Methods and Theories: Doing Over Geography

John Dee got it wrong; the geography has to be done over.
We live inside a hollow earth, enclosed by the terrestrial surface. Umberto Eco[1]

Much of the work in the fields of literary and cultural geography has been subsumed under the "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences. During the later decades of the twentieth century, this turn denoted a break with an epistemology of space that, with little exceptions, was a product of the Enlightenment and early capitalism and that approximated spatiality largely in physical or territorial terms.[2] Interested in the social construction of space, critical geography produced a wide array of (post)structuralist approaches, among them Lefebvre's *La production de l'espace* (1974) whose English translation sparked renewed interest in the study of space. In the following decades, a new appreciation of spatial paradigms was "encouraged by the importation of French theory, in particular the work of Foucault, Lefebvre, de Certeau, and Virilio, which newly emphasized the power relations implicit in landscape under general headings like 'abstract space,' place, and 'symbolic place,' interpreted through new spatial metaphors like 'panopticism'".[3] Edward Soja suggested that many of these ideas represented "a radical postmodernist perspective" which entails a "restructuring of long-established modes of knowledge formation [...] such as feminism and the struggle against racism and colonialism".[4]

For the purposes of this book, Lefebvre's and Soja's merits lie in the liberation of space-related thinking from its internment in the natural sciences and the subsequent development of methodologies that allow for "the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical rebalancing of spatiality, historicality [sic], and sociality as all-embracing dimensions of human life".[5] Or, in the words of

1 U. Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, New York: Random House, 2014 [1988], p. 509.

2 U. Engel, *Regionalismen*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018, p. 3; S. Günzel, "Raum – Topographie – Topologie", in: S. Günzel (ed.), *Topologie. Zur Raumbeschreibung in den Kultur- und Medienwissenschaften*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2007, pp. 13–29.

3 J. Guldi, "What is the Spatial Turn?", *Spatial Humanities: A Project of the Institute for Enabling Geospatial Scholarship*, 2011, http://spatial.scholarslab.org/spatial-turn/what-is-the-spatial-turn/.

4 Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 3.

5 Ibid., p. 10. The historical background of the spatial turn is much more complex, going back to the notion that "[t]he great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its preponderance of dead men [...] the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of

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Benno Werlen: "*Das Räumliche ist das Produkt des Tuns*" (spatiality is the outcome of action).[6] Consequently, places and cultural regions have come to be seen as de-essentialized and socially produced "spaces which people have made meaningful", thus creating "the basic coordinates of human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it [...] it becomes a place".[7] This adds to Tim Cresswell's insight that thinking in spatial terms gives access to new "way[s] of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" but can also result in "reactionary and exclusionary xenophobia, racism and bigotry. 'Our place' is threatened and others have to be excluded".[8]

In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association (ASA), Shelley Fisher-Fishkin endorsed the "transnational turn" that positioned the US "as part of a world system [and] pay[s] increasing attention to the historical roots of multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process".[9] This approach benefited from newfound perspectives on seemingly closed-off topics and aimed at the "worlding of American Studies", namely the study of "U.S. culture within the context of the Americas and larger world systems".[10] As a result, the nation-state forfeited its status as an exceptional and monolithic entity, only to be increasingly imagined as an "imagined community".[11] The transnational scrutiny of the nation has shifted focus away from the centres of territorial power and towards peripheries and liminal regimes, most notably the Mexican-American borderlands, as well as spatial practices and conditions like

juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (M. Foucault, "*Des Espace Autres*" ["Of Other Spaces"], J. Miskowiec (trans.), *Diacritics* 16 (1986) 1 [1967], pp. 22–27, at 22).

6 B. Werlen, "Festvortrag", Leipzig, 25 May 2016. According to Werlen, the construction of geographic realities commences through three different strategies and within three categories: trading in economy, legitimizing in politics and law, and symbolizing through cultural signification (ibid.).

