The creative (re)turn

Geographers have been researching geographies of creativity and employing creative methodologies in various guises for some time. As such, the geography discipline has an enduring engagement with the humanities/art world, suggesting a creative (re)turn rather than a creative turn (Hawkins 2012; Marston and de Leeuw 2013). With respect to this creative (re)turn, Hawkins (2011, 465) proposes that there are two key streams of work: those about ‘dialogue’ whereby geographers ‘interpret and analyse art works to make geographical arguments about landscape, urban space or nature’ and those about ‘doing’, in which geographers collaborate with artists or curators to ‘make-work, carry out research, develop exhibitions or practice various different creative techniques’. The first stream relates to geographies of creativity while the latter refers to the creativity of geography (although it must be recognised that this growing academic landscape is interlinked, iterative and always in formation).

There is also a third strand of creative geographical work in which the geographer is a creative geoartist, enacting or creating geographically-orientated aesthetic works themselves, be it through creative writing (Cook et al 2014; Lorimer 2013), theatre plays (Pratt and Johnston 2013), photography (Lombard 2013; Oh 2012), painting/screen prints (Crouch 2010; Govedare 2011), film-making/videos (Mistry and Berardi 2012; Simpson 2011), graphic narratives (Wilson and Jacot 2013), music (Attoh 2011; Johnston 2013) or creative bricolages (DeSilvey et al 2013; Sundberg 2013). Generally speaking, this strand has privileged scriptural and visual multifaceted creative forms over the aural and oral (Pinkerton and Dodds 2009), although more recent work has concerned the embodied performances/participation involved in multi-sensory encounters with creative works (DeLyser and Sui 2013; MacPhearson and Bleasdale 2012).
This engagement with the creative moment has led to a series of questions raised by various authors (for example, Crang 2010; Cresswell 2014; DeLyser and Hawkins 2014; Foster and Lorimer 2007; Hawkins 2012; 2011; Hulme 2013; Marston and de Leeuw 2013; Tolia-Kelly 2012). Some of their questions revolve around methodology and evaluation: For example, how might employing a creative bent alter our everyday academic practices of expression and geographical ways of knowing? What challenges might this re-orientation offer to publication spaces, peer review processes and grant application assessments? Who will evaluate the ‘success’ of creative work, in what terms and do we have the necessary skills to do so? Other questions circulate around the politics of creative practice and the affective nature of creative forms: How might inclusive arts practice be best instigated and sustained? Can creative work promulgate emotional resonance and what difference might that make, and to whom? Below I explore some of these questions through the lens of a particular creative moment that speaks to and through me: that of poetry. This is a direct response to Marston and de Leeuw’s (2013, iv, v) call for geographers to better appreciate the work that creative expressions do in the world, including their potential political impacts and implications.

**On poetry**

Although geographical work on poetry is a relatively narrow field, poetry has been employed in various different ways in geography (see also Cresswell 2014 for a recent review). This includes work on poetry and pedagogy (Rawling 2010; Sekeres and Gregg 2008), the use of poetry as a research methodology (Eshun and Madge 2012), reflections on the practice of being a poet/geographer (Boyd 2013; Cresswell 2014) and the analysis of poetry evoking a sense of
particular places, spaces or natures. Recent examples of the latter include Hopper’s (2008) exploration of north-west Ireland through Yeats’ ‘The Lake Isle of Innisisfree’ and van Wijngaarden’s (2012) investigation of the role that Homer’s ‘Odyssey’ has played in relation to the ‘structuring’ of the cultural landscape of the Ionian islands. A particularly compelling and nuanced topoanalytical critique of Pablo Neruda’s poem ‘Alturas de Macchu Picchu’ is given by Cocola (2011) in which he makes a reading of the complex matrix of places involved in this particular poem’s ‘story’. Other works have focused on the poets themselves, such as Groves’ (2011) exploration of how Paul Celan unsettles the literal and figurative ground through his poem ‘geological lyric’ and Tomaney’s (2010) discussion of ‘place attachments’ and the artistic expression of the ‘local’ through a reading of the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh and his notion of the ‘parochial imagination’.

