



# Difference as practice: Diffracting geography and the area studies turn

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/phg](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/phg)**Deen Sharp**

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**Abstract**

After decades of geography and area studies drifting apart, I argue there has been an area studies turn in geography. The long divergence between the two, however, has resulted in a certain misunderstanding by geographers of what area studies scholarship is and what this field can contribute to the discipline. Area studies should not be considered as an approach that merely concentrates on the representation of difference but rather as a milieu in which difference is *practiced* and geographical concepts can be ‘diffracted’. Area studies can offer geography new ways to think about its place in, and entanglement with, the world.

**Keywords**

area studies, Cold War, Middle East geography, new materialism, post-colonial theory, representation, War on Terror

**I Geography and the area studies turn**

In 1902, as the first scholarly studies in regional geography appeared, the American geographer William Davis divided geography into two traditions. Davis wrote, ‘Systematic geography is the orderly study of the relations between all the categories of physiography and ontography. Regional geography is the orderly study of all these relations that are manifested in a limited area’ (cited in Martin, 2015: 4). This organization of geography placed regional geography in a subordinate position to the universalist ambitions of systematic geographical studies: the latter developed theories and the former gathered the data through encyclopedic studies of areas to prove these theories. This divide in geography has continued to trouble the discipline. Traditional regional geography, and contemporary

area studies, are often derided for their supposedly descriptive and untheoretical content, while systematic geography’s universalist pretension is accused of imposing hegemonic ‘Anglo-American’ categories onto the world at large.

Area studies can be central to the future of geography, I contend, because the discipline is not constituted by two separate axes of a place-based socio-cultural geography, on the one hand, and a spatial systematic geography, on the other. Geography’s categories are nearly always the result of a certain social milieu. Area studies

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can take a pivotal role in the constant requirement that geography does not merely apply concepts to the world but generates its categories in a manner that is alert to the discipline's entanglement with it. The weak relationship, however, between geography and area studies inhibits such a position for the field in the discipline. Geography, in part because of the regional and systematic division, turned away from regional geography toward quantitative methods and ignored the rise of area studies. But in recent years, as I detail in this essay, there has been an area studies turn in the discipline. Geographers are now beginning to address why their discipline has neglected area studies, as well as seeking new opportunities for the discipline to engage the social settings of the non-West.

In this paper, I set out to critically assess how a more robust relationship between geography and area studies could assist the discipline in expanding the geographies in which geographical knowledge is produced. But more than simply argue for a de-provincialized geography, I argue it is not only the geography of geography that matters, it is also the social settings – the common sets of institutions and networks – in which geographical knowledge is produced that matter. I contend that area studies should be understood primarily as a social milieu, constituted by a common set of intuitions and networks loosely organized around a geographical area, rather than a singular theory, set of methods or an approach to merely represent difference. I assert that area studies' milieus can 'diffract' geographical categories and create new possibilities for geographical knowledge production by facilitating the *practice* of difference, where new ways of forging commitments, connections and geography are constantly explored.

Many ways exist to consider geography's relationship with area studies. Area studies' fields, much like geography's sub-disciplines, are neither internally homogenous or like each

other – each area has a distinctive social and geo-historical setting (Szanton, 2004: 4). Iterations of area studies have also thrived (women's studies, ethnic studies, disability studies) in the academy. Here, I analyze the relationship between geography and area studies from the window of the 'Middle East', specifically Middle East Studies (MES) and Middle East Geography (MEG). My emphasis is on how geography and its approaches can benefit from a stronger relationship with area studies. This essay has utilized a number of recently published historiographies of both geography and area studies and is a result of a systematic review of 22 Anglophone geography journals, as well as dissertations and books, in which over 500 texts on the 'Middle East' in geography were reviewed.

