and abroad. Drawing on some of the imagined geographies that I have developed in the course of my research, I provide examples of the sorts of geographical sensibilities that might complement work in American Studies and invigorate our political imaginations and practices.

AMERICAN GLOBALISM

Just as American imperial ambition was effaced from narratives of American history, and its erasure formed a cornerstone of American exceptionalism, so too have the very real geographies and elaborate geographical imaginations integral to that imperial project been eclipsed. As Neil Smith’s *American Empire* makes clear, there was a palpable and quite willful loss of geographic sensibility in public discourse and national histories during the rise of U.S. globalism in the 20th century.¹ Indeed, it is no accident that, midway through, Henry Luce proclaimed an American Century rather than empire, but scratch the surface of the temporal trick and you see a spatial reality. American self-understanding for the first decades of the century was bereft of any sense of how geography – the relational geographies of uneven development, for instance – was integral to the nation’s growing imperial power. Quite the contrary, it was almost as if U.S. power was deployed in and through ignorance of the geographies that constituted it. This disregard was aided and abetted by the genuine – almost mind-bending – geographical ignorance of the American public, produced in part because of the moribund state of professional geography during much of the century, but also authorized by the manifestly destined imperial ambition that enabled it in the first place. American geopolitical and economic imperatives have been smuggled in and authorized by lofty aspirations such as *democracy* and *freedom*, which conceal the geographic ambit of U.S. power. These discursive alibis – Bush’s “Freedom is on the march!” – con-

tinue to be promulgated by those in power with obviously devastating effects, even as the spoils of that power are quite geographical.

The willful ignorance of geography persists at the present moment of U.S. globalism. Usually glossed as “globalization,” American globalism remains an imperial project of neoliberal capitalism that strives to stabilize and engage the interstices of U.S. geoeconomic power, keeping the United States in the center of uneven developments at all scales. It revives and intensifies primitive accumulation to foster what David Harvey² calls “accumulation by dispossession,” and alters the geographic relationships between production and social reproduction, severing their geographical contiguity, expanding the space between them, and collapsing the scales at which social reproduction is carried out.³

At the same time that American globalism oozes with geographical ambition, the sense that geography has (again) been superseded remains pervasive. For instance, in the language of finance capitalists and others with power comes the message that geography – again, still – is not important. Celebrations of the Internet, telecommunications, shared mass culture, instantaneous financial transfers, and the global assembly line are part of this message. But “progressive” theorists spout the same. Manuel Castells, for example, talks of the spaces of flows and proclaims a network society, while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s romance with deterritorialization severs empire from geography and thus from imperialism.⁴ Others wring their hands about placelessness, cultural homogenization, and the loss of local authenticity as effects of the diminution of geography’s relevance. Many celebrate the loss of geographical friction. In the course of these moans and celebrations, the interweave between geography and power is once again unraveled or obscured. No matter which way you look, it’s geographical fiction.

This essay offers a corrective to these fictions to see what can be gained from attending to the geographic nuances of power. Focusing on the altered geographies of production and reproduction, I hope to challenge the putative placelessness of capitalist production and reimagine the local without nostalgia about the peculiarity of place; provide a geographical imagination that goes beyond the increasingly tedious local–global; and offer the seeds of a geographically inspired political project. As the United States scrambles to secure its hegemony spatially, it is important to remember that, just as geography is integral to power, any reframing of power is an inherently geographic project.

CONTEMPORARY GLOBALISM

The putative placelessness of capitalist production has authorized the transformation of older relations of production and reproduction. Claims of placelessness take root in a terrain that itself has been altered thanks to the mobility of production. Alterations notwithstanding, it remains a place, and every place that capital goes is not no place. Nevertheless it is the case that, when production goes global, as it increasingly has, no *one place* is crucial to capital accumulation, and this tends to untether production and reproduction. Under these circumstances, capitalists need not reproduce a home-grown labor force or maintain the conditions of continued production in any particular place,

loosening their sense of obligation to the social wage and freeing them from attending – in what limited ways they did – to various local environmental conditions. With the heightened mobility and wider dispersion of production, capitalists can more easily succeed at reducing production costs both through exerting pressure on labor costs and renegeing on commitments to particular places and populations. Two of the hallmarks of contemporary neoliberalism – tax rebellion and the privatization of public goods and services – are ushered in and authorized by these circumstances. At the same time, neoliberal excesses tend to collapse the scales of social reproduction. That is, the locus of responsibility for various forms and practices of social reproduction is pressured to shift downward from, say, the state to the firm to the household to the individual, so that eventually public institutions and public environments are increasingly hollowed out as arenas of social reproduction.

