Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday

Jason Dittmer* and Nicholas Gray
University College London

Abstract
This paper argues for the renewal of popular geopolitics through the adoption of a research agenda that emphasizes everyday life. Popular geopolitics as commonly practiced has adopted a focus on textual deconstruction that neglects the practices and performances that mark much of the everyday experience of the geopolitical. This paper reviews the literature on feminist geopolitics, non-representational theory, and audience studies to find points of intersection between them. Following this a renewed popular geopolitics based on the common themes of embodiment, emotions/affect, performativity, and post-human networks is sketched out. It is hoped that this ‘popular geopolitics 2.0’ might allow scholars to truly engage with the everyday without trying to impose a new theoretical orthodoxy.

Introduction
Much of the critical geopolitics literature can be understood as attempting to counteract the perceived reductionism of classical geopolitical theory. For instance, over the past 20 years (an anniversary marked by a special issue of Geopolitics in 2008\(^1\)), reams have been written illustrating the gaps in the state-centric perspective of geopolitics; for example, social movements (Routledge 1996), popular culture (Sharp 2000a), and identity (Campbell 1998). Central to the development of critical geopolitics has been the recognition of geopolitics as something everyday that occurs outside of academic and policymaking discourse; this form of geopolitical discourse has been termed ‘popular geopolitics’. While popular geopolitics has always been an active field, and has particularly flowered in recent years (for a review, see Dittmer and Dodds 2008), it has generally been focused on media and popular culture artefacts. This has led to a popular geopolitics that has been somewhat inexplicably still focused on the elite visions of media moguls, movie directors, and lower-level yet still relatively empowered media functionaries like writers and reporters (Dalby 2008; Dittmer 2005; McFarlane and Hay 2003).

This somewhat paradoxical result is perhaps related to what Müller (2008, 328) has identified as an agency-centered notion of discourse permeating critical geopolitics, in which powerful actors shape discourses which then descend upon the masses to ensnare them:

[M]uch of geopolitical writing starts from the assumption of the autonomous subject who has control over texts, knits them into narratives, and thus turns them into a vehicle through which it exercises power. Narratives are here associated with the agency of subjects as individuals. Individuals produce narratives. These narratives then become manipulated, usually by elites, as a strategic resource for pursuing certain interests.
Abandoning this agency-centric conceptual framework has substantial implications for how research on popular geopolitics should be conducted in the future. Critical (and especially popular) geopolitics has often been critiqued for an excessive attention to texts (Megoran 2006; Thrift 2000) and this provides an opportunity for popular geopolitics to step back and consider a new future, in which power is more diffuse and relational, rather than caught up by elite agents – and thus is much more of an ‘every-day’ affair:

In this formulation of Foucault’s early work, the discursive power to position subjects does not emanate from a fixed locus or from certain individuals. It cannot be traced back to its origin. Rather, it presents the condition of possibility of the social and comes from everywhere. The “who” of power and hegemony is, therefore, indeterminable – power cannot be owned, appropriated, or seized. (Müller 2008, 328)

This paper continues with a brief review of popular geopolitics, followed by longer reviews of three recent theoretical influences on popular geopolitics: feminist geopolitics, non-representational theories, and audience studies. Each is outlined, and opportunities and pitfalls for incorporation into a new popular geopolitics centered on everyday practice and performance are offered. The paper concludes with a proposal for new research methodologies in popular geopolitics, sketching an example of what this renewed popular geopolitics might mean.

Implications of Recent Thought for Popular Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics, as originally formulated in the early 1990s, emphasized the texts and speeches associated with elites’ spatializations of international politics. These elite discourses were generally understood to be divided between formal discourses (those enunciated by theorists) and practical discourses (those performed by politicians and military leaders). For example, in his foundational Critical Geopolitics, Geir O’Tuathail (1996) critically unpacked the work of early 20th-century theorist Halford Mackinder, a project that continues today (Kearns 2009). Similarly, practical geopolitics was interrogated through Dalby’s (1993) analysis of the escalation of confrontation in American strategic discourse of the late 1970s.