7 T. Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, Hoboken: Blackwell, 2004, p. 7.

8 Ibid., pp. 8–11.

9 S. F. Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies", *American Quarterly* 57 (2005) 1, pp. 17–57, at 21–22.

10 R. Adams, "The Worlding of American Studies", *American Quarterly* 53 (2001) 4, pp. 720–732, at 730.

11 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Brooklyn: Verso Books, 1983, p. 1.

migration and diaspora.[12] These concepts prove highly productive for the deconstructive attitude of this book regarding spatial (meta)narratives. This goal, however, cannot be achieved by ignoring or dismissing the pivotal role of national(ist) discourses about the American West. The objective thus is "not to overcome national perspectives but to explore the multiplicity and diversity of spatial imaginations in the early national period".[13]

In recent years, Brian Russell Roberts' and Michelle Ann Stephens' *Archipelagic American Studies* suggested a departure from continental perspectives by envisioning the United States as a fragmented entity whose incorporated territories and exclusive economic zones engender hemispheric networks. This "decontinentalizing" includes "archipelagic imaginaries and reading practices that foreground the Americas' embeddedness within a planetary archipelago that holds in tension the supraregional and the microregional".[14] Hester Blum's *The News at the Ends of the Earth* (2019) describes the US as an "Arctic nation" embedded in a colonial history of polar exploration and colonization that engendered spatial tropes which informed key texts like *Moby-Dick*. The nation's future, Blum suggests is closely linked to Arctic ecosystems, climate change, and melting glaciers, whose thawing causes spatial imaginations of the past (e.g. in the form of bottled messages freed from melting ice sheets) to return into the present consciousness. Looking to the North instead of following a westward trajectory, Blum's study shares common ground with this book by implicitly translating Edwards' concept of *décalage* into the uncovering of spatial discourses that are exposed not by "the taking away of something [...] artificial" but by the addition of something artificial, namely global warming.[15]

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12 Revising western history along these lines reveals a historical continuity that posits American borderlands as the destination of sixteenth-century European conquerors, nineteenth-century manifest destiny, and modern-day migrants and refugees. As Clyde Milner puts it: "The American West began as an international borderland between native peoples, the Spanish, Russians, French, and British. Today the international borderlands are even more significant with connections directly to Canada in the north, Mexico to the south, and numerous Asian nations via the Pacific" (Milner, "America Only More So", p. 39).

13 G. Pisarz-Ramirez, S. Wöll, and D. Bozkurt, *Spatial Fictions: Imagining (Trans)national Space in the Southern and Western Peripheries of the Nineteenth Century United States*, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2018, p. 7.

14 B. R. Roberts and M. A. Stephens (eds.), *Archipelagic American Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 11.

15 Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, p. 14. An entry on the White House website posted under Barack Obama's presidency titled "America Is an Arctic Nation" states: "Melting glaciers and land-based ice sheets are contributing to rising sea levels. The future of America is inextricably linked to the future of the Arctic". Fittingly, a disclaimer above the archived article informs readers that "[t]his is historical material 'frozen in time'" (R. J. Papp, Jr., "America Is an

These approaches to American, global, and transnational spaces increasingly subvert and displace established epistemologies of centredness and peripherality, upending and distorting imaginations of the US rooted in colonial histories and modernist literary canons. But their disruptive attitudes also ask if an investigation that engages traditional concepts like frontier and manifest destiny can appear anachronistic or even regressive. While some might think this to be the case, it does not affect the objective at hand, namely to examine the discursive roots of spatialization processes. In today's political climate that is shaped by growing conflicts over global migration and perceived threats to the stability of national borders and identities in the US and Europe, taking a step back and looking at the emergence of mental trajectories that energize these conflicts and fears seems more relevant than ever. The challenge of dealing with nineteenth-century sources lies in the need of carefully ungluing texts from their historical embeddedness within linear timelines that seem to inevitably culminate in the emergence of nation-state and empire. The present book reveals the latter as only two of many spatial formats and aims to recover those that existed in juxtaposition or below dominant narratives, crisscrossing and defying the parochialisms of traditional epistemologies of local, regional, (inter/trans)national, and global formats.