## **II The great divergence: Geography and area studies**

Over the past 50 years, geography and area studies have moved in starkly different directions intellectually. Geography largely abandoned its commitment to regional geography and area studies scholars have not shown much interest in the geographical concept around which it is organized. But since the 1980s, geographers have become increasingly conscious that knowledge is situated, tracing how geographical categories are always made somewhere by someone within a social setting. Geographers are attentive to locating geographical theory, practice and controversy in their geo-historical milieus: cautious about – without necessarily rejecting – claims to universalism. As Agnew and Livingstone (2011) argue, universals are often a result of projecting certain contexts onto the world at large, and what is needed are ways to negotiate across perspectives, 'so that geographical knowledge can be less the outcome of hegemonic impositions (and a dialogue of the deaf) and more the result of the recognition and understanding of differences, both cultural and

theoretical' (p. 3). If all knowledges provide partial perspectives, in geography the tool through which it can vary its social setting and illuminate the geo-historical sediment embedded in its categories has been abandoned.

Sub-disciplines inspired by regional geography and/or area studies are barely identifiable in geography. As the regional geographer Clout (2003) stated, 'Whatever the cause, and regardless of whether it was academic suicide or academic murder, professional geography in Britain has virtually abandoned the practice of area studies and, in so doing, has rejected part of its birth right' (p. 267). Geographers working at the precarious intersection of the two have long observed that to be a non-western area studies geographer (e.g. Middle East geographer), rather than an economic, urban or cultural geographer, can be enough to consign oneself to the discipline's margins (Farmer, 1973; Sidaway, 2013). In the prominent re-assessments of area studies that occurred in the wake of the September 11th attacks and the intensification of the 'War on Terror', geographers are largely absent (Mirsespassi et al., 2003; Kratoska et al., 2005; Szanton, 2004; Wesley-Smith and Goss, 2010). They were also marginal to the 'maritime response' to the 'crisis' in area studies (notable exceptions include Giaccaria and Minca, 2011; Lewis and Wigen, 1999). These vibrant debates around area studies were led by anthropologists, archeologists, historians, linguists and political scientists (Clout, 2003).

A number of internal historiographies in both geography and area studies have enabled us to better understand the divergence between the two (including Livingstone, 1992; Lockman, 2016; Martin, 2015; Johnston and Sidaway, 2016; Szanton, 2004). Additionally, as part of the area studies turn in geography, geographers have produced a plethora of studies on the split between geography and regional geography, as well as the neglect of area studies (Ashutosh, 2017; Barter, 2015; Mills and Hammond, 2016; Sidaway, 2013). This scholarship argues

that geography abandoned regional geography and ignored the expansion of area studies because of the discipline's quantitative turn in the 1950s. Geography sought scientific status through positivism and modelling through its spatial system; neither regional geography nor the newly expanded area studies resonated with this. Quantitative geography from the mid-1950s began to dominate the discipline and regional geography was placed far from the cutting-edge of disciplinary knowledge production.

While geographers have detailed how the discipline shifted from a focus on regional to quantitative geography, they have not addressed satisfactorily why geography and area studies failed to reconcile once quantitative and radical geography, and their often-unquestioned universalist pretensions, came under attack with the rise of critical (feminist, poststructuralist and later post-colonial) epistemologies. If geography abandoned regional geography and neglected the rise of area studies due to the quantitative turn, why did the emergence of critical geography in the 1980s and its call for a 'new' regional geography not forge a relationship with post-colonial area studies?

Before attending to this question, it is helpful to consider the conventional – and mostly misleading – wisdom about area studies, placing attention on the role of geopolitics. A central contemporary critique in geography (and other disciplines) of area studies is that it emerged out of 'imperial projects of classification, ordering and power' (Sidaway, 2013: 986). It is argued that 'the carving up of "knowledge" into various Area Studies groupings emerges out of, and continues to resonate with, contested histories of colonialism, imperialism and Cold War geopolitics' (Powell et al., 2017: 100). But as I claim below, Cold War area studies was soon transformed into post-colonial area studies in the 1980s (a shift geographers have not been attentive to). Few, if any, of its scholars take a simplistic approach to the geographical division

of their area. Furthermore, geography has been just as implicated in geopolitical machinations as area studies. The discipline's embrace, for instance, of quantitative geography occurred in the context of the Cold War military-industrial-academic complex (MIAC). While it is contested among geographers as to whether the Cold War was in the background or the foreground in encouraging the quantitative turn, it is not disputed that individuals and institutions that were central in producing this turn had strong links to the Cold War MIAC (Barnes, 2008; Johnston et al., 2008).<sup>1</sup> Neither geography nor area studies are simply the by-products of geopolitics, but both have struggled with the pressures that the national security state has placed on them.