While space was carved out under the term ‘popular geopolitics’ to note the ways in which geopolitical discourse suffused everyday life, early writings in critical geopolitics focused on the formal and practical forms of geopolitical discourse, with popular geopolitics seen as the ‘legitimating’ form of discourse that brought popular acquiescence to policies of militarism in democratic states. The foundational work for popular geopolitics is Jo Sharp’s Condensing the Cold War (2000a), in which the anti-Communist content of the Reader’s Digest was traced before, during, and after the Cold War with particular emphasis on the editorial line of the magazine as a significant shaper of American identity during the period. While this work was significant in that it staked out the importance of popular media to the study of geopolitics, it nevertheless perpetuated the analytical focus of critical geopolitics on elite scriptings of the world – the editorial team of Reader’s Digest can be understood as one of the pressure groups that Dalby analyzes, but with a louder bullhorn.

Popular geopolitics has continued in this mold for the past decade; tracing the ways in which popular media reinforce elite discourses. Examples include the roles of video games in shaping militarist subjectivities (Power 2007), war and spy films in gendering international relations (Dodds 2010; O’Tuathail 2005), and superhero comic books in produc-
ing and disseminating nationalist values (Dittmer 2007). However, this body of work must be re-evaluated in the face of theoretical challenges.

FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS

In many ways, feminist thought has always informed popular geopolitics because of the work done by feminist geographers to dissolve the divide between the public and private spheres, yet popular geopolitics has not always followed through in ways that it might. Work in critical geopolitics has tended to engage with the ‘public sphere’ of elite, gendered geopolitics as its main focus of investigation, stripping the private and domestic of political significance (Sharp 2000b). Feminist geopolitics has sought to challenge the masculinist public/private binary wherein ‘public/political’ and ‘apolitical/private’ are the norms. Instead, building upon critiques of citizenship and space by feminist scholars on the gendered and political nature of the public/private divide, a feminist-inspired geopolitics seeks to re-politicize the private sphere, empowering the marginalized groups who inhabit and exist in these realms (Elshain 1981; Fenton 2005; Lloyd 1983). All too often the public sphere has been the realm of politics, with private, domestic spaces ignored as beyond the influence of (or on) politics (see also Morley 2006). Popular geopolitics has been complicit in propping up notions of politics as public action through its focus on mediated (public) texts while ignoring practices of consumption that often occur behind closed doors. Hence, the focus of popular geopolitics on movies, news media, and the like has a discretely gendered dimension – rendering consumers as passive and apolitical. However, there are yet more lessons for practitioners of popular geopolitics to learn.

Recent work in feminist geopolitics has emphasized the topologies of power that connect the phenomena often described as scales – body, locality, region, nation, globe (Sharp 2007). Rather than conceiving of these as scales, with the sense of analytical division that comes with that concept, scholars in feminist geopolitics tend to conceive of politics as ‘grounded but translocal’ (Katz 2001a, 1231) in a way that refuses to ghettoize gender as a local phenomenon (to be juxtaposed with purportedly gender-neutral – and thus masculinely normed – macro-accounts of political processes, see Freeman 2001). Whereas the state has been understood as the primary site and scale of (in)security in International Relations theory and many versions of political geography, feminist geopolitics emphasizes the body as the primary site of violence, having the effect of changing geopolitical focus from ‘state security’ to an arguably more useful ‘human security’.

Jennifer Hyndman’s work (2001, 2004, 2010) traces the shifting role of the body within the notion of human security. Earlier work relied on Foucault’s (1991 [1971], 83) understanding of ‘... the body [as] the inscribed surface of events [...]’, a surface on which political decisions, discourses, and changes have material effects. Judith Butler (1993) developed this poststructuralist idea of the body into her now well-known theory of performativity, in which identities become quasi-fixed as a result of endless performances and iterations, embedding the material body within discourses both textual and performed (see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985). However, Hyndman (2010) notes the shift in Butler’s thinking regarding the body following the exercise of sovereign power by the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and within the USA itself (see Butler 2004). Bodily vulnerability here serves as a limit point – the body is at once shaped by discourse but not reducible to it – on which to base notions of the political: ‘Critical geopolitics can avoid a humanist commitment to prefigured subjects and normative positions by using the human body’s vulnerability to violence as a basis to materialize a non-foundational ethic of encounter that engages “the political”’ (Hyndman 2010, 254).
This emphasis on bodies in feminist geopolitics, carried forward from Butler’s work (and others), is important for the development of a new popular geopolitics as it links to the literature on emotional geographies, which has been expanding over the past several years, as well as offering a normative position from which to engage in political action.