The focus in such works is often towards analysing and interpreting well-known classical (male) poets and rural landscapes. Thus despite Porteous’ (1984, 372) call some years ago for geographers to ‘express their appreciation of the world in non-traditional forms’, such as poetry, there is still only a small (albeit growing) scholarship of geographers using poetry to (re)represent research experiences, fieldwork observations or geographical imaginations. These include Sheers’ (2008) poems about the Welsh landscape, Attoh’s (2011) evocative poem and song ‘the bus hub’, Boyd’s (2013) poems attempting to capture the ‘essence’ of places and landscapes and Cresswell’s (2013a) series of poems ‘displacements’. Two recent substantive poetic works are also set to make an important contribution: Cresswell’s (2013b) ‘Soil’ and de Leeuw’s (2012) ‘Geographies of a Lover’.
In Figure 1, I present one ‘poem’ii. I am not including this poem as an aesthetic work with standing in its own right, but rather I am explicitly using the poem as a ‘spark’ or ‘fulcrum’ to think through some of the questions raised by the creative re(turn). The poem is therefore employed in the process of creative-making, as an experimental methodological tool. I wrote the poem in bed at night in January 2012iii, after listening to a World Service news report about two Syrian women who were abducted by a white van as they went out to buy vegetables; their whereabouts was unknown. The news report moved me and I could not stop thinking about these two women and their families, particularly their children waiting for the return of their mothers. The poem is of the free verse genre, having unrhymed lines that have no set fixed metrical pattern or expectation. Its free form nature was a response to an emotion-filled moment; indeed to push at this affective, evocative nature further, the poem is superimposed on an oil painting as a further stimulus to evoke feeling, to challenge the boundaries of the scriptural/visual/auditory and to see what generative encounters might result from this hybrid ‘plurivectorial’ form of expression (Cook et al 2014; Dittmer 2010). In the remainder of the paper I use the poem as a provocation or pivot to think about three issues in particular: evaluation of the poetic creative moment; poetry as a means of expressing an embodied, affective geopolitics; and the limitations involved in this particular creative move as a means of empathetic, passionate storytelling.

Methodological musings and evaluating poetry

What exactly is a poem and how can I have the audacity to claim my creative words in Figure 1 are indeed a poem? The word poetry comes from the Greek ‘poiesis’ and it literally translates as ‘a making/a forming/a creating.’ While the meaning and understanding of poetry as a genre has changed through time and varies with place, in essence poetry is a literary art in which language
is used to evoke meaning- it is a creative act which uses language. Hence is it enough for me to claim that if a poet is simply one who creates using language, and poetry is what the poet creates, then my creative words are a poem? This partly depends on one’s viewpoint: is poetry the expression of a relatively rare, original, ‘high art literary genius’ which has gained validation through peer-experts, or is poetry a process of creating, of bringing forth by using language, that can be undertaken by anyone- an aesthetic methodology that democratically moves towards everyday ‘good enough poetry’ (Lahman et al 2009, 9)? In this vein, if I am using the poem as a catalyst for creative thinking and debate, as an expression of my view of an event in the world through a particular form of world-writing (rather than as an example of isolated exemplary craft), is the poem ‘good enough’? And who decides? Does an academic geographer have the skills to make a judgment or should the poem be reviewed by a professional poet? (And if so, should geographical photographs be evaluated by photographers, artworks by artists?). The tension remains: Is poetry a creative process of thoughtful- making, an act of expressing new and imaginative ideas and feelings that can be undertaken by anyone, or is it an aesthetic practice that can only be performed by those with particular skills or formal training?