### *I In the presence of absence: Critical geography and area studies*

The civil rights movement in the United States, the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, the Algerian Civil War, the cultural revolution, the 1967 six-day war, May 1968 in France: these are just some of the geopolitical 'events' that assisted in the formation of critiques to mainstream scholarly approaches and their social settings, as well as the formation of new ones. By the 1980s both geography and area studies, in the aftermath of many of these geopolitical convulsions, and the associated rise of feminist, poststructuralist and post-colonial epistemologies, were far more attentive to the ethico-political consequences of research and the relationship between place and knowledge. Yet, geography and area studies failed to form a substantive relationship, and this needs to be considered if we are to fully understand the implications of what I argue is their more recent convergence.

Critical geography is attentive to how geographical categories, practices and institutions get translated differently across space and to the ethico-political consequences of geographical

research. Furthermore, although rooted in radical geography, the rise of critical geography resulted in increased calls within geography for a 'new' regional geography to take shape (Bradshaw, 1990; Gilbert, 1988; Massey, 1985; Paasi, 1991; Soja, 1985; Thrift, 1990). This new regional geography studied regions as produced through various forms of agency and socio-spatial processes; attention was placed on questions of class, gender and ethnicity. The existence of the 'region' itself, it was argued, could not be taken for granted. As Soja contended, existence was not simply 'in' space but was 'of' space as well (1985: 176). This, new regional geographers argued, was a marked diversion from the environmental and cultural determinism of the older regional geography. Critical geography and its 'new' regional geography resonated strongly with the transformations underway at the time in area studies, which was central to the rise of post-colonial theory.

In reaction to the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, area studies was expanded greatly following the approval by the US Congress of Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The government provided this funding with the intent that area studies would be placed at the intersection of the American national security state and the 'Cold War' university (Khalil, 2016). But the newly established area studies scholars soon became dissatisfied with the uncritical nature of their field. In the 1970s, MES scholars (in both Britain and the United States) began to organize to critique the 'Orientalists' that dominated their field (Owen, 2012 [2009]). This culminated in the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1979) that subsequently gave rise to post-colonial theory (Lockman, 2004). Said (1979) criticized area studies for its reliance on Oriental studies, treating the region as a 'thing that exists', and posed fundamental questions about western ways of knowing and the representation of the non-West.

While it is true that Said articulates an ambivalent attitude to area studies in

*Orientalism* (1979), a new generation of area studies scholars had by then in fact emerged, with plans to transform how the 'Middle East' was studied in the field and taking Said's *Orientalism* (1979) as their manifesto.<sup>2</sup> Although area studies scholars did not take on *Orientalism*, as Lockman (2004) notes, 'hook, line and sinker but engaged with it critically' (p. 291), the question of the politics of representation was moved to the forefront of MES. As Edward Said (1994) himself later noted, in the 1980s the formally conservative MESA (Middle East Studies Association) underwent an ideological transformation in which oil-company executives and mainline academics were replaced by critical scholars (p. 315). MES scholars from the 1980s took up more vigorously the ethical and political dimensions of studying the Middle East. The relationship, for instance, between MESA and various American government agencies and corporations was placed under scrutiny and was often the subject of acrimonious debate (Lockman, 2016: 192).

Cold War area studies by the 1980s had been transformed into post-colonial area studies. Geographers, however, largely ignored this transformation. One of the central reasons for this is the way in which the discipline engaged post-colonial theory and the non-West more broadly. In *Orientalism* (1979), geography and traditional regional geography scholarship was very much at the forefront of Said's critique. The discipline of geography, Said (1979) argued, was 'essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography' (p. 216). But the small group of regional geographers that existed in the 1980s was not interested in Said's thesis. The Middle East geographer W.B. Fisher (1981) claimed in reaction to the growing influence of *Orientalism* that geography – unlike religion, history, culture, literature and language – would be largely immune to Said's thesis: 'This is partly because

our geographical work, resting more on observation, survey and quantified analysis, give less scope for opinion and interpretation' (p. 433).