The literature on emotional geographies has grown by leaps and bounds (Davidson et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2009a), emphasizing that emotions are ‘both inordinately diffuse and all pervasive and yet also heart- and gut-wrenchingly present and personal. Sometimes moods seem to surge up from within and comprise the very core of our being—here in the world, they inform every moment of our existence’ (Smith et al. 2009b, 2).

Emotions have recently been placed on the agenda in critical geopolitics, with important scholarship addressing (and contesting) the centrality of fear to the last decade’s geopolitical order (Horselmann 2008; Pain 2009; Pain and Smith 2008).

Surely this is a perspective that has been lacking in most work within popular geopolitics, which has typically abstracted away the pleasure, thrills, and tragedy from people’s experiences of popular culture and media; the media-centric work that has traditionally been done in popular geopolitics could surely stand to have emotions incorporated. One way in which to do this would be to utilize psychoanalytic techniques, which share with past research in popular geopolitics an interest in identity but add in emotions and drives such as desire and anxiety (for an example, see Nast 2003). The past omission of psychoanalytic techniques from popular geopolitics is particularly puzzling given their popularity in film studies and in some segments of cultural geography, but is perhaps understandable given the historical lack of attention paid to gender within political geography (Staeheki et al. 2004).

But the everyday ubiquity of emotions begs us to consider the ways in which we could conceive of popular geopolitics without requiring people to always be watching movies, reading newspapers, or playing video games. What would such a popular geopolitics look like? It might take a phenomenological turn, focusing on everyday experiences of space and geopolitics that are neither scripted nor found embedded in celluloid or print. There is of course a great deal of geographical research done within this theoretical frame in the 1970s (e.g., Tuan 1974), but this predated the revival of political geography and hence has never really reflected work within political geography. By focusing on the interaction of the material body with the discursive world, phenomenological accounts of popular geopolitics could provide a resolutely ‘grounded but translocal’ perspective of what everyday geopolitical life is, whether linked to the media or otherwise.

**NON-REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY**

A further source of theoretical innovation within popular geopolitics has been non-representational theory, which shares with feminist geopolitics an interest in embodiment. Non-representational theory has until now had its most significant influence on popular geopolitics via attention to affect (Carter and McCormack 2006, 2010; O’Tuathail 2003).

‘Affect refers to the force of intensive relationality — intensities that are felt but not personal; visceral but not confined to an individuated body’ (Whatmore 2006, 604). The focus of popular geopolitics on affect reflects the influence of Gilles Deleuze’s (2001, 2005) interest in film and affect as well as the traditional attention in popular geopolitics paid to cinema (Dalby 2008; Dodds 2003, 2005, 2008, 2009; Power and Crampton 2005; Sharp 1998). Certainly any account of popular geopolitics that is focused on the everyday ought to incorporate notions of affect, both within the popular media and without. Arguably popular geopolitics has spent more time considering the former than the
latter, and it is in the latter direction that a renewed popular geopolitics might fruitfully develop, as ‘these knowledges are not only being deployed knowingly, they are also being deployed politically (mainly but not only by the rich and powerful) to political ends: what might have been painted as aesthetic is increasingly instrumental’ (Thrift 2004, 58). Dixon (2009, 413) argues further that

it matters a great deal when thinking through the political character of aesthetics as to how the body is itself to be understood, whether that be within a scientific, regulatory, economic or philosophical framework. It matters as to how various technologies [...] are considered to impact upon the body’s sensory apparatus, cognitive and precognitive functioning and emotive registers. And it matters as to how bodies and their diverse affective capacities, augmented by and embedded within myriad forms of technology, are understood to work as political agents.

Dixon’s argument that bodies should be understood in context, in terms both technological and environmental, hints at the relevance of more-than-human networks of agency. All of which is to say that non-representational theory has contributed to a de-centering of agency from its long-time association with subjective intentionality.

