CREATIVITY AND GEOGRAPHY: TOWARD A POLITICIZED INTERVENTION*

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Whether geographers have engaged directly or indirectly with artists and writers and their creative products or have themselves produced artistic or literary work, there is no dearth of evidence for both the somewhat regular appearance and the frequent dissolution of these engagements. The relationship spans efforts since the age of geographical expeditions and arguably goes back to the classical Greco-Roman period of Strabo’s Geographicus. Despite vagaries of interpretative frameworks, the place of arts products—such as painting, literature, film, music—as empirical objects has been consistent within geography over at least the last fifty years. Perhaps less present during this era has been a more practice-based relationship between geography and the arts. In the last ten years, however, geography as a discipline has again become involved with creativity in a practice-based way (Crang 2010; Dear and others 2011; Hawkins 2011; Thomas and others 2011). It is with these most recent sets of alliances, collaborations, and individual creativities that we align this special issue of the Geographical Review.

If the relationship between geographical knowledge-making and creative practices has an extensive history, creative expression produced by geographers has not been much examined for its potential for and as a form of political critique. This is all the more surprising, for such political critiques and social theory-engaged analyses have been a hallmark of the last two decades of geographical explorations of the creative productions of others, whether these be landscape artists, writers, or filmmakers (Daniels 1989; Barnes and Duncan 1992). Such foldings of the cultural and the political were characteristic of the emergence of so-called new forms of cultural geography in the latter decades of the twentieth century and were responsible for sharpening the interpretative relationship between geography and the arts. Prior to this period, arts practices held a place in the constellation of descriptive practices, which also included the counting and measuring that constituted twentieth-century–geography’s topographic tradition (Daniels 2011). The political critique of new cultural geography therefore marked a significant shift in

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creativity and geography

the nature of the interpretive approach geographers took to a variety of creative practices and how their products were understood to go to work in the world. This approach continues to evolve to embrace new forms of politics and to take account of frames of interpretation that revisit the understandings of representations that sat at the heart of earlier approaches. Indeed, recently the collaborative creative work undertaken by artists, writers, and geographers, as well as the solo work being developed by geographers as practicing artists and writers, has increasingly been engaged as a force of political critique, whether this be with respect to feminist thinking on landscape art (for an early example of this contemporary trend, see Nash 1997); human-nonhuman relations (Yusoff 2008), or discussions of participatory arts practices and methods (Mackenzie 2004; Parr 2007; Johnston and Pratt 2010; Tolia-Kelley 2012; Ingram 2013).

The distinguishing feature of this special issue of the Geographical Review is an overt politicization of this “creative (re)turn” in human geography (Hawkins 2010, 2013). In an effort to present the kinds of working practices contemporary geographers have been engaging with as creative practitioners and collaborators, we solicited pieces from practicing artists/writers, academic geographers, and those who blur these discrete groupings. The result is eighteen contributions—including poetry, essays (fiction and creative nonfiction), an excerpt from a novel, photographs, prints, a graphic narrative, a feature interview, and a commentary on a dramatic forum-theater play—all of which perform political critiques of contemporary social and spatial relations and practices or intervene in and comment on the politics of knowledge production. Our two main lines of inquiry in this introductory essay are to explore how geographers can and have engaged with their own creative expression critically and to lay out the sort of political work creative expressions can and have been understood to do in geography.

In what follows, we undertake a discussion of the recent rise of creative expressions as a disciplinary practice. We then map out the historical context in which this more recent work can usefully be situated. In the third section we take up the published contributions we solicited and had formally reviewed and revised. We ask how they “do” political work in the world, in terms of both what “type” of political work and, interlinked to this, through what means this work is accomplished. We also reflect, as we consider these contributions, on their intersection with ongoing disciplinary debates concerning the politics of knowledge production. This includes exploring how these creative pieces challenge the normative spaces and practices of disciplinary knowledge-making as well as how they proffer creativity and poetics as a means to face down those modes of knowledge-making that still succumb to the logics of epistemological fixing and distancing (see, for example, Davies 2010). We end with a brief conclusion concerning the value of geographers’ production of creative expressions for the discipline and a call for them to better appreciate the work that these expressions do in the world.
The Emergence of “Creative Geographies”

Attention to the possibilities of creative practices is widespread across a range of today’s geographies. Critical, radical, poststructural, historical, cultural, feminist, nonrepresentational, postcolonial, urban, and social geographers are all, in varying ways, deploying or considering various creative and artistic expressions and representations. Furthermore, professional geographers have begun to curate or collaborate on producing exhibitions of art and visual culture (Nash 1997; Alfrey, Daniels, and Postle 2004; Yusoff 2008; Driver forthcoming), employ creative and arts-based practices as research methods, partner with creative practitioners in multiple genres (McDonald 2003),3 and produce their own creative work (for example, Quoniam 1988; Yusoff 2007; Kitchin 2009, 2010, 2012; Crouch 2010; Cresswell forthcoming; Katz forthcoming). As well, a growing number of artists and writers have entered the discipline of geography to obtain advanced degrees, among them Marie Ceri, Katherine Yusoff, Sarah de Leeuw, Rupert Griffiths, Nelly Ben Hayoun, and Eric Magrane. Just as geographers are employing creative practices to gather knowledge, analyze information, and explain and disseminate their work, so, as a recent book on the geohumanities has made clear (Dear and others 2011), are creative practitioners of various stripes turning to theorizations and concepts we may associate with the geographical. Special geography and art sessions and creative interventions at the discipline’s large international conferences as well as specialist conferences are becoming more common, and interdisciplinary graduate programs that aim to cross train in the arts and human geography are emerging.4 That “geography will deserve to be called an art only when a substantial number of geographers become artists” appears to be a kind of inspirational slogan being taken up by more and more disciplinary colleagues in anglophone university departments (Meinig 1983, 325).

