

**SPATIALITY REVISITED FIVE YEARS LATER****SPATIALITY REVISITADO CINCO ANOS DEPOIS**Robert T. Tally Jr.<sup>1</sup>

The publication of a Chinese edition of my *Spatiality* presents me with a welcome opportunity to revisit its argument and goals, and I am extremely grateful to Dr. Ying Fang both for her elegant translation and for this opportunity. I wrote *Spatiality* in 2011–2012, but it was the product of many years of reading and thinking, a point I hoped to register in part by dedicating the volume to my graduate school advisor and mentor, Professor Paul A. Bové, with whom I had had lengthy discussions about matters of literary and critical theory during the 1990s. In truth, some of the rudimentary origins of the themes and ideas in this book extend back even farther, to my days as a university student or even to childhood, where a fascination with philosophy, geography, and history combined to make me more aware of their complex interrelations. As many scholars have pointed out, the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries have appeared to be characterized by an increasing significance of spatiality, with greater attention being paid to matters of space, place, and mapping, as well as spatial relations more generally, and I believe that recent geopolitical developments have confirmed, and even strengthened, this view. The rapid spatiotemporal transformations in China itself, along with China's role in the ever-more-interconnected political economy of a world system, makes China a fundamentally critical site in the global network that now conditions and makes possible the truth of lived experience throughout the world, and therefore also an important place to consider spatiality in the present era.

*Spatiality* is intended to serve as an introduction to the concept and an argument for its significance in literary studies. As an introduction, it is intentionally broad, touching on a number of different areas without going into as much depth as some readers may desire. It is also very much a limited introduction, particularly

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considering the burgeoning and diverse research in what is now known as the spatial humanities. For the most part, I do not discuss a lot of the work being done by geographers, including the subfield of cultural or literary geography (and my own use of this latter term is thus somewhat eccentric, as I discuss below). I also made little reference to the spatial work associated with physics, mathematics, or computer science, and I do not examine work taking advantage of Geographical Information Systems (G.I.S.) which has led to new areas of research in the arts and sciences. Much more could also have been said about architecture, urban planning, and regional development, to name just a few disciplinary fields for which spatiality is a crucial concept. And indeed, even limiting myself to the humanities, I focus my attention largely on literature, philosophy, and critical theory, thus leaving aside relevant research in such adjacent disciplines as archaeology, art and art history, communications, film, jurisprudence, linguistics, music, religious studies, and theater, among many others. Finally, as will be all the more apparent to readers outside of the United States and the United Kingdom, *Spatiality* is rather heavily Eurocentric in its selection of texts and authors discussed, and this limitation reflects my own background in what used to be misleadingly called “Western Civilization,” which for me mostly involved the far more limited range of English, French, and German languages and literatures. In fact, spatially oriented critical theory has done much to call such artificial divisions into question, and I am grateful to the many critics around the world for exposing the weaknesses of a Eurocentric perspective while opening up literary and cultural studies to a much more expansive and inclusive body of texts and theory. As an introduction, therefore, *Spatiality* may serve as a point of departure for future research that, necessarily and beneficially, complements and goes well beyond the ideas and arguments to be found in its own pages.

In truth, *Spatiality* reflects my own interests in delineating a critical theory and practice of literature as a form of mapping, which partially explains its specific emphases and omissions. As a writer, editor, and teacher, I have endeavored over the years to promote a variety of approaches to literature and culture that would highlight the importance of space, place, and mapping, I have also maintained my

own vision of what I believe constitute the interrelations between these concepts and practices. The trajectory of the argument in *Spatiality* coincides with my theory of literary cartography and its relationship to literature at large.

I begin with the assumption that, to the extent that human beings are political animals, as Aristotle defined them, we are also necessarily mapmaking animals. I do not mean this is a technical sense, for my use of mapping is partly figurative, but human subjectivity is fundamentally spatial (as well as temporal), and thus orienting oneself with respect to space and place (and, again, also time) is an essential aspect of our Being. More recently, as in my book *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2019), I have used the term *topophrenia* to indicate this fundamental “place-mindedness” that characterized our comportment to the world in which we find ourselves situated. In the introduction to *Spatiality*, I drew upon the well known notation on the map, “You are here,” to stand as a figure for this topophrenic sensibility, and using Dante’s famous opening image from his *Commedia*, I also note the degree to which our most urgent anxieties may be figured forth in the experience of being, or imagining ourselves to be, lost in space. The existential condition thus underlies the desire for some sort of representation, which I argue is generated most often in the form of narrative and which in turn serves as a kind of figurative map, allowing individual and collective subjects to achieve a sense of place with respect to a larger, often imperceptible and potentially unrepresentable spatial and social formation. There is a temporal aspect to this as well, as one attempts to situate oneself in relation to various temporal registers of history—a day, a year, a lifetime, an epoch, a geological age, and ultimately, History itself—but even this attempt to map one’s position in time is often figured in spatial terms, as with a chronological timeline, for example. I affirm that, just as we are by nature storytellers, we are also, broadly speaking and inescapably, mapmakers. The term *literary cartography* combines these elements, for we make sense of or give form to our world and our experiences by creating narratives that themselves serve as maps.