In addition, Koch (2016) argues, in a piece in which she asks if a 'critical' area studies is possible, that the 'new' regional geography failed because its proponents were unable to counter critiques of regional research and area studies programs as being complicit in the type of *Orientalism* that Said had identified (p. 809). But little evidence exists that 'new' regional geographers engaged Said's thesis, post-colonial theory more broadly or any type of area studies scholarship or milieu. The new regional geography did not cite *Orientalism* (1979) or engage the work of other post-colonial scholars in any depth (Bradshaw, 1990; Gilbert, 1988; Massey, 1985; Paasi, 1991; Soja, 1985; Thrift, 1990). This is despite the strong synergies between post-colonial theory and 'new' regional geography, in which both questioned the existence of the 'region' and focused on social relations and power to their formation. The reason, I contend, that 'new' regional geography failed to engage with post-colonial theory and area studies was due to the complex dynamics of the Cold War and its impact on academic practice.

If the start of the Cold War helped shift geography away from regional geography and toward quantitative approaches, its end stunted the potential of 'new' regional geography to engage with post-colonial area studies. New regional geography did not falter because a critical area studies could not be forged, as I have outlined that a post-colonial area studies had been fully formed by the 1980s. Rather, proponents of the 'new' regional geographers suddenly grew tired of the debates over the politics of representation, perhaps in reaction to the end of the Cold War, turning instead toward 'non-representational theory' (NRT) (Castree and MacMillan, 2004). The end of the Cold War resulted in what some scholars labelled as the end of history, and geography.

This prompted some academics to pen the obituary of area studies and laud the rise of global studies. MES scholars began to question if there was a future for their field, with the proliferation of manifestos that proclaimed area studies as simply a by-product of the Cold War and accused them of being overly descriptive and untheoretical (Khalidi, 1995). In 1993 the Ford and Mellon foundations reduced funding for regionally focused research and launched a joint globalization project (Lockman, 2004: 238–9). NRT was more in-tune with globalization, focusing on interconnection, performance, hybridity and possibility.

Post-colonial theory, and a concern with the non-West, did not enter geography through area studies (like other disciplines) but rather the pressure that emerged in the discipline over its role in the Gulf War. The Gulf War (1990–1) was the first full-scale GIS war. ‘It put geography,’ Neil Smith wrote, ‘on the public agenda in a quite parable if impalatable way as it claimed an estimated 200,000 Iraqi lives’ (1992: 257). It was in this context that Derek Gregory published *Geographical Imaginations* (1994) that produced a thesis that facilitated a unity of spatial concepts with critical theory, building in particular on the work of Said’s *Orientalism*, that many geographers had been searching for. In this work, Gregory (1994), writing explicitly in the shadows of the Gulf War, articulated the growing concern within the discipline of how little geographers knew of the world beyond the West; the ethnocentrism (specifically the Euro-Americanism) of geography; the danger of universalizing geography’s own parochialisms and its theories; and, crucially, the way in which geographical knowledge, and its representations, is intimately tied up with western political power.

But Gregory did not outline how to address these issues in the discipline. New regional geography did not take up the concerns outlined by Gregory, nor – it should be added – did Gregory seek to align them with the revival of a new

regional geography. The new regional geography that could have been poised to build synergies with post-colonial area studies and related concerns with how to engage the social settings of the non-West failed to develop. The post-Cold War shift to NRT was fatal for ‘new’ regional geography; but area studies survived this period. Area studies by the late 1990s was beginning to successfully pressure the social sciences to abandon their exclusive focus on the West and interrogate the geographies of their categories (Wallerstein, 1997). Perversely, given the importance of space and place to these scholarly dialogues around area studies, geography continued to struggle with how to engage the non-West and the relationship between its EuroAmerican social setting and the formation of its categories and theories. The September 11th attacks, however, pushed geographers once again to consider the ethico-political relationship of their discipline with the non-West and the eurocentrism of geography.