Answers to these questions partly depend on how creative works are evaluated. For example, rather than using a positivist notion of reliability and validity of data, we might instead value a poem’s rigour and credibility according to its ‘metaphorical generalisability’ or its ‘imaginative transgression’. In other words, perhaps a poem should be evaluated for its ability to engage a reader/listener, to penetrate an experience, to bring a place to life, to express multi-sensual worlds- for its ability to ‘do something’ to the reader/listener- rather than whether it conforms to some set metrical pattern (see Hones 2011 and de Leeuw 2011 for more on this). Thus does the
validity of a poem ‘lie in its ability to resonate in the reader, to communicate emotional truths in a language that is fresh and engaging’ (Sherry and Schouten 2002, 231)? This raises challenges for reviewers of geopoetic works about how legitimacy might be appraised (for example, through affective resonance or through the transference of meaning), how aesthetic worth might be evaluated (for example, through the creative act of making that can be experienced and felt or through the explanatory power of an aesthetic work) and by whom (for example, by the editor, reviewer, audience, ‘subject’ of the poem). Indeed, as Saunders (2010, 439) suggests, creative literary forms do not persist per se but are ‘constituted as such by those who receive and manage’ their ‘entry and being within the world’. Therefore in answering the question ‘How to evaluate a poem?’, one must recognize that creative geographic practices are always inevitably limited and circumscribed by the conditions and power relations of their production and the value systems in which they are brought into being, such as an already determined discursive space of global capital.

The value of a poem also depends on our relationship to it. Different people will (re)read/listen to, create meaning and understand a poem differently depending on (for example) their geographical location, life experiences, personal desires, institutional cultures, geopolitical positioning, their relationship to the poem/poet and their purpose for reading the poem (i.e. a reviewer might read and value a poem quite differently to a political activist or a student). And that is the beauty of poetry: it allows for hybrid, multiple, simultaneous interpretations- both by different people and the same person (re)interpreting a poem differently at different times and in different places. Poetry is not necessarily an easy literary devise, however, for it can require close and thoughtful reading and re-reading (or listening and re-listening), pushing the
reader/listener to engage with their imagination by ‘reading between lines’. As ‘language transforms when it is heard’ (Lorimer 2008, 282) and many poems rearrange conventional language forms and structure to disrupt the linearity of text, meanings must often be ‘mined’ beyond the literal level, requiring a level of commitment and repeated engagement to think through and reflect upon what the poem demands from the audience/reader (c.f. Raghuram et al 2014). Some poetic genres can also evoke difficult emotional responses, which can be a risky encounter for both poet and audienceiv. Thus although poems have the potential to be dynamic, multi-layered literary devises, they are also indeterminable- for it cannot be predicted how a poem might be read, heard or understood nor the response it might (or might not) evoke. This differential and ambivalent nature of poetry creates tricky issues for poetic evaluation. Nevertheless, in the ‘contextualized and always emerging geographical event’ (Hones 2008, 1301) of the poetic encounter, might poetry hold particular purchase in ‘knitting together’ the passionate and the political?

**Affecting geopolitics through the embodied poetic encounter**

Poetry can be a linguistic means to express geopolitics. John Kinsella has termed his activist poetry as ‘linguistic disobedience’ reflecting the idea that poetry can be used as both an instrument of power and as a means to disrupt that power. Poetry has thus played a useful role (albeit often dissenting) in raising and addressing issues of political injustice and socio-cultural inequities and even in empowering individuals. This is quite clear when considering the important disruptive role poetry played in the decolonisation moment throughout many parts of Africa with poets such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o using their creative resources
to affirm the humanity of African people in defiance to colonial authority- although it must also be remembered that poetry was also used in some places to uphold colonial regimes of power (Eshun and Madge 2012).

Moreover, some poetry can have an affective register too. It can challenge understanding, arouse intensive passions and alter sensibilities. It can do this by being evocative, compassionate, angry, painful or funny, which can produce an empathic response from the reader/listener which can help sensitize them to a particular issue, experience, place or group of people. In this manner, poetry has the potential to invoke an empathetic relationship and stimulate a dialogic process between poet/reader/listener because this act of creativity usually involves, at some point, a social dimension that connects people. In the ‘poem’ in Figure 1, for example, the invitation to ‘just imagine that’ might evoke an empathetic response (as a woman, a mother, a human being).