What are the implications of this creative ferment? How do we critically engage this “creative (re)turn”? What critical analytics are being deployed in this recent turn in the discipline? What, indeed, do we make of this “coming together” of geography and creative practice (Foster and Lorimer 2007)? The responses to these questions must address the fact that, although much attention has been paid to the processes of producing these creative products, with many commentaries recounting, for example, the dynamics and politics of these collaborations and the biography and intent of these projects, as yet this contemporary “creative shift” is not being historicized, substantively conceptualized, or carefully and critically theorized (exceptions include Driver and others 2002; Crang 2010; Hawkins 2011, 2013, in press; Tolia-Kelly 2012). In addition, despite the deployment of politics and critical social theory as an interpretative framework for the arts practices of others, this disciplinary (re)turn to creative practice has not been much politicized. The growing output of “creative practices” in geography thus requires attention and assessment with respect to its potential political impacts and implications. While recognizing that much more work needs to be done to adequately conceptualize and specify the historical progression of the creative “turn” in geog-
creativity and geography, in this essay we lay a foundation for engaging with its politicalities and potentials.

Critical human geographers in the twenty-first century accept, for the most part, that knowledge and power are coproduced. In short, what we make and represent, how we practice, and what we say is never innocent, so the potential for unequal power dynamics bears articulating every time geography takes a new “turn.” The risk we see in geographers’ engagement with arts practices is one of oversimplification; differences among various arts practices and the forms of “work” they do need to be appreciated. We also need to be aware of the value of our own disciplinary critical frameworks in analyzing creative practices, as well as being concerned with the analytical coordinates more routinely applied to each individual form of practice. And although geography has a history of cocreating and producing the arts, the differences between what geographers generally do and what practicing artists generally do are marked. Difference does matter; what requires further interrogation are the nature of that difference and the resultant tensions and productive forces that may result when connections are made.

For instance, one difference between the two is the spatiality of the products of expression and representation: The majority of geographers’ work, even our visual work, is circulated textually, in discipline-specific spaces like geography journals or textbooks. We tend mostly to speak to other geographers—during conferences and in the confines of academic settings—about our practices, processes, and results. Practicing artists, be they visual artists, performance artists, musicians, or literary artists, largely practice and deploy their work differently, with different audiences in mind. Their work is disseminated through museums, galleries, concert halls, libraries, performance centers, but also, and increasingly in the last sixty years, in a host of more popular spaces beyond the walls of such institutions, including the street, cafés, bookstores, parks, and other public spaces where audiences gather to listen, observe, and increasingly to participate in creative production. It is interesting to reflect on how geography’s creative (re)turn has already begun to reshape existing spaces and potentially prompt the development of new spaces within which these creative-geographical practices take place and through which they are disseminated. For example, gallery spaces and performance location are sites within which geographical research takes place through practice, while journals, both online and in print are reshaped to afford the space for presenting geographers’ creative outputs. Furthermore, without wanting to suggest that there has not previously been a crossover in the populations of creative practitioners and academic geographers, there has occurred the recent rise and problematization of artists as researchers, and the growth of creative practice–based doctorates, not only within “home” disciplines of the arts but also within geography (Elkins 2009; Macleod and Holdridge 2009).

With respect to similarities, it seems important to point out that the work of geographers and practicing artists is always epistemologically and ontologically situated and consumed. When any work is produced within its respective disci-
plenary boundaries, a host of well-honed and discipline-specific responses can be quickly and almost axiomatically called upon to evaluate and situate it. Although compelling arguments exist that these precrafted responses and standard approaches can stand in the way of innovation, it is nevertheless the case that disciplinary practitioners are trained to approach the work in their field with particular questions, attitudes, and critical approaches in mind, whether they are geographers or artists. Fascinatingly, when it comes to geographically produced creative practice we tend to overlook the value of our situated sets of questions and are caught up instead in disciplinary anxieties over the kinds of questions we may ask and the interpretive skills we may need (see Merriman and others 2008). That is, in seeking analytical questions specific to a creative medium or form, we should not lose sight of the importance and value of our own disciplinary schooling. At the same time we must not homogenize either art or geography: Just as geographers produce work across the full spectrum of epistemological and ontological orientations, so too do artists and writers, whose disciplines are not dominated by one philosophy of knowledge or creativity. This point is made more clearly in our next section, where we provide a brief encounter with the variety of engagements geographers have been undertaking with art and literature and art and artists over the last five or so decades.

**Creative Geographies in the History of Geography**

Three periods of substantive interaction between creative practices and geography are identifiable during the solidification of geography as a discipline and over the last two hundred plus years of geographical knowledge production. Beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, scientific voyages and expeditions tied to colonial and imperial interests constituted perhaps the first modern appearance of a strong linkage between the making of geographical knowledge and arts practices. Though perhaps not necessarily emblematic of this period, Alexander von Humboldt is often called upon to represent its salient qualities, in that he argued for the combination of science and the arts in the production of geographical knowledge-making as both an artistic and scientific practice (for more on Humboldt, see the 2006 special issue of the *Geographical Review* edited by Kent Mathewson and Andrew Sulyter). The creative practices and objects produced by Humboldt and other geographers of this “naturalists-and-navigators” period often took form as floral and faunal collections or painted or sketched representations of the landscape, plants, animals and birds, insects and people—including their dwelling, dress, and significant objects—of exotic places (Living-
This period of artistic and geographical flowering represents a fertile moment in knowledge production and creativity unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries that must certainly be seen to contain the seeds for later interactions between the two. What is perhaps most interesting about the objects created as a result of artistic and geographical interaction, such as maps, diagrams, prints, watercolors, and illustrated gazetteers, is their source in an aesthetized empiricism. Scientific knowledge, premised on the generation and testing of hypotheses and theories measured against observations of the natural world consistently and expectedly enrolled painting, sketching, modeling, and other artistic practices to illustrate and, indeed, visually demonstrate its claims (Stafford 1984; Smith 1988). In these romantic-age productions we find creative practices coming together with a more “scientific” geography both as a source of geographical imaginaries and for confirming the way “truths” about the natural world could be accessed and comprehended. As such, they operated in a complementary manner, each a specific criterion of truth premised on identifiable rules and standards that enabled access to reality but in different ways.6