These relationships and shifts have an almost paradoxical geographic form. On the one hand, there is an extension of the space between production and reproduction, but, on the other, there are pressures that collapse the scales at which reproduction is secured. Among the geographical imaginations that are associated with this dual characteristic of contemporary globalism are the production of scale, time–space expansion, and fragmented globality.

Production of Scale

Geographic scale seems easy and obvious: a nested set of hierarchical levels at which social, political, economic, and cultural life takes place. But there is nothing ontologically given about scale. It is produced by the very social, political–economic, and cultural practices that it appears to contain. Indeed, geographic scale embodies social relations of power as much as it is the arena in which these relations are played out. Geographic scale is the (partial and temporary) resolution of the social forces of cooperation and competition.⁵ For example, the nation-state is simultaneously an arena in which there is a certain level of cooperation among firms and the apparatus of competition with others outside. Contemporary globalism is ushered in and maintained by institutions that manage this competition (GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], the World Bank, the United Nations, and the WTO [World Trade Organization], among others). But at the same time – at a different scale – contemporary capitalist globalism is also maintained by the collapse of scale around the accomplishment of social reproduction, its downward trajectory ensuring higher levels of capital accumulation.⁶ If the state sheds responsibility for the provision of social welfare and capitalists off-load the costs of health care benefits to the individual worker, it enables enhanced capital accumulation on their parts as everyone at the household and individual scales struggles to cover these formidable costs on their own.

Time–Space Expansion

If the collapse of scales at which social reproduction is accomplished is characteristic of neoliberal capitalist globalism, so too is the extension of its space. In an increasing number of places social life is maintained only through an exploded geography of everyday life. I call this phenomenon *time–space expansion*. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* David Harvey speaks of *time–space compression* as one of the hallmarks of contemporary capitalism. As space is annihilated by time thanks to numerous technological advances, geographically

distant places are brought closer together. Jet travel, electronic communication, and relatively reduced shipping costs are obvious examples of the process. But time–space *compression* is how it looks from the perspective of the powerful. To take a simple example, as transportation improves, the costs for shippers may be reduced, but for workers or would-be workers the improvement enables them to travel even further to secure a job. Time–space expansion is the local fallout of time–space compression at a higher scale, and this fact – and its significance for rerouting capitalist globalism – is often overlooked. Time–space expansion has several forms, including extensions of daily commutes, expanded spaces of everyday life, and broadened labor migration networks.⁷

Geographies of production embody the social relations of both production and reproduction. Although the two were long embraced within the purview of the household or extended family, the development of capitalism tended to sever them in time and space, simultaneously propelling production from the household and reconfiguring the home as a reservoir of reproduction. With production distanced from the home, some sort of routine commute was required. The distances between home and workplace were limited by, among other things, terrain and infrastructure, technical capacity, and access to various forms of transportation by would-be workers. As production was relocated outside of the home, its historical geographies were often quite contained. Their compass was commonly the distance that could be walked without taking too much energy or substantially extending the working day. As transportation networks were developed, that compass expanded. Cities were in part sensible as geographic entities by the integument between the sites of production and reproduction; not just home and workplace, but also schools, recreational facilities, clinics, community centers, and religious institutions. With the development of suburbs and eventually exurbs, commuting distances increased tremendously. But if in recent years the space of commuting *has* been annihilated by time through telecommuting and the like particularly in the wealthy countries of the global North, the opposite has been the case in cities of the global South, where daily commutes have expanded tremendously during the same period. As central cities (north and south) become unaffordable for poor and working-class people, many workers are forced to move further and further away even if much of the work, particularly informal and service work, remains more centrally located. For instance, in São Paulo some people commute upward of four hours a day from *favelas* (informal settlements) on the city's outskirts to service and other jobs in the city's expensive center and residential neighborhoods. Such extensions of the routine spaces of everyday life enable people simply (and literally) to stay in place. Extended commutes tap into people's resilience – or, more bluntly, the fact that they must somehow secure their own reproduction – in ways that simultaneously subsidize and defuse the predatoriness of contemporary regimes of capital accumulation.

My research in rural Sudan over the past couple of decades revealed another form of time–space expansion. There I found that, as agricultural “development” both circumscribed access to arable land for the population coming of age and put pressure on pasture and woodlands through the creation of a fixed area for cash-crop cultivation, young people were able to remain in the village only by vastly extending the realm in which they worked routinely. People in the area had traditionally made their livelihoods through a combination of farming, forestry, and animal husbandry. To maintain this pattern a generation after the

establishment of a state-sponsored agricultural development project, villagers had to go as far as 50 kilometers to find agricultural work, 100 kilometers to graze animals during the dry season, and 200 kilometers to produce charcoal and other forestry products for cash. This same work had been accomplished within 5 kilometers of the village in the first decade of the agricultural project. The time–space expansion that ensued during the following decade or so represented an areal extension 1,600 times the original just to do the same work, and even this had to be complemented increasingly by periods of work in nearby towns or more distant cities. How far could people continue to go just to stay in place before the tethers to home frayed or broke entirely?