In addition to being a form of geopolitical world-writing, (some types of) poetry can also be particularly useful literary devises to locate a researcher emotionally, illustrating how geopolitics affects ‘us’ (Sidaway 2009), presenting a counter-point to detached, disembodied, unemotional geopolitical accounts (Pain 2009). Here I am making a case for tender, fleshy, geographic expression which can ‘breathe life’ into the humanity of a geographical event or situation, allowing for ‘visceral resonance’ (Sherry and Schouten 2002, 218). Poetry has potential to give insight into the multiple (sometimes painful) realities of life- not some emotionally-flattened version. For example, in the poem the lines ‘squashed and squelched as a bruised aubergine’
speak directly to the embodied dreadfulness of violent disappearance (and evince a fleshy reaction in me as I repeat the words). In getting ‘close to the bone’, poetry can inspire a ‘drilling down’, a deeper introspection, encouraging contemplation of ‘different social and spatial orders which might otherwise remain concealed or suppressed’ (Saunders 2010, 441). Poetry can thus help write political geography in a passionate, embodied way and creating such embodied versions of geopolitics suggests that emotions, feelings and passion may have transformative power: ‘we’ can affect geopolitics too.

In theory, then, there is much to be gained from using poetry to express an affective geopolitics: it is a creative format that traverses between the representational and the more-than-representational, a form of ‘embodied storytelling’ (Daya 2011). For example, in the poem, I express my embodied horror (on hearing the news report, my lungs were ‘punctured’) at the (differentially gendered) harsh brutality of the conflict in Syria. This was a ‘gut reaction’ to the reported disappearance of these two (unknown to me) women and the dreadful uncertainty that their vanishing might have provoked in their (assumed) children’s everyday lives. The poem layers together the everyday mediocrity of shopping for vegetables or eating a meal with the extraordinary event of violent disappearance, as felt through my body. As this geopolitical situation moves through my body, the embodied imagination starts to offer possibilities ‘to live the circumstances and experiences of others’ (Lahman et al 2009, 5), enlivening and embodying the geopolitical imagination. This illustrates not only how emotions can ‘travel’ but also how geopolitical events can ‘speak through the body’. As such, the poem is presented not so much ‘a view on the world’ but a ‘point of view in it’ (Hawkins 2011, 466) and it is a means to acknowledge and write the body not only as a social, political and economic location, but also as
a sensory agent (Noxolo 2009). As the poem traverses between the dualisms of the everyday and the extraordinary, it knits together the geopolitical and the affective, global and intimate relations, entwining mind and body, suggestive of the creative promise of (some genres of) poetry to express the emotional, political and embodied multiplicities of world-writing.

**What limits empathy, poetry and passion?**

Employing poetry to express an affective geopolitics is, however, far from straightforward; indeed, it is beset with complexities. One of these difficulties revolves around the limits to empathy and the affective response. For example, how possible is it to evoke some understanding of the horror of violence and disappearance that some Syrian people have suffered (and continue to suffer)? How possible is it for me to even begin to imagine what this might be like and what audacity, epistemic appropriation, imperialistic projections and stereotypical assumptions do I display in even trying to do so (for example, in assuming that the women had children, that they ate aubergines)? How possible is it for this poetic moment to move beyond appropriation and ‘speaking for’ when the complex evolving political, economic and social connections associated with British ‘influence’ in Syria have been ‘written out of the script’? And how dialogic is this creative move, when there is such little space within the academy for (different) Syrian (and other) women to ‘speak back’ and present their agentic version of events, or refuse mine, or even be (possible to be) interested in them? There is a case to be made that the poem does little to move beyond my subject-centered, self-referential catharsis of how hearing this news event affected me, lying in ‘lofty distance’, while unspeakable horrors may have been being perpetrated against the women in the poem, or whom indeed may have been making an active escape from their captors. Thus in a paradoxical move, by invoking the affective register
through my body but by not recognizing the limits to empathy and the complex politics of
disconnection (Noxolo et al 2012), have I presented an individualised and depoliticised account
(Mitchell and Elwood 2012), that through the power to name and situate, both reinforces
difference and privileges a ‘self-indulgent focus on the self’ (Kobayashi 2003, 348)?