Re-acknowledging space in nineteenth-century texts means unpacking the historical caveats and interplays of spatial representations and in this manner contributing to the understanding of processes that inform(ed) American identities by "revisiting founding, if not foundational, notions and ideologies of space".[16] Oftentimes, these "notions and ideologies" appear most forcefully in the works of authors that found themselves caught between the grindstones of the nation's ostensible spatiotemporal destiny, the socially disparate allocation of resources, and liminal configurations of ethnicity and gender. In light of Said's demand for "a geographical inquiry into historical experience" and assertion that "most cultural historians, and certainly all literary scholars, have failed to remark the geographical notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territory that underlies Western fiction" certainly seems ripe.[17] Such a "theoretical mapping" must be guided by theoretical awareness of the spatial dimensions of textuality and thus be able to locate these dimensions in theoretical and real-life contexts.

Arctic Nation", *The White House: President Barack Obama*, 2 December 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/12/02/america-arctic-nation).

16 S. Blair, "Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary", *American Literary History* 10 (1998) 3, pp. 544–567, at 550.

17 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 7; ibid. p. 58.

Achieving these goals produces spatial literacy by demonstrating how cultural discourse functions within the framework of spatialization processes.

The Spatial Dialectics of the American West

Only a dialogue with the past can produce originality. Wilson Harris[18]

American Studies with its broad theoretical and methodological repertoire supplies a productive basis from which to recover and evaluate the complexity of spatial imaginations in nineteenth-century literature.[19] Conceptualized by architectural theorist Alexander Tzonis and historian Kenneth Frampton as a critique of the anonymity and uniformity of postmodern architecture – and perhaps best summarized in the notion that "Americans do not need piazzas, since they should be at home watching television" – the critical regionalist method has been appropriated, modified, and refined in the service of various disciplines.[20] It is often contrasted to traditional regionalism with its archival studies and more specialized subjects. Accused of parochialism and provincialism, regionalism for some has turned into an almost pejorative term that seems to stand in the way of more inclusive perspectives that emphasize transnational and global connections. Limerick expresses this idea by stating that "to many scholars, regional history is where one goes for a nap".[21] Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter proposed a redefinition of regionalism that might be able to wake up these "napping scholars". Concretely, they suggested that "[r]egions are culturally constructed spaces of the collective imagination and not simply coherent entities

18 Qtd. in V. Dindayal, *Guyanese Achievers, USA & Canada: A Celebration*, Bloomington: Trafford, 2011, p. 577.

19 Sarah Blair points out that "[f]ictive texts, with all their tricks of resistance to the imperatives of the temporal and the teleological, are a far richer resource than literary geographers have thus far recognized for charting the 'strange effects' of space – its simultaneity, its encryptations, its dynamism and repressions" (Blair, "Cultural Geography", p. 556).

20 K. Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in: H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983, pp. 16–30, at 25.

21 Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, p. 84. As much as he was a proponent of a nationalized western history, Turner also stressed the importance of regional histories, albeit only in the framework of the nation. Martin Ridge relates that "each year [Turner] asked his seminar students to write two papers – the first on a narrow [regional] frontier subject and the second on why it was important in the nation's history" (Ridge, "The American West", p. 140).

located inside clear lines on a map".[22] According to Heike Paul, this way of imagining regions for cultural and literary studies becomes productive because it "interrogates the discursive 'production' and the role of regions in large geopolitical constellations – often under the conditions of colonialism/empire and/or modernism, neo-liberalism, and globalization. Thus, it critically reflects, first, on a traditional paradigm of regionalism that was often invested in essentialist, at times romanticized and nostalgic notions of regional formations and identities".[23]

Critical regionalism in this way enables scholars to take heed of regional connectedness and representational macro-structures that simultaneously construct and deconstruct regions as imagined spaces. Such an approach demands a heightened sense of self-awareness since getting involved in the study of literary placemaking also means becoming "a part of the larger creation of place itself".[24] In addition, as already noted, decoding and re-encoding go hand in hand and scholars are by no means non-participants but transformative actors in this process.[25] To conclude, critical regionalism helps revealing how layers of meaning accumulate around and attach themselves to realities or imaginations of certain (regional) spaces.