Affect-based research brings similar sensibilities, if somewhat different emphases, as the emotional geographies described before. They are united not only through what they are reactions against (the cognitivity of discursive and representational studies), but also through their mutual interest in practice and performance. Here, however, the distinction between performativity (as theorized by Butler) and performance (as theorized by scholars in non-representational theory) becomes important. First, the Butlerian paradigm:

Performativity is a discursive mode through which ontological effects (the idea of the autonomous subject or the notion of the pre-existing state) are established. Performativity thereby challenges the notion of the naturally existing subject. But it does not eradicate the appearance of the subject or the idea of agency. Performance presumes a subject and occurs within the conditions of possibility brought into being by the infrastructure of performativity. (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 408)

Butlerian performativity thus allows for agency to be embedded in networked relationships whose key nodes appear to have agency and power — a point with great importance for traditional forms of popular geopolitics which we will return to in the next section. In contrast, non-representational theory

emphasises the flow of practice in everyday life as embodied, as caught up with and committed to the creation of affect, as contextual, and as inevitably technologized through language and objects. In other words, non-representational theory sees everyday life as chiefly concerned with the on-going creation of effects through encounters and the kind of linguistic interplay that comes from this creation, rather than with consciously planned codings and symbols (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000, 415).

While there are obvious commonalities with Butlerian performativity, non-representational performance emphasizes the fundamental openness of time-space, its constant sense of becoming in contrast to the (still flexible) structuring effects of performativity. Further, Thrift and Dewsbury’s definition emphasizes the role of non-human agency, drawing inspiration from actor-network theory. It is this post-human aspect of both affect and the subjectivities brought about through social practice that marks a position from which non-representational theory can contribute to a renewed popular geopolitics.

Non-representational theory’s distribution of agency through networks of people and objects allows for more complex theorization of causation within a renewed popular
geopolitics. William Connolly (2007, 82) has brought attention to the model of emergent causality, which argues that changes to one element in a network (or system) produces changes in others, but often in mysterious ways:

[First the volatile elements are not knowable in detail before the effects that emerge; second, some of them become infused into the very organization of the emergent phenomenon, so that the causal factor is not fully separate from the new formation; third, the new infusions tap into heretofore dormant capacities of self-organization within the affected system; and fourth, a series of loops and feedback loops flow back and forth between these forces – sometimes generating a new stabilization and sometimes intensifying disequilibrium.

Attempts to understand everyday geopolitics using this model of causality require methodologies that take account of the many human and non-human elements of the system. Many of these methodologies are experimental and as yet waiting-to-be-developed (but, see Dewsbury 2009); still, any account of the emergent, non-linear everyday ought to be contrapuntal in ways enabled by engagement with the concepts of affect and performance.

An example of research that could be grounded in such a perspective would be an analysis of the everyday sites of complex encounter between human bodies, environments, material landscapes and technologies, and media. Consider for example a cemetery for the war dead; surely such a sight/site exceeds the discursive elements. The quiet; the feel of a headstone underneath a hand; the sound and then feeling of a quiet breeze making its way through the trees and then across a brow; these are all non-representational elements of the geopolitical that can resonate with discourses in unexpected ways and are deserving of analysis.

AUDIENCE STUDIES

A final strand of literature to be incorporated into a renewed popular geopolitics is the strand of cultural studies known as audience studies. Engagements with audiences and the development of audience theories arguably began in the 19th century with the collection of sales data of ‘penny’ literatures. The first major theoretical model of audiences, the propaganda model (wherein media subjects are essentialized as passive and unknowing recipients of discourse), emerged during the early 20th century (Bratich 2005) and in many ways remained ensonced in popular geopolitics until fairly recently (see Dittmer 2008; Dittmer and Larsen 2007; Dodds 2006). Audience studies offer two points of intersection with feminist geopolitics and non-representational theory, each of which provide insights that might animate a renewed popular geopolitics. The first is an emphasis on performativity and the second is attention to audiences as a constituent power within networks.