In other words, there must be recognition of the limitations (in this poetic encounter, at least) of
‘speaking for’ through an affective geopolitics- for emotional relations are complicated and can
be challenging, refused or withdrawn (Bennett 2009; Noxolo et al 2012). So the affective
moment can be(come) ossified (sometimes as an active denial, other times as a form of
resistance); and sometimes this perceived absence of emotion can be productive too, for it
enables endurance and survival (Madge in revision). Moreover, empathy can never be
guaranteed: there is no automatic way of feeling or knowing another person’s lifeworld- this has
to be laboured for (Evans 2012; Jones and Ficklin 2012). This is precisely because the emotional
landscape is not simply a personal, subjective, individual experience (Bondi 2005); rather it is
relational and shaped by broader historical, social, cultural, economic and political structural
conditions, as well as ‘more-than-social’ non-human, biosocial and atmospheric influences
(Kraftl 2013). Moreover, these are driven through with historically embedded power inequalities
and injustices, so the emotional landscape is never played out on an even socio-political playing
field: in other words, there are often limits to what emotions can ‘do’ and to the connections that
can be formed through them. Hence it is not simply a matter of evoking empathy but rather
‘working through’ (often in small, enduring ways) what happens to that empathic opening and
being receptive to getting a surprising and unexpected response (or indeed, no response) (Noxolo
et al 2012). Thus although empathy played out through the poetic frame has potential (mediated,
circumscribed) agency, we cannot predict what this might be, what it might mean nor how it might matter to different people in various places: emotional relations too are an ‘emerging geographical event’ (c.f. Hones 2008).

Therefore, in failing to challenge the self/other binary in any significant way (Closs 2011), in perhaps reinforcing a detached alteriety, should the topic be left ‘well alone’ because of its intensely troubling and difficult nature? This is a tricky question…..but just because using poetry as a form of world-writing is complicated, does not mean that we should not try to engage with the poetic moment (after all, all forms of geographical expression are beset with the politics of their production). I should make myself clear, however: in presenting the poem I am not simply suggesting that the (assumed) suffering of two Syrian women and their (assumed) children is something that I can straightforwardly and uncomplicatedly empathise with through some creative words. Poetic expression can never be exempt from multiple and intersecting power relations as there will always be a set of inescapable politics around how we re-represent the world, including in the poetic form. Poetry is just as susceptible to asymmetrical power relations, dominant voices and exclusions as any other mode of knowledge creation. Nevertheless, what I am proposing is that despite these inherent difficulties, perhaps poetry is one of the more useful linguistic tools available to the geographer to attempt to express an affective geopolitics- if it is used thoughtfully and attentively- and perhaps most importantly, if the poetic work also has enough aesthetic value, emotional resonance and skilful craft.

This brings us back to the issue of evaluation. It has to be acknowledged that some of the limitations identified above derive from the inadequacies of my particular poem. It is not enough
to simply assert that I had an embodied response to events in Syria that translated into a poem; frankly, this does not mean that the poem itself is a work that can evoke an embodied response in a reader/audience. Assertions about the potential ‘work’ that poetry can do are rendered null and void if the creative words lack poetic merit. So if a poem is unable to stretch meaning enough to promote emotional resonance, if the author lacks the skills and creativity to impress the reader/audience, is the creative process of thoughtful-making, the act of expressing new and imaginative ideas and feelings, ‘good enough’? While I would agree with Cresswell (2014) and Marston and de Leeuw (2013) about the importance of attention to hard work, formal training in the craft of poetry and perfecting it through repeated practice, I would also hold on to the possibility of opening up academic publishing spaces to more experimental, more contingent and perhaps less-than-perfectly crafted poetic works as a methodological tool in the creative process of making geography.