Yet, by the early-to-mid–twentieth century, with the advent of geography’s growth as a quantitative science, the place of creative practices within geographical knowledge had changed rather dramatically. In place of their status as a valued part of a constellation of geographical knowledge-making practices, artistic and literary representations of the material worlds of the age of exploration were either abandoned or de-aestheticized. Such a shift in the disciplinary fortune of artistic practices can be attributed to the development of scientific sensibilities: turning the naturalist-geographer away from the particularities of artistic practices as a form of knowledge-making in favor of generalization and the derivation of laws. As a strong reaction to the quantification of the objects and subjects of disciplinary interests, by the 1970s a second period of art and geography interaction emerged. The logic of this second period was as an intellectual counterforce that began to recall artistic ways of doing and knowing as part of a desire to describe subjective phenomena as contingent and unique (Tuan 1974, 1977). At the same time as this more qualitative approach critiqued the dehumanization of the natural science and spatial science models that came to be embraced by more and more geographers, this countermovement looked to humanism, particularly phenomenology and the humanities, for a way of understanding the world (Buttimer 1976; Entriken 1976; Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Pocock 1981; Relph 1981; Porteous 1985). This period, which extended well into the 1990s, and through which we can trace some more recent geographical interpretations, includes those scholars who produced “literary geography,” “art geography” and “music geography” through an exploration of the geographies of the work of well-established novelists (and mystery writers and other popular authors), painters and photographers (mostly landscape specialists), and popular and classical musicians.

Most ubiquitous has been the “literary geography” genre covering classic novels such as those by William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, and Jane Austen as well as
highly popular forms of fiction, including mysteries and westerns. Shifting away from the largely descriptive situation of arts practices within topographic traditions, in general, this more recent scholarship tends toward tracing the geographical imagination of the author or the way the geography constructed within a work of fiction constitutes an important element of the story or provides a different way of evaluating it (Whittington 1974; Aiken 1977, 1981; Jeans 1979; Birch 1981; Barrell 1982; Hudson 1982; Herbert 1991; Rundstrom 1995); or how consistently a fictional geography reflects an actual one (Aiken 1981). The most frequent popular literary form treated by geographers has been the mystery (including detective fiction and spy novels), in which place becomes essential to the solving of a crime (McManis 1978; Tuan 1985; Cerveny and Brazel 1989; Hamilton 1991; Hausladen 1995; Kadonga 1998). Perhaps more critically, in terms of our comprehension of how arts practices have been understood to work in the world, other fictional works—and, to a lesser extent, popular nonfiction works—have been treated as empirical evidence of how a regional sense of place or the characteristics of a region have been literally produced and how they may shape a popular imaginary (Blake 1995; Ryden 1999).

Although literature became the most attractive practice for geographers, some attention was also paid to music, including opera, rap, and rock and roll, in the 1990s. Again, the approach to these different genres was to expose how geography played an important role in constituting the musical experience or in shaping its development, mobility, and transformation. Rolf Sternberg, for instance, noted the way Richard Wagner used landscape and urban images—rendered as visually believable scenery—in the staging of his operas (1998). Concentrating on more contemporary music, Larry Ford, George Carney, and Warren Gill looked at rock and roll (Ford 1971; Carney 1980, 1984; Gill 1993). Their entry point was to explore how particular places in the United States and Canada have been instrumental in sustaining it or in shaping its variations. In a rather different casting of the relationships between music and place—one resonating with growing concerns in other areas of geography—Ralph Saunders treated rap music, demonstrating how rappers use lyrics and videos to disrupt dominant ways of viewing the American ghetto (1993). Distinct from these other music geographies, Saunders employed rap to make an argument about the political potential of the genre as counterdiscourse, one that refuses a racist stereotype of everyday African American urban space.

Nearly a decade later, Kafui Attoh published “The Bus Hub,” a poem and sound recording (2011). This piece illustrates the shifting role of arts practices in relation to disciplinary ideas of place. Like Saunders, Attoh explored class and race divisions in a frenetic site within an urban landscape, adding to growing discussion about new and experimental ways of theorizing urban geographies. Furthermore, his music and sound-poetry, by considering urban geographies in creative new ways, demanded that space once more be made for creative practices within geography’s own disciplinary practices. The piece challenged the journal’s editors to address how submissions may operate “evocatively rather than analytically in [journal spaces] dedicated to analysis” (Butz 2011, 278).
The most significant example of poetic geography was the extensive relationship between a group of poets (and artists) associated with Black Mountain College, an experimental community in North Carolina, and the iconic geographer Carl Sauer. The poet Charles Olsen, a charismatic figure in the group, found fertile inspiration in Sauer’s work and his approach to the cultural landscape (Parsons 1996, 22). The literary critic and poet Donald Davie confirmed Sauer’s deep influence on humanities-based work: “However this may be for professional geographers, it is the statement of 1925 [Sauer’s The Morphology of Landscape] that will have the readiest appeal for poets. Its tone is militant” (Davie 1977, 167).

Although geography was the source of inspiration in the relationship between geography and poetry, in the relationship between geography and landscape painting the direction of inspiration was reversed. Initially a handful and then a growing number of geographers have pursued the relevance of this type of painting as a historical/empirical record as well as a compelling object for a geographical understanding of social relations. Included among the earlier group were R. L. Heathcote (1972), Ronald Rees (1973, 1976, 1978, 1982), and, nearly two decades later, John Thornes (1999), a physical geographer who interrogated the meteorological conditions depicted within the work of the nineteenth-century English landscape painter John Constable. Deborah Dixon, Harriet Hawkins, and Elizabeth Straughan also detail a number of geomorphologists who have turned to landscape painting and photography as a record of microscale and macroscale movements and changes in the earth’s surface and atmosphere (2012).