In place of the propaganda model a number of theoretical models have been proposed, the most influential of which in popular geopolitics has been the active audience model (Dittmer and Dodds 2008). Although a contentious model for some scholars (Barker 2006), this model argues that popular culture is consumed by audiences via use of quasi-mediated forms of communication (television, film, books, comics, etc.), which have a wide spatiotemporal distribution (Hall 1980; Thompson 1995). Embedded within these texts are systems of spatiotemporally specific symbols that constitute ‘meaningful discourse’ to be consumed by audiences (Johns 1998; Moores 2004). Because audiences have differing degrees and varieties of cultural capital, audiences create their own systems of meanings within a text, consciously and unconsciously, which may or may not overlap or reflect that which it was originally intended to convey (Barthes 1983; de Certeau 1984).
Perhaps the most obvious active audiences can be found by looking at groups of people with high investments of cultural/emotional capital in aspects of popular culture: fans. Usually presented as classic cultural dupe, they instead represent a highly active audience through their engagement with media forms (see Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992). However, audiencing practices need not be limited to fans, as people antagonistic or ambivalent to texts often engage in entirely different, yet still active, practices of audiencing (Gray 2003). These practices are often seen as being oppositional to hegemonic intent (although they are not necessarily so, as these oppositional practices are still dependent on consumption of cultural commodities) and therefore fall into the Butlerian framework of performativity as the exercise of agency within preexisting discursive formations. As such, active audience research can be seen to connect theoretically with feminist geopolitics in regards to embodiment and performativity (and loosely with non-representational concerns of performance) through its emphasis on individualized audiences and the ways in which they use mediated messages for their own purposes, such as performing the role of critic, fan, or disinterested cynic. Consequently, many studies of the active audience have moved away methodologically from the quantitative analyses associated with market analysis and instead have been occupied with contextual research, utilizing focus groups and ethnography (but, see Barker and Mathijs 2007). In this too, audience studies work in parallel to feminist geopolitics.

The second realm of opportunity for popular geopolitics to be found in audience studies is an appreciation for constituent power. A theoretical concern within the communications literature of the past two decades is the nature and constitution of an audience (Hartley 1992; Morley 2006). While some strands of audience studies continue to seek to represent and characterize audiences and their practices, other scholars have moved toward understanding audiences as a preexistent constituent power. Drawing on Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), Bratich (2008, 35) argues that ‘Constituent power is the immense pool of desire and action, the res gestae of subjective forces, that is the motor of history’. This perspective has allowed a new research focus to emerge:

Within this perspectival shift, the audience is no longer tied to its problematized representation[,] Rather than focus on these problematizations, an analysis working with constituent power turns to the milieu of immanent creative forces. The sphere of audience motors those problematizations in the first place, as well as offers the site and resource for new potentials of collectivity. The representations in these reactive discourses are responses to the immanence of creative powers. (Bratich 2008, 35)

In this formulation ontology is elevated above epistemology, and audiences are seen as an animator of actor-networks, though not their sole source of power. The purported power of media producers (firmly established within the agency-centered model of discourse that has been dominant within critical geopolitics) and the mesmerizing potential of media objects are themselves effects of the power of the network in which these people and objects are embedded; rather than a network through which ideology is passed, we are confronted by an actor-network in which audiences’ constituent power is central to any understanding of the other elements in the network, including the people and technologies associated with production (see Adams 2009). The semiotic and commercial success of a popular culture artifact is only understandable as a result of emergent causality, with various elements of the techno-cultural-economic assemblage resonating with each other in ways neither predictable nor necessarily understandable after the fact.

By turning to constituent power, actor-networks, and emergent causality, audience studies can be seen as having conceptual overlaps with the post-human and affective
elements of non-representational theory. ‘Audience power refers to the creative processes of meaning making, the appropriation and circulation of affects, and the enhancement of these very capacities’ (Bratich 2005, 246; see also Plantinga 2009). As stated earlier, seeing the study of the active audience as primarily about embodied performance and performativity allows the significant overlap between audience studies and feminist geopolitics to become apparent. Together then, these three literatures that have each begun to influence popular geopolitics make a powerful case for new practices of studying the everyday ways in which people live geopolitics. It is toward some tentative conclusions on this topic that this paper now turns.

Synergies and Beyond: A Call for Methodological Innovation

At this point it is tempting to pull all three of these perspectives into an all-encompassing synthesis, but to do so would be to elide the theoretical and conceptual differences between the perspectives. While, for instance, emotional geographies and affect-based research have made common cause and do indeed speak to similar aporias within the discipline of geography, they clearly speak to related, but not identical, phenomena (Pile 2010). Even more of an outlier, audience studies can be seen to connect to both of the previous bodies of literature but is hardly congruent with them, especially as a result of the centrality of media to the subject matter. In other words, we have before us three related concerns that speak to the notion of the everyday and in their own ways co-produce a new sense of possibility for the study of popular geopolitics.