More so because the creative geographer must not shy away from the painful and disturbing terrain of our multi-polar world to reinvigorate Anglo-American provincialisation nor only attempt to deal with comfortable topics and forms of expression. Awkward emotions and troubling methodologies cannot be ignored- they must be worked through- even if (and actually precisely because) self-critique might unsettle our very own position. Indeed, it is this vulnerability, this position of unknowing, that might form a bridge upon which a dialogue of mutuality might begin, to be beside one another in pain (Madge in revision). However, such mutuality requires far more than the act of using poetry alone, or self-reflexivity about its value (c.f. Kobayashi 2003), but also depends on what is made of poetry, the use to which it is put (see Eshun and Madge 2012).
Conclusions: A critical moment for (creative) reflection?

As a creative agent, I have attempted to initiate some discussion of the potentialities and limitations of geopoetics to contribute to the debate about geocreativity and have made the case for a cautious recognition of the potential that (‘good?’) poetry might hold for creative geographical expression. While this is an approach that aims to ‘open up’ publishing space to normalise and make more acceptable a broader variety of ways of doing and expressing geography, it is also an approach that considers the pitfalls, risks and difficulties of doing so. The paper thus particularly responds to Lorimer’s (2008) plea (and Porteous 1984 before him) for geographers to pay more attention to various creative writing activities and to DeLyser and Hawkins’ (2014, 133) encouragement for geographers ‘to explore their writing as practice’.

A consideration of this nexus between creativity and geography is particularly important at this moment in time in the British context as the Conservative-Liberal coalition government makes significant cuts in Arts funding and organisations. As political discourses shift from creative to cultural education (see the Henley Review DCMS 2012, which although espousing the relevance of cultural education for young people, paradoxically runs in tandem with a striking drop in funding for local authority children's and cultural services), the future outcomes of these policies for the active creative agency of young scholars can be questioned. This is also time of huge changes to the British Higher Education scene, with privatisation coming in through the front door, forcing academics into student-surveyed shaped agendas, which might further constrict the creative energies of academics. Will the shifting market-based neoliberal regulatory governance of British Higher Education, the audit culture of REF and wider cultural shifts in working practices in the UK and beyond (in which academics are called upon to become entrepreneurs to
gain funding or border regulators for ‘international’ students), curtail the ability of academics to do creative research that is unusual, unanticipated (and unfunded) rather than research which is set by policy agendas or grant awarding bodies? (see also Massey 2002).

Therefore, while geographers have had a long-standing engagement with creativity, (indeed, most geographical research is to some extent creative- even the most quantitatively scientifically driven sorts), one can question whether this renewed focus on the creative will lead to surprising, challenging geographies which might push at the enduring hierarchical, power-laden boundaries of geographical power, in all its complex manifestations, or just result in ‘lip service’ being paid to ‘thinking outside the box’? The politics of knowledge production, including that of the creative practice, is uneven, fractured with inequalities: employing creative expression does not automatically produce critical, significant, geographical insights. Questions therefore arise such as: ‘Will the creative (re)turn enable geographers from multiple centers to speak, be listened to, and be heard, and on whose terms?’ ‘Which people, places, sub-disciplines of geography and which creative practices might be excluded in this move towards creativity?’

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is given of the support provided by the University of Leicester in granting Academic study leave to write this paper. Thanks to colleagues in the Human Geography Group at the University of Leicester for intellectual debate about creativity, especially Peter Kraftl and Jen Dickinson. Also thanks to Lisa Barber and Laura Vann for help in converting the Figure to
the correct file format. I am also grateful to the referees for their thoughtful and extremely useful comments.

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Notes

i This may be partly because the Humanities approach promotes a concern with ‘interpretation and criticism rather than creativity’ (Crosgrove 2011, xx11).

ii Whether this should be considered a free verse poem, or rather a collection of creative cathartic words, or emotionally expressive prose, is open to debate.

iii Events in Syria have since escalated, so the poem is a reflection of a particular moment in the conflict.

iv Although as one reviewer observed, it should also be acknowledged that some poetry types, such as the abstract/absurdist genre, expressly do not work at the emotional level but are instead designed to demand almost exclusively cerebral responses.

v Thanks to one reviewer for this observation.