Most important to our point about a geographical assessment of the politicality of art and literature, during this second period as it merged into the third, is how its leading practitioners, Stephen Daniels, Denis Cosgrove, and James Duncan, folded together questions of culture, power, and politics through studies of landscape art and architecture. All three were interested in exposing the complex social relations that inform art or architecture as they manifest a particular kind of landscape. The work produced by this trio of so-called new cultural geographers—in contrast to Sauerian cultural geography, and its expression in the literary and musical mappings of arts practices and their diffusion—addressed itself to poststructural concerns and brought literature, art, and architectural objects more directly into geography by “reading” and/or deconstructing them as texts that possessed and conveyed social and political power. Through a formulation that drew on parts of both discourse and semiotic analysis, they expanded both art-historical frameworks and concerns with mimesis to configure their objects of analysis as “authored” texts that were read in particular ways by their respective audiences and, furthermore, materially shaped landscapes and lives.

As social theorists with a focus on the power relations embedded in a range of creative productions, Daniels, Cosgrove, and Duncan deserve to be appreciated for the ways they enabled the discipline to move past description. Indeed, their contribution was their recasting of the terms of interpretation—not only for geographers but for a whole host of humanities scholars—in order to explore how
material objects worked in a complex world. Their efforts thus constitute the opening of the discipline to the complex politicity of arts practices and the ways a geographical imaginary could confront and deconstruct them. In various publications either together or apart Cosgrove’s and Daniels’s research (Cosgrove 1979, 1984, 1985; Cosgrove and Daniels 1987; Daniels 1989, 1993) engaged a rapidly emerging Marxist cultural theory to expose the ideological underpinnings of capitalist cultural practices, especially with respect to landscape art, where the bourgeois idea of landscape is interrogated and exposed. And James Duncan’s *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (1990), moved the discussion of landscape’s duplicitous nature beyond European aesthetics and their implications for landscapes at “home” and in the colonies to explore the landscapes and architectures of the ruling elite in eighteenth-century Ceylon.7

We contend that we are witnessing in this second movement, with its gathering attentiveness to the critical and political interpretations of the works of creative practitioners, an emerging third phase of work, where geographers return to an enrollment of arts practices as a mode of disciplinary knowledge-making, collaborating with artists and themselves venturing into the practice of politically explicit creative works. As such we argue that this recent work can learn much from previous phases in terms of attunement to the politics of knowledge production and by being attentive to those same foldings of culture and social practice that were the hallmark of earlier engagements.

**Pairings: Geography and Creative Expression**

As with the larger discipline, the contributions assembled in this special issue on “Creativity and Geography” are varied. By including this variety of genres we mean very explicitly to provoke readers/viewers into thinking about the different effect/affect each type of “doing” has on an audience. Moreover, when we called for contributions for this special issue we asked for creative work that addressed some kind of politics. Our aim was to push our contributors and readers/viewers toward a critical appreciation for how creative expressions possess the capacity to pose different kinds of questions that can challenge both the disciplinary status quo and the broader world. In addition to engaging in long-standing debates on the politics of knowledge-production, we realized from the onset that, in part, the production of creative expressions by geographers, or those by artists that are geographically focused, can themselves be political statements about our academic production of knowledge: Publishing poetry, for instance, may not be the best way to secure tenure in a geography department, so it is a risk for a geographer to maintain creative practices outside or even in tandem with the production of more standard geographical scholarship. As such, the pieces are expressly concerned with addressing what has been, albeit tacitly, a preponderance of geographers undertaking creative expression separately from their asking questions concerning politics and power. In this way, and linking with contemporary resurgences of antihegemonic and socially just geographies, we aim to show
through the special issue that, just as with other creative works, so the creativity of geographers is political and that their creative works and expressions do socio-geographical work too.

In what follows, we introduce the eighteen pieces as couplets. On first glance, these cross-medium pairings may appear counterintuitive. Indeed, the pairings we have produced are not replicated in the journal’s pagination. These pairings are felicitous ones; others, many combinations of others, are certainly possible. We offer them as configurations that enable particular kinds of analytics to be explored rather than as pairings necessarily premised on a commonality of theme or form of creative practice.

Of course, creative works must be judged in part within and by the traditions and legacies of practice of which they are a part, calling on geographers working with creative expression to gain some fluency in creative disciplines in order to avoid established critiques about research tourism in unfamiliar or exoticized cultures (Thrift 2002). In line with those political readings of new cultural geography, however, we want to argue that geographers’ creative expressions must also be comprehended as objects and doings that perform work in the world. Thus their productive force can be comprehended alongside, but also outside, the standard sets of technical and historical questions—of form, composition, cadence, tonality, for example—associated with the interpretation of arts practices carried out from within their individual interpretive frameworks. We contend that comprehensions of the work that these eighteen pieces do are assisted when very different creative expressions are set alongside one another. Just as intertextuality informed the analytical modes of Daniels and others, with poetry and music set alongside painting, for example, the resonances, amplifications, and readings against the grain that emerge through our pairings open up new and productive spaces within which critical human geographers may work.

Our position here, therefore, is that geographers qua geographers—who already possess a set of critical skills that enable a particular kind of reading or assessment—can very capably approach and engage with creative expressions whether or not we possess the skills to create them ourselves. It therefore seems imperative that the critical skills of our discipline, including feminism, antiracism, realism, and poststructuralism, to name just a few theoretical standpoints, should be seen as analytical resources that must be engaged if we wish to comprehend the political potentialities of this recent (re)turn of geography to creative practice.

Our first pairing, for example, thinks through the narration of emotionally charged landscapes of violence and social and environmental breakdown. In their visual and textual engagements, Jeff Wilson (with illustration by Jay Jacot) and Kimi Eisele’s contributions do something that social scientists often struggle to do. In the challenge we face to comprehend and convey such landscapes and the lived experiences of them, simply mining authors’ and artists’ works can be tempting. In other words, creative work becomes source material for a particular form of geographical data, as was typical of the literary geographies of the 1980s. By twinning...
Wilson with Eisele, however, we are asserting that the very act of creative making, including thinking about the creative practices of others through creative expression, as Wilson does, is a political act. Furthermore, at the same time both of these pieces provide provocative invitations to geographers to be open to the political power of such creative forms of communication and the possibilities they hold for their own practice.