Emphasizing the role of historicity in literary theory, new historicism precipitated a paradigm change during the 1980s in reaction to the more inflexible formalisms of New Criticism, structuralism, and poststructuralist deconstruction. Duncan Salkeld compares this approach to a flexible toolset that brings together "related materialist, Marxist and feminist critical practices as they seek to interpret literary works amid the complexities of their own historical moment".[26] In its analytical chapters, the present book builds upon this notion by adopting what anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* calls a "thick description", namely the discernment that human behaviour (including that of fictional characters) cannot be meaningfully explained outside of its sociocultural context.[27]

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22 M. D. Lassiter and J. Crespino (eds.), *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 11.

23 Paul, "Critical Regionalism", p. 398.

24 D. R. Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 26.

25 K. Struve, "Third Space", in: D. Göttsche, A. Dunker, and G. Dürbeck (eds.), *Handbuch Postkolonialismus und Literatur*, 2017, pp. 226–229, at 226.

26 D. Salkeld, "New Historicism", in: C. Knellwolf and C. Norris, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 59–70, at 59.

27 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 27. Geertz adopts the term "thick description" from British philosopher Gilbert Ryle and goes on to argue that "[i]t is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must

He proposed that such a strategy necessitates believing like "Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun [and taking] culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning".[28] According to Harold Aram Veeser, the basic assumptions of new historicism include:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.[29]

Against this background, Foucault's concept of power-knowledge becomes a vital instrument to correlate the production and reproduction of texts to their function within prevalent discourses of race, class, and gender and relating to agendas of dominant or "correct" interpretive governances.[30] The following analyses include a variety of sources both historical and contemporary with the goal to initiate a "thick", namely intertextual and interdisciplinary debate among them. This approach is moreover indebted to "crossmapping" as a "reading strategy that engages and connects 'visual imagery' and 'figures of thought' in different 'texts' that are not in any narrow sense intertextually connected but can be brought into play to productively signify on each other".[31]

Of course, all above-mentioned methods emerged long after the primary sources discussed below came into being. In dialectical terms, the present study thus faces the dilemma of being caught between two hermeneutic extremes: The first option would be to tacitly assume a position of historical "objectivity". Notwithstanding the well-known problems concerning objectivism itself, this position would mean discarding many so-called (post)structuralist approaches and

measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (ibid., p. 16).

28 Ibid., p. 5.

29 H. A. Veeser, "Introduction", in: H. A. Veeser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1989, pp. ix–xvi, at xi.

30 M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* [*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*], A. M. S. Smith (trans.), New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975], p. 27.

31 Paul, "Critical Regionalism", p. 399.

their fundamental critiques of modernist epistemologies that cannot be transplanted back in time without the introduction of severe biases. Being "objective" would mean parting with any and all opinions and be unfeasible since writing always represents a reflexive and constructive process that involves the cumbersome exercise of retrodiction as the interpretation of past events inferred from the laws assumed to have informed them. In other words, reasoning from effect to cause and thus "starting with the 'dénouement' and then retracing forward what had already been traced backward".[32]

The alternative would be to write from a perspective of universalism. From this point of view, history appears as a coherent and meaningful unit that is equally valid for all participants at any point of a linear timeline. Assuming such a "totalizing history", however, suffocates complexity as it leaves no room for contradictions and ambiguity as vital components of any discourse. As a third option, Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of dialectical horizons aims at reconciling the inherent flaws of both approaches. It involves the assumption that reading and interpreting always means entering a dialogue. The participants of this dialogue, however, regularly do not share the same historical "horizon": They are separated by time, space, and the sociocultural structures that surround and influence them. The best approximation to an equal dialogue and hence the most "organic" hermeneutic strategy would be to engage in what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons".[33] As Jeff Malpas explains,