### III September 11th and the War on Terror

In direct response to 9/11, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) sponsored – through a special grant by the federal research funding agency the National Science Foundation – the publication entitled *The Geographical Dimensions of Terrorism* (Cutter et al., 2003). The book was derided across the discipline. Geographers cited the book’s lack of a substantive definition of ‘terrorism’, its instrumentalist and spend-and-technology approach to it and, in turn, its dependence on positivist-GIS analysis (De Blij, 2004; Griffith, 2004; Gregory and Pred, 2007; Johnston, 2004; Stewart, 2005). A central critique of the book by geography scholars was the complete absence of Middle East geographers and an area studies ‘approach’. Broadly, geographers noted that an area studies ‘approach’ consisted of bringing the ‘Other’ nearer: of lived knowledge of the area, some

linguistic aptitude, the ability to describe various ‘terrorist’ groups and maybe offer thoughts on Islam (or specifically what they label as ‘Wahhabism’) (De Blij, 2004; Stewart, 2005). Notably, geographers failed to engage with how area studies scholars, and specifically MES academics, themselves ‘approached’ 9/11.

The ‘War on Terror’ and ‘terrorism’ was far more familiar to MES scholars than geographers, as it had been raging since the mid-1980s in the Middle East, spearheaded by the Reagan administration. MES academics viewed terrorism studies, or ‘terrorology’, as not only a deeply compromised scholarly field, derivative of US national security interests, but also of little practical significance either (Beinin, 2003).<sup>3</sup> While MES scholars were fighting to protect their scholarly output from being determined by geopolitical ‘events’ and (American) national security interests, geography scholars dove head first into debates around the War on Terror. The heated internal dialogue around *The Geographical Dimensions of Terrorism* and the intensification of the War on Terror in geography provoked some of geography’s most prominent figures to engage with the Middle East and specifically the war on Iraq (Elden, 2007; Graham, 2004; Gregory, 2004; Gregory and Pred, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Smith, 2001).

The ‘moribund backwater of geographical studies of the Middle East’, as Sidaway (1994) described it, was radically transformed following the 9/11 attacks and the escalation of the war on terror. In stark contrast to previous MEG work grounded in traditional regional geography, with a focus on ‘objective’ (and largely applied) studies, post-9/11 MEG drew extensively from poststructuralist and post-colonial epistemologies emphasizing moral, ethical and political concerns of studying the region. In MEG, representation as central to the conduct of war and application of power is a core concern of scholarly investigations. The primary approach has been for geographers to highlight how the Middle East has been (mis)represented

by the West and how this is connected to power and war (Gregory, 2004; Khoury and Da’Na, 2012; Morrissey, 2011; Stewart, 2005; Güney and Gökcan, 2010). The second method has been to produce more ‘accurate’ and/or bottom-up (‘sub-altern’) representations of the Middle East (Culcasi, 2010; Smith, 2011).

But even with the substantial increase in literature in geography on the Middle East, the connections between Middle East geography scholarship and MES, and area studies more broadly, remained weak. Mills and Hammond (2016) have detailed how the minor institutional profile of geography in the United States has doomed any synergies between geography and area studies from developing. The diminished profile of geography in the US, for example, has meant that in many universities with Title VI MES centers there are no geography departments. Geography departments have also been hit particularly hard by the economic crisis in universities in the United States, as most are located in state universities (Mills and Hammond, 2016: 168). The absence of a robust relationship between area studies and geography is clearly pronounced in MES. For instance, the roundtables ‘View from the Seas: The Middle East and North Africa Unbounded’ (Roundtable, 2016) and ‘The Indian Ocean and Other Middle Easts’ (Low, 2014) did not include a contribution by a geographer. In addition, according to *Issues in Middle East Studies* (2016), in their disciplinary breakdown of papers, geography constituted around 1 percent of papers presented at MESA’s annual conference in each of the past four meetings (p. 16).