Figure 1 visualizes some of the overlaps and commonalities that have been described before, although it necessarily reduces the complexity of these relationships (and assumes a coherence within each circle that is not necessarily there). The first-order commonality of all three schools of thought is an interest in the everyday and in the use of qualitative methods to study it. A couple of caveats are in order. First, the notion of the ‘everyday’

![Fig. 1. Venn diagram of overlapping conceptual frameworks.](image-url)
is not necessarily entirely congruent among these three literatures — for example, consumption of media is assumed to be ‘everyday’ in audience studies but feminist thought might reject this essentialization. Second, it should be noted that audience studies have a long history of engaging in quantitative methods that still exists today. Nevertheless, the last few decades have seen qualitative methods become commonplace. These first-order commonalities serve as the fundamental basis of a renewed popular geopolitics.

The second-order commonalities are areas in which these three inspirations are in something less than total agreement. Nevertheless, the divides apparent at this level are hardly wide schisms. Feminist geopolitics and non-representational theory share an interest in the intimate geographies of the body. While each conceptualizes the body differently (Pile 2010), they nevertheless agree on the body’s importance in social life. Audience studies do not necessarily reject the body’s importance but neither do most writers in audience studies privilege it. An everyday geopolitics emphasizing the body could (and has) taken many forms, but an as-yet unstudied example would be the attempts through time to remake corporeal bodies for the purposes of militarism (we are thinking here of a recent flurry of news reports expressing concern about American, British, and German soldiers being, in the invariable headline: ‘Too fat to fight’).

Audience studies share with feminist geopolitics a common interest in performativity via the active audience tradition, which emphasizes audiences’ agency within discursively formed boundaries. This stands in opposition to non-representational theory’s emphasis on more open-ended performance. Audience studies also share with feminist geopolitics an interest in emotions, as pleasure, disgust, and gratification, among other emotions, have long been associated with engagement in mediated popular culture. A possible project, drawing both on feminist geopolitics and audience studies, would be a study of the impact of activist experiences on audience subjectivities. For example, Nick Megoran’s recent important work on the Reconciliation Walk (2010) has illustrated how American evangelical leaders had their geopolitical views on the Arab–Israel conflict challenged by the experience of traveling through the Middle East and apologizing for the Crusades. This transformation of geopolitical subjectivities was generated in part by the new orientation of the walkers as audiences; having apologized, they now had to listen. The Reconciliation Walk organization now leads tours through contested parts of the Holy Land, speaking to interested evangelicals about regional geopolitical issues. The emphasis on communication in both the initial and latter formulations begs for an analysis that draws on the bodies and activism of feminist geopolitics and the understanding of mediation found in audience studies.

Audience studies share with non-representational theory an interest in affect. While this might seem a bit ‘having one’s cake and eating it too’ given the just-stated interest in emotional geographies, it is understandable given that audience studies have generally adopted the notion of a psychological subject who can access their own affective relationships (at least sometimes). This obviously aligns more with the emotional geographies literature than with the affective; nevertheless, it means that audience studies make space for the study of affect as part of a comprehensive study of the everyday. While the divide between the cognitive and pre-cognitive versions of affect is worth debating and has important consequences, it is a debate that should occur within a renewed popular geopolitics rather than serving as a litmus test for inclusion/exclusion.

Importantly, the interest in affect by scholars in audience studies is connected to the adoption by some scholars of a belief in affording post-human quasi-agency to objects, images, sounds, and the like. This is manifested through the adoption of a network ontology, which links together the people associated with media (e.g., artists, writers, cameramen, DJs,
critics, fans, passive consumers) and the objects necessary for the constitution of the media (e.g., printing presses, televisions, radios, broadband cables, satellites) in a techno-cultural assemblage the effect of which is ‘the media’. Audience studies provide insight into the varying importance of these links, as the mediation of affects has remained largely undertheorized in affective geography and in emotional geography:

the geography of in-between is relentlessly constructed in the smooth space of an encounter between a person and another person or people; or in the encounter between a person and their environment, whether through travelling, dwelling, reading, ageing, consuming, cowering, or whatever. (Pile 2010, 15)

While work in audience studies is often framed quite differently than work in affective or emotional geographies, it nevertheless has a long history of recognizing the bumpiness of mediation.

Research that combines the insights of non-representational theory and audience studies could emphasize the improvisational quality of everyday geopolitics, the contingency which environment and materiality inject into the everyday mediation of power and ideas. Such research could, for instance, approach emerging forms of social media not just as networks through which discourse is perpetuated, re-shaped, and consumed but also as affective technologies, the use of which predisposes the user to a variety of particular engagements with the geopolitical.