Another instance of time–space expansion is witnessed in transnational labor migration. Although in some ways these processes are not new, some of their recent patterns are. It is around social reproduction that their novelty can be seen and their importance to capital accumulation assessed. Many contemporary labor migrants are lone women who move to wealthy countries and find work as domestics or childminders. These women frequently have their own children whom they leave in the care of their extended families – sometimes for years – in order to care for other people’s children to provide remittances for the support of their own. This transnational flow of bodies and capital – both as labor power and as money – enables, among other things, the gendered relations of production and social reproduction to remain intact as poor women work in the households of wealthier women without rustling assumptions about who should be responsible for childcare or other aspects of domestic reproduction. At another scale, these patterns of domestic labor migration enable more privileged households to circumvent shortfalls in publicly provided child care, after-school programs, and the like, immunizing them from corporate and public disinvestments in the social wage. The burden of these falls again, still, on poor people, crossing an archipelago of caring work that is gendered and racialized in utterly predictable ways.

These examples of time–space expansion represent shifts in the scale of social reproduction and a reworking of the relationship between production and reproduction. In each instance capitalist production is subsidized, which helps to foster its globalization without exposing the lie of its placelessness.

Fragmented Globality

Time–space expansion is interstitial with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls *fragmented globality*. According to Trouillot, capitalist globalism is wildly uneven and, as it evolves, various places of power are brought into closer resonance as others are flung apart. The wealthy cores of New York City, Tokyo, and Caracas, for instance, may have more in common than any of them do with the impoverished areas that pock them or with which they are geographically contiguous. Thus the shape of globality is fragmented, and as the historical geographies of privilege and power are more tightly bound there is a concomitant expansion or displacement of those without power or wealth. At the same time the tightly sutured technoculture of globalization makes it everyday more apparent to poor, displaced, and excessed populations what they are missing in the global emporium. The tightening of the core and fragmentation of those who are marooned across multiple geographies is one of the hallmarks of capitalist globalism, and one that is more geographically resonant than tired scriptings that note the growing gap between rich and poor. This gap is expressed within

as much as between household spaces, within and between urban areas, and within and between nations.

Marooning results from the uneven development that occurs at all these scales. The dialectic of development and underdevelopment, which characterizes capitalism, tends to jettison certain parts of the population; certain spaces within cities, regions, or nation-states; or certain nations. The people and places that are marooned during the globalization of capitalist production generally must be contained, destroyed, or reincorporated under particular (and often punitive) terms. Imprisonment and military service are two of the most prevalent strategies for containing excess populations for example. *Redlining*, the process through which banks cordon off particular areas at different scales as unsafe for loans or investments, is another common strategy of containment. Taken to extremes, as has been the case in selected urban areas or certain Third World countries, redlining also serves as a means of slow and erosive destruction. Places destroyed or incapacitated by the process are often then reincorporated into the fold under strict conditions set by finance capitalists and their affiliates through such processes as gentrification in selected neighborhoods or structural adjustment programs in Third World countries. Any viable response to the contemporary conditions of neoliberal global capitalism will need to figure out how to engage, incorporate, and build political movements with marooned populations. They are arguably one of the fastest growing “by-products” of the imperatives associated with the globalization of capitalist production. While there are obviously many local, community-based responses to these imperatives, and even some coalitions that cross disparate localities around particular issues, it seems important that political movements develop geographical imaginations that have the vitality to match those of capitalist globalism.

TOPOGRAPHIES AND COUNTERTOPOGRAPHIES

Elsewhere I have tried to work out a way to imagine the connections produced by the social relations of globalized capitalist production and reproduction across wildly disparate places.⁸ My goal in developing these *topographies of global capitalism* is to map the encounter between global capital and local places in a way that might get beyond the tired dialectic of local–global. A topography is simultaneously a place, its close and “thick” description, and its graphic representation. Topographies are always interested, and there is no separating a place and its representation. The development of topographies in the sense presented here is a means of examining how particular material social practices undo, remake, and rely on particular political economic and social relations sedimented into space. Topographies both create and reveal social forms and relations in space and provide the ground – literally and figuratively – for developing a critique of their effects.