> all understanding involves a process of mediation and dialogue between what is familiar and what is alien in which neither remains unaffected. This process of horizontal engagement is an ongoing one that never achieves any final completion or complete elucidation – moreover, inasmuch as our own history and tradition is itself constitutive of our own hermeneutic situation as well as being itself constantly taken up in the process of understanding, so our historical and hermeneutic situation can never be made completely transparent to us.[34]

32 Giles, *Global Remapping*, p. 3. Regarding the contradictions that come with writing "objectively" about literature and history, Hayden White cautions that this "would entail surrender by the Marxist theorists of their claim to see 'objectively' the 'reality' which their opponents always apprehend in a 'distorted' way. For we would recognize that it is not a matter of choosing between objectivity and distortion, but rather between different strategies for constituting 'reality' in thought so as to deal with it in different ways, each of which has its own ethical implications" (White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 22).

33 H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* [*Truth and Method*], W. Glen-Doepel (trans.), London: Continuum, 2004 [1960], p. 305.

34 J. Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3 March 2003, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/.

Adopting this perspective means that the subsequent examinations cannot content themselves with the analytical conveniences of moralistic hindsight, ahistorical *nunc pro tunc* presentism, and the resulting self-fulfilling prophecies.[35] By taking into account its own "historically-effected consciousness", the efforts of this book thus acknowledge their own status as not being "above" its subjects, but rather being themselves an "effect of [their] history".[36] To be sure, the examined sources by no means all originate from the same horizon. Much of their interest in fact results precisely from their perspective variance that creates antithetic and complex spatial imaginations. In their "horizontally fused" readings these texts regularly exceed their traditionally assigned generic conventions. In terms of dialectics and hermeneutics, a two-tiered horizontal dynamic is therefore at work in this book. First, via the conscious historical interaction between text/author and reader/critic, and second in the juxtaposition of the texts' own discursive horizons regarding western spatiality. In this way, the synthesis of both dimensions under the methodological umbrella of critical regionalism and new historicism makes visible the asymmetrical unfolding of the American West on diverse regional, national, and global scales as a diverse and multiscalar assemblage of "sites where individuals negotiate [...] social relations immigrant and native, regional and global, dominant and other".[37] Finally, the following takes cues from Raymond Williams' concept of cultural materialism. On the one hand, this means going

35 In 2003, Charles Crow observed growing presentist tendencies in literary studies: "Obsessed with its own myth of origins, the scholarship that comprises most literary histories is always seeking some defining beginning (usually Puritan New England, sometimes the Virginia Plantation, in rare instances the European voyages of discovery) in whose texts may be discerned something peculiarly or characteristically 'American' – American by current criteria, of course. [...] [T]he works produced are patently ahistorical, tacitly reading some version of the present back into the past" (C. L. Crow, "Introduction", in: C. L. Crow [ed.], *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, Hoboken: Blackwell, 2003, p. 51).

36 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 335.

37 Blair, "Cultural Geography", pp. 544–545. The term assemblage is used either to describe processes of governance or as a conceptual critique to implement new understandings of social entities and relations between exteriority, materialities, and enunciations. Here, it is understood in a more descriptive manner that stresses "[t]he relationship among the elements in an assemblage is not stable; nor is their configuration reducible to a single logic. Rather, an assemblage is structured through critical reflection, debate, and contest" (S. J. Collier, "Global Assemblages", *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 [2006] 2/3, pp. 399–401, at 400; see S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 5). The products of assembling space or spatial imaginations can range from landscapes to nation-states to entirely unique spatial configurations such as folded, striated, or crumpled geographies (see G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 73).

beyond merely aesthetic and formal criteria of analysis based on the "recognition of 'literature' as a specializing social and historical category".[38] Texts and authors are both understood as spatial actors that assert agency by aligning themselves with or resisting dominant discourses within their particular historical moment, again stressing the value of "thick descriptions". Ascribing this agentive function to literary and cultural discourse, on the other hand, stresses the correlations between textual productions and political, economic, and ideological power structures.

38 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 53.