Graphic narratives located beyond traditional cartoon genres open new critical spaces, communicating complicated and charged concepts in a more forceful and possibly accessible manner than may text alone (Gravett 2005; Versaci 2007; Gallacher 2011). Wilson’s graphically represented interview with Joe Sacco, a renowned comics-based journalist, expressly tackles the politics of ethnographic fieldwork and the places in which ethnographies occur. In the combination of Wilson’s and Sacco’s words and Jacot’s images, the engagement between embedded ethnographer and graphic artist unfolds through a creative practice rather than by means of a separate commentary on it. Because of that, the piece demonstrates that the process of creative production is itself a site of power relations, not merely a secondary site of mimetic representation. It is also a locus for critical self-reflexivity as regards the politics and possibilities of our knowledge-productions and some of the responsibilities that may accompany them.

Authorial presence—or absence—always has political implications, especially in representational practices: This is the political gesture of Eisele’s work, a distinctly nonmasculinized contemplation of a postapocalyptic United States. Speculative fiction is dominated both by male authors and by archetypical antihero male protagonists. In “The Lightest Object in the Universe,” however, emotional geographies as conjured by women and men are deftly produced by a female author with a blunt narrative purpose of imagining the deterioration of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism and nation-state power. In her conjuring of a dystopian imaginary we find the echoes of a suite of provocative questions that are often raised around the potentialities of arts practices with respect to sociopolitical transformations. If some arts practices look to bring about these transformations through action at the level of the community or collective, others, like Eisele’s, subtly insert their future imaginaries into our consciousness, working at the level of the thinking, feeling individual. Both of these works are asking readers to be moved, and are moving us, not as subjects disarticulated from creative practice and creative expression but instead through and because of them.

If text and narratives have long been understood as foundational to discursive structures shaping the worlds in which we live, in the pairing of Alison Barnes and Julia Christensen we find space being made for a querying of the nature of this world-shaping power. Both are concerned with the place of the author and of the nature of creative object–audience relations in considering the transformative power of creative expressions. Barnes’s handcrafted experimental “book,” “Stuff,” contends that texts, right down to the individual letters they comprised, are worlds unto themselves. Articulated partly as a politicized defense of the textual, in what
she contends is a shift toward a privileging of visual culture in geography’s current creative moment, Barnes’s “Stuff” insists that text remains an active geography with transformative potential to engage place. A book is a fully articulated world of agency expressed variously as smell, font, pattern, dimensionality, texture, and image. Each volume, apart from its author, is able to impart itself on, and even potentially transform, an individual reader through the force of these multisensory encounters.

Christensen’s short story “To Catch a Coney Fish,” in addition to exploring colonial histories and disruptions of indigenous geographies, considers much more actively the role of the author in the production of texts about people whose worlds and history are different from hers. Here, to a degree, the text and the story become part of a process by which it is possible to destabilize the omniscient presence of a well-intentioned short-fiction author. This reflection on positionality vis-à-vis authorship about indigenous peoples and places is drawn into the spaces of the text, asking us to acknowledge the ubiquitous power of the colonizer. Christensen’s creative practice reminds us that, although stories are continually told in the social sciences, in the production of creative stories as social science we cannot overlook or forget the politics of positionality and that authorial power matters.

Unlike novels, short stories, or essays, nonprose poems must function as strongly at the level of an individual line as they do as a collection of lines. Despite one being made by a visual artist and one by a writer, both of Laisha Rosnau’s and Richard Long’s works are driven by “lines.” The forms of spacings on the page or wall, the rhythms and cadence of words when read silently or out loud, matter here. They matter because it is through such visual and sonic spacings that both works establish relations between humans and their environment and between their domestic space and wilderness. Long’s “Human Nature Walk,” for example, is as much about the absences, the spaces and gaps between the observed objects during the walk, re-created in part in the spaces on the page, as it is about the interactions of the lines or words. The world that surrounds the work—as document of being in the landscape, as words on a gallery wall and on the page—insists itself on a viewer, allowing aspects of landscape to produce “human being-ness” at the same time that humans imprint ourselves on nature. Rosnau’s poems are line driven in a different way, with textual run-ons and breaks allowing elisions and gaps to form, that open new spaces for readers to understand and grapple with female situatedness as well as schisms in domestic spaces and the eminently biological and wilderness-like attributes of homes and families.

Although these close readings may certainly be of interest to geographers, we can attend to this work in other ways, can ask of it important questions that need not rely on close attention to imbrications of technical form and content. For instance, with respect to these two works, critical human geographers are encouraged to engage in questions about situated production and the spatialities of consumption, such as: Where are the works circulating, and who is consuming them?
Why does authorship matter? What spaces are highlighted by the works, and, consequently, what spaces and places are eclipsed and at risk of erasure? Our logic in twinning Long and Rosnau, then, is to highlight that geographers must carefully approach the disciplinary variances of creative practice while asking critical and familiar questions of the works, similar to the questions we would as geographers ask any other form knowledge production with which we were confronted.

The power of lines and lines of power are often of interest to critical human geographers; we think, for example, about the lines of connection that constitute networks, of those that compose commodity circuits. We worry about the lines on maps and their etchings of power and sketch out “lines of flight,” considering the political possibilities of the not-yet-drawn proffering the means by which to escape oppression. Yet the creative potential of lines, and creative lines as political practice—afforded in-depth analysis by critical art theorists and many practicing artists—has to a large degree escaped political scrutiny in human geography (except for Scalway 2006). In the pairing of Juanita Sundberg’s contribution with Amanda Thompson’s, politics also turns on the line: As method, as reminder, as practice, as memory, and as a kind of semipermeable boundary requiring constant reformulation and transgression in efforts to achieve new and potentially hopeful geographies.