Beyond the second-order commonalities are the singularities – the media-centrism of audience studies, the unique notion of performance found in non-representational thought, the trans-scalar framework and activism of feminist geopolitics. The media-centrism of audience studies sits better with affective geography given audiences’ role in circulating and transmitting affects (Gorton 2009; Kavka 2008), while it is arguably more foreign to feminist geopolitics (but not beyond the realm of interest). The distinction between performance and performativity is perhaps an even finer-grained dispute than that of emotion and affect; what is in common among all three schools of thought is a focus on embodied action. Feminist geopolitics maintains scale as a key concept but does so in a way that is amenable to the networks of non-representational thought and recent work within audience studies, which emphasize the locally embedded nature of people and objects within a network. Massey (2004) has described places as constructed through their connections to other places; these power geometries imply that not only is the local grounded but so is the global. This binding of the local/global to each other makes possible resistance to ‘global’ capital and other macro-scaled oppressions (Gibson-Graham 2002; Katz 2001b). The focus of feminist geopolitics on activism is perhaps more foreign to the other two schools of thought under consideration; nevertheless there is nothing to prevent scholars of popular geopolitics from taking a more activist stance, whether rooted in human vulnerability or on another principle (e.g., Megoran 2008).

In short, the three schools of thought described in this article can serve as a platform from which to launch a renewed popular geopolitics – using qualitative methods to focus on the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics. We are not pretending to invent a new field of study – rather we are trying to describe that which is already emerging (or has emerged) as a field of study in various parts of geography. John Wylie’s (2005) work on subjects’ affective and performative encounters with landscapes and Deborah Thien’s (2009) work on the emotional spaces of the Royal Canadian Legion both illustrate the strands of research outside of critical geopolitics that might illuminate a renewed popular geopolitics. Some of
these inspirations have already animated work within critical geopolitics. Take for instance Sidaway’s (2009) on the geopolitics of walking on the South West Coast Path. In this paper Sidaway uses a stroll out of Plymouth on the walking path as a framing device to illustrate how landscapes are materialized forms of geopolitics which affect those passing through them and can become embodied. The paper is certainly difficult to frame in the traditional triad of formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. However, it could certainly fit into the big tent of a popular geopolitics 2.0.

As Sidaway indicates, such work is not easy to frame, conduct, or write. Its reliance on non-representational literature on walking, on the emotional geographies of mourning and loss, and on mediation (trail markers, trail guides, historic maps) hint at the ways in which the literatures described in this paper can productively be brought together, but also hints at the complexity of doing so. There are of course many antecedents to such work; defining an origin point is an exercise in futility. Nevertheless, Sidaway’s article is an interesting point from which to leap further into the void in our attempts to provide an account of the geopolitical everyday. The popular geopolitics he (and we) has sketched is one that moves away from the deconstruction of texts and instead shifts to the practices of everyday life. It is hoped that with this move we might find a renewed popular geopolitics that can contribute further to the geographical enterprise.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Alan Ingram, Jennifer Hyndman, and James Sidaway for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Likewise, to the editors of Geography Compass and the anonymous reviewers for their hard work in improving this paper. All errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Short Biographies

Jason Dittmer is a Lecturer in Human Geography at University College London. His interests lie in the intersection of geopolitics with popular cultures such as superheroes, religion, and literature.

Nicholas Gray is a PhD student in the Department of Geography at University College London. His research is on the role of audiences in producing geopolitical meaning from popular culture.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Jason Dittmer, Department of Geography, University College London, Pearson Building, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK. E-mail: j.dittmer@ucl.ac.uk.

1Volume 13, Number 3, July 2008.

2Mediated interactions are conducted in similar temporal conditions and using (as close as is possible) mutually understood systems of signs and make use of technologies to communicate messages, e.g., telephone communications. Quasi-mediated interactions have a message that is encoded and created in a specific temporal spatiality utilizing current systems of discourse to encode the message. This message can then be decoded by others in different spatiotemporal locations, e.g., television and books (Thompson 1995).

3A quick Google search revealed these three panics, over the past 16 months, on the first page alone.

4It should be noted that Megoran approaches peace-making from a perspective that is not feminist in origin; nevertheless his work and that of feminist scholars can be seen to have some overlaps.

5See also Sidaway (2008) for another expression of the intimate connections between geopolitics and everyday lives.
References

Barker, M. (2006). I have seen the future and it is not here yet...: or, on being ambitious for audience research. The Communication Review 9, pp. 123–141.


