

SYMPOSIUM

Geography and Representation: Introduction

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Introduction

When I teach introductory undergraduate geography classes, I often assign as additional reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Menchú, 1984). The life story of the Nobel Peace Prize winner, as recounted to and by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, is a moving account of Rigoberta Menchú's childhood, of the difficulties she and her community had to face, and of their political efforts to bring about change for the indigenous population of Guatemala. In class evaluations, students have responded with enthusiasm to this text—they empathize with the young Rigoberta and her family, and they are helped in this by a narrative that is immediate and emotive. Recent work, though, has questioned the validity of this text. In particular, anthropologist David Stoll claims that important segments of the text are fabricated—he highlights Menchú's flawed accounts of the deaths of family members, and her refusal to acknowledge the extent of her formal education (see Stavans, 2000 for a useful overview of this debate).

The arguments and debates over *I, Rigoberta Menchú* go to the heart of the 'crisis of representation' that has surfaced in geography and other disciplines.¹ The text is, on the one hand, vaunted as a corrective to colonial practices that serve to subjugate and silence indigenous populations, in terms of both its subject matter and its narrative voice. On the other hand, the text also opens itself to critique in a way that may undermine the power of its message—it is, according to its critics, exploitative, inaccurate and fraudulent. How do we adjudicate these competing representations? How do we make choices about what and how we represent in our classes and classrooms? How do we address the politics of representation in a way that does not replicate past mistakes? These are all questions that we attend to—often implicitly—whenever we teach.

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In this symposium, we foreground these questions and highlight practical and tested ways of addressing the issues they raise.

Representation in Geography

When we talk about, write or teach geography, we are involved in the act of representation. In its broadest sense, geography is representation. The etymology of geography suggests this: the Greek origins of the word geography are *geo* (earth) and *graphia* (writing). Earth writing takes the world as we experience or understand it, and translates it into images. The forms of these images vary: they can be written, visual or oral and aural, and within each of these categories there exists a wide range of possibilities. Written representations include academic texts, newspapers, magazines, travel writing, novels, plays and poetry. Visual representations include maps, photographs, posters and films. Oral and aural representations include music, film soundtracks and audio recordings, as well as the stories we tell about the relationships between people and places. The boundaries between these different forms of representation are fluid—films combine visual and aural representations, maps have written legends, newspaper reports contain visual images. We use a range of these representations as we research and teach geography.

As teachers of geography in higher education, we are intricately involved in the practice and the politics of representation. We teach students whose views about the relationships between people and place have started to form long before they reach our classrooms. We use the spaces of teaching to represent our own views of these relationships, which are sometimes at odds with our students' interpretations. Our research forces us to confront issues of intellectual property, confidentiality, and our relationship with the people and topics we are researching. We operate within broader social and political contexts that attempt to delineate fact from fiction and right from wrong. Representation, therefore, is central to what we as geographers do. In recent years, geographers have been paying more explicit attention to issues of representation. This attention includes attempts to theorize representation that draw on the work of—among others—Foucault, Lefebvre, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari; an awareness of, and attempt to rectify, gaps or absences in geographic literature; and a concern with self-reflexivity on the part of geographers as researchers (see, for example, Soja, 1989; Gregory, 1994; Jones *et al.*, 1997; Doel, 1999; Moss, 2002). Much of this work, particularly in terms of theorizing representation, is influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thought. However, the 'postmodern turn' within geography has not been universally welcomed. Many are sceptical of these developments, citing exclusionary language and a lack of relevance to the 'real world' as justification for their unease. There is, as a consequence, a perceived gap between those who theorize about representation, and those who represent, through teaching, familiar and unfamiliar people and places (see Cook, 2000 for an interesting attempt to bridge this gap).