As a feminist antiracist geographer, Sundberg traces material and figurative lines in the desert as markings that serve simultaneously as trails and maps for self-reflexivity and calls for action against atrocious violations of human life by state power. Thompson, trained as a visual artist in print media, makes and traces lines of connection between the natural world and human transformations of it. Like Sundberg’s use of a textual line to elicit new lines of thought for ethnographers, Thompson too walks lines on the ground as a means of critically reflecting on more abstracted line-focused modes of representing fragile species and physical environments. Read in dialogue, Thompson’s and Sundberg’s contributions highlight the politics of walking, of transforming walked lines into lines of creative expression and practice. The resulting creative works draw out the always contested and political nature of line production. The line within creative practice, these contributions remind us, is politically charged. Lines are neither innocent nor inconsequential; individual lines, as well as lines collectively, are charged with political possibility, with the potential to open new spaces of production and representation as well as close them down.

Part of place’s resilient presence in the discipline of geography is its remarkable (trans)mutability. Geographers, of course, know well the power of place; the abilities of place to transform subjects and the possibilities of place to be transformed by the subjects engaging it. Geographers are well versed in reading and analyzing the powers and politics of place, doing so by demonstrating the operations of peoples depending on where they are and the in-place social relationships that constitute or destabilize them as a function of em/placement. As our earlier discussion suggested, forms of creative expression, especially written forms, have long
been a part of geographical engagements with place, both as individual location and as a pressing disciplinary concept. These historical, and to some extent contemporaneous, efforts by geographers to illustrate and accessorize their scholarly theorizing of place by drawing on creative expression are extended, as well as beautifully upended, by the contributions of Kathleen Stewart and Tim Cresswell, whose creative practices simultaneously open out our conceptualizations of place and themselves form a place.

Each piece provokes questions about place as produced through creative expression as well as about how to sort through the implications of what is (re)produced by the inscription of place as creative work. Both pieces may be situated within a broader set of scholarly preoccupations about oppositional tension between structure and event. Historically, studies and explanations of human and nonhuman activity across time and space turn either on privileging a moment/individual/essential—for example, a specific event—or the recurrent/social/quotidian—for instance, a system or structure (see, for example, Sahlins 2000). One of the ongoing struggles of recent times, however, has been less around which side of the equation we privilege as about the tension that emerges around how we render an analysis of place that is simultaneously intensive and extensive, always situated but also necessarily connected to other places, to other bodies and objects.

Both Stewart and Cresswell negotiate this issue, insisting on connections between places and the simultaneity of near and far. Stewart positions crystal-clear specifics about the dialects of New Englanders inside both global circuits of consumerism and the domestic interactions of family members. Cresswell details an escaped parakeet’s tail feathers in a suburb of London and maps the remarkable specificity of a Rowan tree’s red berries across topographies that include northern landscapes and a woman’s lips. Both demonstrate the impossibility of fixedness or boundaries in the twenty-first century.

For the growing number of human geographers concerned with indigenous geographies, of primary concern is unpacking and analyzing points of contact and tensions between overlapping ways of being in or conceptualizing the world. This focus has become especially important with our attunement to the persistence of colonial powers and practices, especially as we come to formulate practices of resistance. At the heart of Craig Campbell’s and Gillian Wigmore’s contributions are such zones of contact and the sublimation of indigeneity: by literally burying it in the ground, by relegating it to colonial memory, or by materially and discursively deterritorializing it. As such these pieces offer human geographers new ways of unearthing the resilience and ever-present-ness of peoples and places that thrived prior to colonial incursions, especially those into remote northern landscapes. They take on the fluctuating and slippery ways in which the past and the present move in and out of each other, the ways in which what is suppressed reenters to haunt the suppressor; in Campbell’s words, the ways in which moments, events, and sites “bleed out geographically and temporally, impossible to contain” (p. 197 in this issue).
The images that accompany Campbell’s narrative, a critically self-reflective creative nonfiction essay that is as consciously fractured and uncontained as the topics it contemplates, are marred and broken, multilingual and scratchy bricolages comprised of maps, landscape photography, and what appear as etchings on a zinc plate. Positioned so that it hails different coordinates and events, the images illustrate “the movements between experience and abstraction” designed to “agitate the presumed meaning of the line and the mark” (pp. 196, 197 in this issue), the latter of which played such crucial roles to settler colonists as they moved across Siberia, Russia, and, in the case of Wigmore’s poems, northern British Columbia. In a move not dissimilar to Campbell’s bricolage, Wigmore’s poems are polyvocal, offering equal space to human and nonhuman, to surface and subterranean, to settler objects and to that which is indigenous and cannot be contained or buried. Through poetic traditions like repetition and rhyme, the poems insist on a constant resurfacing of what is buried. Indeed, in Wigmore’s hands poetry or “this poem”—which becomes poetry writ large—is both a location on a map unto itself and a means of locating displacement. As with geographers vested in understanding the workings of colonization and decolonization, Wigmore’s and Campbell’s works demonstrate the impossibility of ever fully sublimating or de/re-territorializing landscapes on which the past and living presences of indigenous subjects are ever present.

Testimony, which cuts across a number of contributions collected here, is explicitly addressed as source and theme in the paired contributions of the geographers George Lovell and Geraldine Pratt and Caleb Johnston. Testimonies bring with them a loaded-knowledge politics hinging on presence; they are valued as raw, firsthand accounts of personal witnessing of the situated truths of events in specific violent times or places. Testimonies, especially testimonies concerned with times of terror, exploitation, or suffering, exist in multiple registers, demanding a critical positioning of those working with them that accounts for the moment being witnessed, the witnessing-subject, and the processes involved in bearing witness to the testimonials. Working with testimony is, fundamentally, a political act intersecting with the concerns of a growing number of qualitatively inclined critical human geographers who, for instance, write about positionality, subject/participant power relationships, or the potential and limits of critical self-reflexivity (Kobayashi 2003; Harrison 2010; Carter-White 2012).