### *I Area studies as milieu*

The weak relationship between geography and area studies has likely contributed to misconceptions among geographers of what area studies is and what these scholars do. In geography, it is widely assumed that area studies scholars apply a specific ‘approach’ to represent an

object (their area). More broadly, area studies is understood to be about intensive language learning; in-depth field research; close attention to an area's historical perspectives, materials; testing grounded theory against detailed observation; and multi-disciplinary conversations (Szanton, 2004: 4). But even these commonly conceived central characteristics should not be taken for granted as central to any approach within the field. For instance, the idea that area studies is primarily about language acquisition and spending time in a place in the area is both increasingly questioned and changing. Indeed, Orientalists mastered Middle Eastern languages but were often unwilling to question key assumptions about the West that framed their judgements of the area (Makdisi, 2016). Furthermore, to study Arab-American communities in the United States, climate change, global finance, or the American military could result in a serious contribution to MES forums and MEG without traveling to the region itself. Simply put, there is no single approach to conduct area studies scholarship.

Relatedly, geographers have often understood an area studies 'approach' as taking up a static and absolute scale of the region. For instance, Barter (2015) and Ashutosh (2017) both argue, without citing any past or present area studies scholarship, that this field is guilty of reifying its areas. The dialogue around the geographical concept of the Middle East – and its connection with British Empire building – in MES has been a long and unresolved one. Even at the very moment that MES was established in the academy, and professional bodies such as MESA were founded, its members questioned the boundaries and constitution of the 'Middle East' (Davidson, 1960) – a dialogue that geographers have only recently contributed to (Bonine et al., 2011; Culcasi, 2010). Importantly, the post-colonial inspired critique that Orientalists understood their 'object' of study as static and unchanging may have been overstated and even essentialist. Recent work by

scholars like Foliard (2017) have documented how the geographical concept of the Middle East that developed in the context of the British empire never created singular, static or bounded objects but rather multiple, incomplete and contested ones. Even the Orientalist Hogarth (1902) recognized that his 'object' of the Near East was subject to 'political conditions' in which at least some of its borders were arbitrary (pp. 1–2).

Perhaps more significantly, over the past decade MES scholars themselves, as part of the reassessments of area studies that followed the end of the Cold War (in which geographers were largely absent), have placed greater attention on the geographic entity of the Middle East. The Middle East has been understood more explicitly as a geographic core without boundaries and MES scholars are more cognizant that regional definitions are constantly fluctuating due to 'accelerating global flows and broadening intellectual horizons' (Kurzman, 2007: 29). In 2018 the MESA conference theme is entitled 'Without Boundaries: The Global Middle East, Then and Now', focusing on concerns about global warming, environmental degradation, migration and refugees, global economic policy and transnational intellectual networks. To study the Middle East does not preclude an analysis of other scales or even other places. Indeed, political upheavals in the region in recent years have also resulted in the mass displacement of people from the region to Europe and around the world. The movement of many intellectuals and artists from across the region to Germany has led to what the Australian-Egyptian sociologist Amro Ali told me was the rise of Berlin as the 'exile capital' of the Arab world.

Area studies is *not* an approach – there is no singular theory or set of methods that studies a bounded space or a group of scholars committed to the study of place over theory. Rather area studies is a social setting, characterized by what those who identify themselves with a loosely conceived geographical area do. To do area studies is to engage a milieu (a common set of

institutions and networks), which can be loosely organized around a space (or more recently defined as a ‘core’) that is constantly shifting and subject to interpretation but somehow overlaps. These institutions and networks in MES, for example, include, inter alia: universities; academic and professional associations and their often-annual meetings (MESA being the most prominent); institutions related to learning the language of the area; a wide range of other institutions and organizations; and specific academic journals, periodicals, websites and podcasts. Area studies milieus are likely also to have their own canon. In MES, for example, whether you study encyclopedic activity in the medieval Islamic world or labor movements in Egypt you are probably expected to know the work of Ibn Khaldoun, the Orientalists, like Bernard Lewis, and post-colonial thinkers like Edward Said, Lila Abu-Lughod and Talal Asad. Area studies – like geography – only exists as a site of knowledge production because of the practices, institutions, networks, imaginaries and materialities of scholars who identify themselves as such.