My underlying interest in topographies is to produce *countertopographies* of globalization that connect its effects beyond a single site.⁹ The material social practices of globalization work across space when capital or labor moves from one place to another, but they also work iteratively in the sense of producing common effects in disparate places. Countertopographies draw on a quintessential feature of topographic maps – the contour line – to link such places by

virtue of their relationship to particular abstract but material processes associated with global economic restructuring.¹⁰ The deskilling of young people in the wake of economic restructuring, for instance, connects places as distinct as New York City, São Paulo, and rural Sudan. Focusing on this question across place might provide new kinds of leverage in countering the dispersed but homologous effects of deskilling and unemployment. Similarly a counter-topography might be produced that charts retreats in the social wage and the militarization of certain aspects of social reproduction. The two sites of my work – New York and rural Sudan – are again connected in these terms, if by broad strokes. In both places the military absorbs many of those displaced from the prospect of routine employment. Tracing a line that links places by virtue of this sort of response to the altered relations of production and reproduction – in this instance, where the military represents one of the only sites of public investment in social reproduction (along with prisons) – produces a geographical imagination that can frame these shifts as systemic as well as translocal.

In other words, driving the production of topographies and countertopographies is a geographical imagination that cuts through and across received distinctions not only among discrete places, but between such lumpy distinctions as global North and South, East and West, or the First and Third Worlds. There is an entrenched politics and considerable power in occluding these common effects in very different places. Countertopographies are meant to ensure that they no longer slink by in taken-for-granted geographies. These connections not only can be mapped through contour lines demarcating such things as disinvestments in public welfare, the appeal of militias, or the burgeoning of prison populations, but the contour lines can be overlaid on a single map to reveal potentially fruitful sites of organizing on common and/or intersecting grounds.

The sorts of geographic sensibilities I have traced here – of scale, of time-space expansion, of fragmented globality, and of countertopographies – help chart the archipelago of marooned places. They have metaphoric entailments to be sure, but these geographies are not solely metaphorical. The material spaces and their representations may help produce more geographically charged responses to capitalism's global imperatives. These maps provide representations of U.S. globalism from the inside out – translocally, across scale, and across common and even hardened divides of historical geography. They have the potential of revealing common grounds of concern and struggle across specific geographies, which might alter the nature of and targets for political intervention. Producing them here, I hoped to call into serious political question the missing geographies of contemporary American Studies and in the U.S. imaginary more broadly. The absence of such vibrant imagined geographies marks and undergirds particular relations of power that work off of and on quite material historical geographies.

Celebrations of placelessness are, after all, built upon particular and quite political geographical imaginations. In many ways these celebrations are of a piece with the discourses of American exceptionalism, which in the past allowed American Studies (and U.S. politics) to evacuate its specific geography, obscuring not only that its ambit is an area among area studies, but blunting its ability to ground its claims in particular historical geographies. Allowing geography to go missing or be seen as somehow unimportant in academic discourse as much as in politics or the American imaginary, eclipses all those many spaces (the prisons, the Caribbean houseyards, and the attenuated commuting corri-

dors, to name a few) that make it possible even to imagine placelessness or frictionless mobility. Exhuming the geographies of the dispossessed, of the scrambling, of marooned places, of American Studies, and *connecting* them in their specificity across common concerns, could create enough friction to gum up the works and make the spatial strategies through which hegemony is secured that much harder to achieve. This is not just a question of exploiting geographical ignorance. The sorts of geographical imaginations I have suggested here can cut through the unequal relations of power that eclipse, erase, and even deny their geographical integument – like policing Penn Station in desert camouflage. The twin projects of exposing geographical fictions and producing new imagined geographies open fresh ways of organizing against this power in American Studies and well beyond.

NOTES

1. Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

2. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3. Cindi Katz, "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction," *Antipode* 33 (2001): 709–28; and Cindi Katz, "Hiding the Target: Social Reproduction in the Privatized Urban Environment," in *Postmodern Geography: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Claudio Minca (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 93–110.

4. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

5. Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographic Scale," *Social Text* 33 (1992): 54–81; and Sallie A. Marston, "The Social Production of Scale," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (2000): 19–42.

6. Katz, "Vagabond Capitalism."

7. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Cindi Katz, "On the Grounds of Globalization: A Topography for Feminist Political Engagement," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (2001): 1213–34; and Cindi Katz, *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

8. Katz, "On the Grounds"; Katz, "Vagabond Capitalism"; and Katz, *Growing Up Global*.

9. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Theorizing a Global Perspective: A Conversation with Michel-Rolph Trouillot," *Crosscurrents in Culture, Power, and History: A Newsletter of the Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power, and History, Johns Hopkins University* 4 (1996): 1–4; and Giuseppe Dematteis "Shifting Cities," in Minca, *Postmodern Geography*, 113–28.

10. In topographic maps contour lines connect places of the same elevation, thereby mapping the gradient of slopes so that the three-dimensional form of the landscape can be seen. Producing contour lines does not require every millimeter of the terrain to be measured but rather relies on the precise assessment of elevation at selected sites in order to infer the relationships between them. So too with countertopographies, which I view as a means to draw out precise analytic relationships among places that may appear quite different on the surface.