The aim of this *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* symposium is to take contemporary theoretical debates around the issue of representation and to translate them into the spaces of the classroom. The result is a broad-ranging interpretation of representation within geography, from a wide variety of perspectives. Two of the authors—Vincent Del Casino and Carolyn Gallaher—are based in the US. Susan Mains teaches in the West Indies, and Allen White

teaches in the UK. All of the authors trained as geographers but now work from a disparate set of academic homes, including geography, but also international service and liberal studies. Their papers deal with diverse topics: from asylum to violence; from daily activity spaces to transnationalism. Despite this diversity, though, the focus of the symposium is effectively on the ordinary and the familiar—what Del Casino calls the ‘bread and butter’ issues of geography teaching. These papers deal with the issues we confront on a daily basis: teaching unpopular or controversial topics, translating our research to the classroom in an ethical way, dealing with student preconceptions, textbooks that do not quite work in the ways we would like, and media reports that undermine or challenge the messages we try to convey.

The papers contain a variety of practical suggestions for addressing the practice and politics of representation within a broad range of classrooms. White’s approach to media analysis can be usefully and effectively applied to television and radio broadcasts and to Internet sites, as well as to newspaper and magazine articles. Gallaher writes about her experience of teaching about militia movements in a way that provides clear guidelines for designing, presenting and reflecting on courses that deal with controversial topics. Mains outlines an approach to teaching population geography that uses the concept of transnationalism to understand processes of neo-colonialism, representation and globalization. She uses her experiences, those of her students, and a wide range of media—including film, novels and music—to ground these concepts in the practice of everyday life. Her insistence on the importance of contested spaces provides a useful pedagogical framework for examining questions of power and truth. Del Casino points to the ways in which we can complicate the relationship between different scales of analysis in teaching world regional geography. His example focuses on Thailand but it raises very pertinent questions about how we imagine or construct the concept of scale, and points us towards new ways of teaching world regional geography that link the individual with the global.

These diverse papers have, at their core, a commitment to addressing the politics of representation within the teaching of geography. The authors take positions that seem, at times, contradictory. Mains and Del Casino, for example, argue that we need to destabilize our understandings of boundaries and borders in order to understand the material and social construction of places. In contrast, Gallaher insists on the need for comparative studies, thus reasserting the importance of bounded notions of place. White’s analysis of newspaper reports of asylum seekers looks to the text itself in order to uncover its internal inconsistencies. The papers are linked, however, by an awareness of and attention to the politics of silence. Mains highlights the ways in which geographic publications generalize about the Caribbean, and the reactions of Caribbean students to what they perceive as negative and misleading representations. This raises pertinent questions about the production of knowledge, the production of space, and the ways in which different versions of ‘truth’ are constructed, legitimized and contested. Del Casino uses the words and emotions of Ton, a Thai man living with HIV, to illustrate alternative approaches to the study of HIV/AIDS that move beyond the attribution of blame. In doing so, Del Casino draws attention to the ethical issues involved in using other people’s life experiences as the subject matter for teaching. White deconstructs a tabloid newspaper article about refugees in Britain in order to illustrate the often hidden

politics behind seemingly innocuous stories, while Gallaher highlights the general silence of geographers on topics of violence.

These papers are, in part, a response to the position that we, as teachers of geography, are required to take within institutional structures. In our colleges and universities, we teach large and often mandatory undergraduate classes, with students from a range of backgrounds and with a range of abilities. We have access to a limited range of teaching materials, and those that are available are often insufficient for our needs. These papers show ways of working with and against these broader institutional constraints. These papers are also, however, a response to Janice Monk's provocative *JGHE* article (Monk, 2000). Both Susan Mains and Carolyn Gallaher highlight her observation that large parts of the world are invisible in the *JGHE*, as well as in the discipline of geography. In this symposium, we have aimed to move beyond an understanding of the world that operates through the First World/Third World binary, and that seeks to make visible the connections between our daily activity spaces and the activity spaces of others. In his summing up of the Menchú controversy, Ilan Stavans says that "by unmasking a myth-making Guatemalan Indian, Stoll, a fact-obsessed, Stanford-trained anthropologist, embarked on a journey into the abyss between south and north" (2000, p.217). This is our version of this journey.

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Note

1. By "crisis of representation," I refer to debates that surfaced in the social sciences from the 1970s onwards, questioning the possibility of objective knowledge, of methodological certainty and of academic authority, and highlighting the relationship between knowledge production and political, social and economic exploitation and oppression (see Flaherty *et al.*, 2002 for an informative discussion of the 'crisis').

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