Before turning to this matter in more detail in *Spatiality*, I felt the need to provide the context for reassertion of space in twentieth century critical theory, and

therefore I began with a widely ranging chapter on “The Spatial Turn.” Although there is no clear date for when such a turn occurred, a number of prominent scholars in various disciplinary fields have made it clear that spatiality, along with related matters of space, place, and mapping, has become increasingly significant in the humanities and social sciences in recent decades. The predominance of spatially oriented theory and criticism reflects a pervasive sense that our own epoch is somehow more characteristically spatial than others had been, as such different theorists as Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson have insisted. I would agree that, in our time, space and spatial relations have taken on greater significance, but given my affirmation of the human being’s fundamentally topophrenic condition, I would also insist that the historical production of space and the evolution of formal representations of space in the arts and sciences must be considered if we are to understand the context in which the spatial turn has occurred. Thus I tried to cover, in a very brief survey, several moments in the history of spatial critical theory and practice in the hopes that this chapter could serve as a tentative and provisional genealogy of the spatial turn as it is now manifest in literary and cultural studies today.

That context having been established, I return to my idea of *literary cartography* in the next chapter, and I would emphasize that my use of the term, as with my use of the terms *literary geography* and *geocriticism* in the subsequent chapters, is quite different from the way that others may have used the term. For one thing, as readers have pointed out, *Spatiality* includes no actual maps whatsoever, and indeed, throughout my career, for the most part, I have avoided using figures or maps, preferring the medium of the written word. (It is not just a preference, one could add, but also a way of registering the implicit rivalry between mimetic forms, where text and image compete for attention and relevance; although the two frequently complement each other in generally beneficial ways, the verbal and the pictorial registers might also be said to offer distinctive, and sometimes opposing, representations of the subject in question.) I use the term *literary cartography* to indicate the ways that a writer—usually but not always a creative writer and producer of narrative—figuratively maps the world depicted in

the text. The chapter then surveys various means by which writers accomplish this narrative mapmaking.

If literary cartography is understood as an activity performed by writers, then *literary geography* as I am using this term refers to the territories mapped and the ways in which they are mapped by the writers. Note that this is not what many others mean by the term, and the fact that there is disagreement as to what constitutes literary geography is, as Neal Alexander has suggested, a sign of the vitality of the research currently being undertaken in its name. In my chapter titled “Literary Geography” in *Spatiality*, I am especially concerned with reading, as opposed to the previous chapter’s emphasis on writing, and thus I use *literary geography* to refer to the sort of work being done by literary and cultural critics when they analyze the “maps” produced by the literary cartographers. I do not mean to say that all reading is by definition a form of literary geography, but I do think that the attention paid to space, place, and mapping by the critics discussed in that chapter offer models for more spatially oriented ways of reading.

Along those lines, in the chapter titled “Geocriticism,” I look at spatially oriented literary theory, which will include the geocentric approach advocated by the French critic Bertrand Westphal, but which, in my use of the term, extends well beyond it. I prefer to think of geocriticism as a broader category, one which would encompass a number of different forms of criticism associated with spatial literary studies, and as such I spend that chapter briefly surveying the works of several major philosophers and literary theorists whose writings have helped to shape literary and cultural studies after the spatial turn. Thus, following the introduction and contextualization of the spatial turn in chapter one, the central chapters of *Spatiality* deal with literary production, analysis, and theory (or, perhaps, writing, reading, and thinking) respectively, which in combination all operate together as a means of making sense of the fundamentally topophrenic character of our being in the world.

My conclusion, which points the way toward fantasy and utopia, is intended to highlight once again the existential basis for these literary practices. Quite understandably, mapping is frequently associated with realism, and maps are

excellent tools for helping us make sense of the real spaces and places that constitute our world. But people do not tell stories or make maps in order only to represent their world as it exist; they also imagine alternatives. Part of the point in that chapter is to observe that all maps and all narratives are figurative, and that elements of fantasy are therefore integral to even the most realistically mimetic representations of the so-called “real world.” But beyond that, I also wanted to show how, in our attempts to make sense and give form to the world, we necessarily project other worlds. In making space available in our critical practices for the fantastic, we open ourselves up to the possibility of new spaces.

Sometimes the fantastic and the real overlap in ways that show us just how inextricably intertwined they really are. The radical transformations with respect to culture, communication, and technology in recent years can seem like the stuff of science fiction, and China is perhaps witnessing some of the most astonishing socio-economic development of any place on the planet today. Some years ago I published an essay, titled “Post-American Literature,” in which I alluded to the spectacle of the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics as signaling a symbolic transition from what had been dubbed “The American Century” to what could only be heralded as “The Chinese Century.” These labels are not very important, for this century—like the last—will be internationally interconnected with all manner of local and global consequences, but it is also true that the rapid spatiotemporal transformations of social life in China at present makes it one of the most important sites to explore for anyone trying to comprehend the world in which we live now and in the future. As such, I have no doubt that the literary and cultural production of China, historically but also in the coming years, will be essential to our understanding and representation of world literature and the multi- or transnational world system. Hence, spatially oriented criticism and theory will be all the more desirable, and I hope that my *Spatiality* book will prove useful to those scholars who will be in the vanguard of the critical practices of the future.