#### **IV The area studies turn in geography**

After decades of drifting apart, geography and area studies are converging. As many geographers have recently noted, the Anglo-Americanness of human geography has grown as a cause of concern in the discipline (Agnew and Livingstone, 2011; Barnes, 2014; Gregory and Castree, 2011; Johnston and Sidaway, 2016). Geographers are increasingly questioning, for instance, how the traditions of Arab, Chinese or Indian geographies can be incorporated into the conventional histories of geography (Gregory and Castree, 2011), coupled with a growing scholarship on spatial knowledge across different cultures and a translation of it (Ledger, 2016). Geographers are also considering the consequences of the dominance of the

English language in geography and the exclusions that are produced in the use of ‘Anglo-American’ (Fregonese, 2017; Johnston and Sidaway, 2016: xv). In parallel, there has been an increased concern with area studies and the non-West in approaches that are influential in geography, such as science and technology studies (Law and Lin, 2017).

More specifically, the area studies turn in geography consists of: scholarly journal articles directly addressing the relationship between geography and area studies (Ashutosh, 2017; Barter, 2015; Chari, 2016; Mills and Hammond, 2016; Noxolo, 2016; Klinke, 2015; Koch, 2016; Myers, 2014; Jazeel, 2016; Sidaway, 2013; Young, 2017); associated discussions of a ‘new, new’ regional geography (Jones, 2017; Paasi and Metzger, 2017); special issues in geography journals *Society and Space* (Sidaway et al., 2016) and *Political Geography* (Powell et al., 2017) on area studies and their respective forums in 2015 at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the University of Oxford; the ongoing debate on ‘theorizing from the South’ (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013); geography journals placing increased emphasis on translation and ‘internationalizing’ their activities (see, for instance, *Antipode*’s recent call for translation and outreach); and geographers (previously absent from debates within area studies) contributing to area studies journals such as the roundtable in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* that focused explicitly on the relationship between geography and MES (Atia, 2017; Evered, 2017; Culcasi, 2017; Hamdan, 2017; Hammond, 2017; Koch, 2017).

Geo-politics and economic ‘events’ have likely played a significant role in the increased contact between geography and area studies. As outlined above, the impacts of the Gulf War, 9/11 and its intensification of the War on Terror have continued to provoke geographers to engage with the non-West. In the 21st century, power is shifting outside of the Anglo-America

world. The global financial crisis of 2008 – perhaps the first truly ‘global financial crisis’ in scope – also produced a recovery driven far beyond the confines of Anglo-America. Global connectivity and technological change is intensifying but so are structural inequalities and militarization. This has been coupled with events like Brexit and Trump that some analysts have speculated to be the signs of ‘deglobalization’, which have in turn surely banished speculations of the ‘end’ of human history and geography from serious scholarly dialogues. Furthermore, geo-political ‘events’, such as the Arab uprisings, the Syrian Civil War, the Ukraine Revolution, are just some examples that have all resulted in geographers looking to area studies (see, for instance, Klinke, 2014). To comprehend the complexities of contemporary geo-political, social and economic configurations, geography requires a more than Anglo-American basis.

Another central vector in pushing geography and area studies together is the change in the ‘who’ and ‘where’ of Anglo-American geography itself. Anglo-American geography’s membership has continued to diversify (in terms of both race and gender) in recent years (Hanson, 2004; Jöns et al., 2017; Kaplan and Mapes, 2016). Hanson (2004) argues that this broader constitution in geography has resulted in a renewed concern in the lived experiences of ‘other’ cultural contexts and introduced a wider range of perspectives and new kinds of networks.

The increased diversity of those who practice geography has also been coupled with the globalization of higher education and the discipline of Anglo-American geography itself. In geography, the globalization of higher education has meant that Anglo-American geographers are not only more likely to lecture and engage with academics in, for instance, Seoul (Harvey and Nak-chung, 2017) but to be based in educational institutions outside of the Anglo-American world. The National University of Singapore

(NUS) is one prominent example of a university that houses a notable Anglophone geography journal and is home to a number of prominent ‘Anglo-American’ – indeed, the category itself is now being stretched to its limits – geographers. The NUS, as noted above, has been an important hub for the formation of this area studies ‘turn’ in Anglo-American Geography (McMorran, 2016; Skelton, 2016; Ramdas, 2016; Sidaway, 2013; Sidaway et al., 2016).