Through creative nonfiction and theatrical form, Lovell, as well as Pratt and Johnston, tackle the mechanics of the ways in which testimonies work: as primary texts, as geopolitical spaces, and as opportunities for critical social engagement and social transformation. Neither creative nonfiction nor forum theater are often taken up in the discipline of geography, signaling perhaps a particular politics about, and subsequent need to integrate, the reasons why some genres are more prevalent than others in geographers’ work. For Pratt and Johnston, community-based theater opens up new and interactive spaces in which testimonies of Filipina domestic workers, drawn from more standard interviewing, are transformed from
static text to evolving voices based on performance site and attending audience. Testimonies are enlivened, made present and reach out, through (re)performance. Pratt and Johnston turn to theater to “create and extend public debate about current immigration policies, racial and ethnic stereotypes, the commodification of reproductive roles, and the transfer of care labor from the global South to global North” (p. 288 in this issue). Through the medium of forum theater, testimony becomes a living work, drawing in new witnessing subjects at each performance, constantly renewing itself beyond the confines of a written document or a unidirectional narrative.

For Lovell, testimonies of dead and disappeared citizens exist as material site, as stacks of decomposing documents sequestered away among corrugated steel and cinder block in the National Police Historical Archive in Guatemala City. The process of unearthing records of violence, and the voices both of those doing and having done unto them that violence, cannot be cleanly or clinically considered. Instead, with an urgency perhaps possible only in the first person, Lovell considers records of violence through creative nonfiction. Insisting in part through description, literary flourish, and adjectives not always available in noncreative contemplations, Lovell humanizes the archive, the testimonies and the stories both in the archive and on the page. Like Pratt and Johnston, Lovell’s creative work serves to collapse distance between viewer/reader, to contemplate varied geographies of occupation and to demand accountability. In Lovell’s piece the testimony is embodied, breathed.

Works of publicly installed literary-sound performance are rarely read in tandem with the works of printmakers, thus our pairing of works by Caleb Johnston and Briar Craig signals a potentially fertile ground for human geographers looking to engage creative expressions in fresh ways. To read across and with difference in mind is, after all, at the heart of what many critical human geographers do. Conceptualizing spaces as diversely layered and socially produced, as routinely produced through shifting hierarchies of power, in addition to undertaking contrapuntal readings and modes of analysis, particularly of tensioned subjects, is well-charted terrain for many geographers. Indeed, geographers have long valued the creative-material practices of collage and montage as a mode of ontological and epistemological critique that promotes precisely these understandings of place (Crang and Travlou 2001; Doel and Clarke 2007). Though working in very different media, Johnston’s and Craig’s works offer spliced, layered, and montaged (materially and discursively) investigations of various and very different geographies. They are linked, however, not only by common practices but also by their focus on geographies of human memory and imagination, examining affective and felt geographies of recollection, while problematizing naive, sentimental, or nostalgic representations of past human being-ness in place.

Johnston, a geographer who turned to creative expressions as a means both of furthering experimental geographies about the city and of deepening and illuminating genealogical relationships with a specific place, partnered through an art-
ist-run collective with a musician to produce layered audiovisual-scapes of Vancouver. The resulting piece is based on voice recordings from intimate family archives that feature interviews with Johnston’s grandfather. Consciously steering clear of any romanticized notion of the past as an idyllic place free from contemporary vernacular troubles, Johnston instead interrogates differences, overlaps, tensions, disappointments and, ultimately, the complicated lives of seaside settlers. By reading, seeing, and listening to the orations of Johnson’s grandfather overlaid with musical scores, participants in Johnson’s experimental geographies are captured by historical materiality of these remembrances.

Craig’s ultraviolet exposed prints, which are firmly embedded in screen-printing traditions of negotiating questions of “high” and “low” art, advertising, circulation of mass-produced images, public demonstrations, advocacy, and accessibility are, in their very medium, calling for politicized readings (Taylor 2006). Craig’s work also employs multilayered montages, gesturing at the incompleteness of any one story, any single representation of an object or event. These prints challenge different registers of geographical understandings, affecting confusion and disorientation in the intersection of the iconic National Geographic magazine with the most mundane and ordinary human detritus: Post-It notes or parking tickets insisting that behind each of these remnants are diverse and ever-complex identities struggling to find a place in the world. The images eschew singularity, univocality, and neutrality in either the representation or interpretation of the geographies around us, calling instead on a rich poststructural politics of expressly not smoothing meaning or flattening tensions. Differences become productive, stumbling over words we may otherwise take for Granted (neutralize), pointing out just how fragile and incomplete our own works and understandings are.

Human connection with and alteration of ecology, landscape, and the places we live are, albeit sometimes only tacitly, resilient themes in much of the work we do. Grounding this work, literally embedding it in the topsoil, the loam, the rich earth of farmers’ fields or river estuaries, is at the heart of both Hayden Lorimer’s creative essay and the multiple sound and visual creative expressions produced by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, explored in an interview essay by Mrill Ingram. Lorimer’s and the Harrisons’ expressions, in Ingram’s words, animate landscapes, build creative responses to environmental challenges, and tackle them in complex ways. As such, the work has the potential to open up new spaces for political ecologists and others intent not only on theorizing and exploring, but also on transforming, the complicated relationships between social traditions, biological environments, economics, and politics.

The Harrisons’ work is never divorced from the political goals that have informed land- and water-use planning endeavors and government policies in the European Union and the United States. Ingram records the intimate feelings, sensory explorations, and embodied efforts that include the artists “mixing sand, clay, sewage, sludge, leaf material . . . manure” (p. 269 in this issue), which are then intertwined with much larger-scale efforts to construct entire meadow ecologies.
on rooftops, replete with 160 species and careful scientific consultations. The creative works, notes Helen Harrison, teach us that “farming processes need to be reinvented in such a way that the harvest preserves the system” (p. 271 in this issue)—which, in some ways, is exactly the concern of Lorimer’s work. In Lorimer’s segmented creative essay, in his framing of the British countryside through train windows, overlapping narratives and conflicting stories, in his evocation of the sentinel scarecrow figure as it has moved in and out of history and place, he insists that creative contemplation of geographies on the margins of urban imaginations are worthy of exploration, charting, attention, and care. There the scarecrow’s guarding of farmlands, its crooked and straw-filled work of warding off birds, becomes a metaphor for thinking about a way of life, a way of engaging rurality and agricultural land not in a saccharine or nostalgic manner but driven by curiosity and responsibility. As critical human geographers, then, the creative works of Lorimer and the Harrisons—the latter as explored by Ingram—are lessons about how to watch, write, and build new, rich, and fertile ground that further geographical inquiry about landscapes and ecology.

Politics and the Creative (Re)turn

With this special issue we are asking geographers to explore the “creative (re)turn” in our discipline by carefully attuning to the manifold politicalities of their creative makings. We are also asking them to explore creative expression with a firm understanding of both geography’s historical engagement of the arts and humanities and the political possibilities and responsibilities of the expressions being produced. Throughout the discussion of our pairings, we have been drawing attention not only to the political work these creative expressions do in the world, but also how they partake of and critique the politics of the production of knowledge. In addition to those questions about situated production and consumption that have concerned us here, we also wish to identify a concern with the unevenness of processes and circumstances that inform and determine any practice, including creative ones. Creative practices come about in particular ways; invitations to work with artists may be influenced by the institutions in which we work or the informal networks to which we belong and from which we draw. What kinds of subjects are privileged, or excluded, when we draw on the networks we know? These kinds of critiques have gained significant traction in literary and visual-arts communities, but are they also familiar to geographers working with and in creative practices? Indeed, how have they shaped the contributions we have represented here?

Another important function of the situated politics of creative production involves understanding the “climate” in which all geographical knowledge is being produced; namely—and as David Harvey noted more than two decades ago about academic geography—we exist in a time of rapid and constant transformation: “The competitive marketing of ideas, theories, models, topic thrusts, generates color-of-the-month fashions which exacerbate rather than ameliorate conditions of rapid turnover, speed-up and ephemerality. . . . [We need] a critical perspective
from which to evaluate our reactions to the social pressures that surround us and suffuse our lives” (1990, 431–432). We are not necessarily suggesting that a turn to creative practices entirely provides the critical perspective sought here. Rather, we urge geographers to take the time to embrace both the creative products of their peers and, if they decide to make the move toward producing creative expressions of their own, to take seriously the skill sets that may be involved in such productions. The very acquisition of the skills of creative making, achieved over time and through repetitive practice, in and of themselves are performative of resistance to the temporalities of scholarship that worry Harvey. Furthermore, we would suggest that we human geographers, rather than rushing headlong to the “new,” explore our work as part of a creative (re)turn, appreciating that the resources for exploring the politicalities of geographers’ creative expressions can already be found within the terms of our disciplinary history and existing critical and theoretical outlooks.

Creative practice encompasses a wide range of doings. Visual, literary, performance, installation, and music and film/video, each with multiple processes, genres, media, and outputs, are all associated with the range of doings. Important to note is that the expressions included in this issue are not a full survey of the different creative practices available to geographers, nor, indeed, of the many kinds of creative practices with which geographers work. Absent, for instance, are film, filmmakers, or collaborations with film or video makers, despite a long history, especially in cultural geography, of working with film. We acknowledge the incompleteness of our project and offer up this special issue as a voice meant to stimulate discussions of these and many other creative practices.

Notes

1. Although we recognize the breadth of meanings that creativity has come to have for contemporary geographers—from an economic force to an everyday practice—we focus here on creativity in relation to arts practices. Furthermore, our use of “expression” is as a generalized term denoting creative output. This is as distinct from the possible use of “expression” to capture the analytical position of these arts outputs in relation to either specific artistic movements or the various theoretical positioning of expression, most often vis-à-vis representation.

2. See, for example, the evolving discussions of the geographies of literature, including an assembled virtual issue of the journal Environment and Planning D: Society and Space ([http://societyandspace.com/2012/09/26/literary-geographies/]) and the “Fictional Worlds” discussion forum in Thomas and others 2011.

3. For example, Cindi Katz has collaborated with the American artist Ellen Rothenberg, whose work can be found at [www.ellenrothenberg.com/about.html]. Laurel Smith, whose projects are described with Ojo de Agua Comunicación, an independent, indigenous media center in Mexico at [www.ojodeaguacomunicacion.org]. Gerry Pratt and Caleb Johnston collaborated on their play with the Canadian multidisciplinary theater artist Alex Ferguson [www.capilanou.ca/bpa/bios/Alex-Lazaridis-Ferguson/].

4. See, for example, the Creative Environmental Writing master of arts program at Royal Holloway, University of London, cotaught by members of the Geography and English departments.

5. In addition to specialist-journal sections for creative practice, such as Cultural Geographies’ “Cultural Geographies in Practice” section, the development of online journal forms enables the exploration and expansion of creative possibilities, with ACME: An International E-Journal for Criti-
cal Geographies, Geography Compass, you are here, and Antipode, among others, all making space for creative outputs as part of their Web sites.

6. We have provided an unfortunately truncated history here that suffers from a lack of nuance in the ways both geography and art changed from the premodern period to the modern period as each became institutionalized and both became differentiated by “high” and “low” practices, with the latter losing respectability and scholarly value. Moreover, we focus on geographical history and not art history in our discussion.

7. So many more geographical scholars have partaken of this new cultural approach with respect to explicitly creative objects that we do not have the space to include them all. Among the most cited are: David Harvey’s “Myth and Monument” (1979); Vera Norwood and Janice Monk’s The Desert Is No Lady (1997); Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon’s Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity (2002); and George Henderson’s California and the Fictions of Capital (2003).

References