In Middle East geography over the past decade there has been a noticeable increase in contributions by scholars from the region itself, mainly from Turkey and Palestine/Israel, submitting articles to Anglophone journals.<sup>4</sup> In 1998 the *Arab World Geographer* was founded with the explicit intention of increasing contact between Arab and Anglo-American Geography (Falah, 1998). It is these developments within the discipline that are perhaps enabling geography to transcend the barriers between it and area studies that Mills and Hammond (2016) identified, which are mainly internal to the United States. Anglo-American geography is expanding its geographical reach and in so doing is perhaps not only becoming less Anglo-American but simultaneously illuminating its Anglo-Americanness and the limitations produced by this milieu.

### *1 Area studies’ diffracted geographies*

Underlying much of the scholarship that constitutes the area studies turn across geographies’ sub-disciplines are feminist and post-colonial epistemologies. The scholarship on the relationship between geography and area studies cites the importance of area studies in illuminating historical and geographical difference, often stressing the importance of this difference despite – or even because of – the processes of globalization (Gibson-Graham, 2016; Jazeel, 2016; Oza, 2016). Relatedly, this literature focuses on the inequalities in social power between the West and the non-West, calling for

geographers to be attentive as well as reflexive to this in the production of geographical knowledge. There is a notable concern with the politics of representation in this scholarship. Cognizant that colonization and authoritarianism (past and present) depend on certain ‘ways of seeing’, the scholarship within the area studies turn repeatedly cites the importance of listening and translation to form improved representations of ‘other’ cultures (Jazeel, 2016; Oza, 2016; Powell et al., 2017; Ramdas, 2016).

I contend, however, that the future of geography and area studies should not be focused singularly on geographical imaginations (the representation of the ‘Other’) but should also be attentive to geographical materials and practice. The focus on the politics of representation and the hugely important political-intellectual debate that was sparked by Said’s *Orientalism* may have reached its scholarly limits; or rather, geographers should be cognizant of the analytical restrictions of representation. A central issue that area studies scholars, among others, have long identified with post-colonial theory’s focus on power and representation is that there is no ‘true’ or non-hegemonic representation of the world. Representations to understand our world are always engaged with power (Young, 2011: 384). In MEG attempts to establish alternative, more bottom-up or ‘accurate’, geographical conceptions of the Middle East have not been straightforward. Alternatives like the ‘Arab homeland’ identified by Culcasi (2010) impose a categorization that covers non-Arab geographical imaginations in the region (Cornwell and Atia, 2012) but also the way that the Middle East has been utilized in the region at ‘ground level’ (Hammond, 2013).

In this paper, I am not rejecting the political or intellectual significance of the struggle over representation nor arguing necessarily for a non-representational engagement with area studies. Rather, I am stressing that the question of the politics of representation that dominates

the area studies turn, and conversations about the relationship between geography and area studies more broadly, is perhaps a narrow one. As Timothy Mitchell (2016) has suggested elsewhere, the question of representation is always entangled with the material (p. 258). It is important to consider questions of the material, signification and representation together and not simply place the material and the representational in opposition (Mitchell, 2016). The Middle East, for instance, was not a geographical fiction but was part of a whole range of material practices, which include cartographic as well as other inscriptions, forms of value and meaning.

Geographers have to a certain extent taken up the task of engaging the non-West beyond questions of representation. In urban geography, the task of having to confront both the material and representational in the settings of the non-West have been urgent with the vast urbanization of the Global South. Indeed, there have been notable calls for Anglo-American urban theory to be ‘provincialized’, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) call for the ‘provincializing of Europe’, and for the formation of a postcolonial urban studies that theorizes from the Global South (Robinson, 2002; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2005, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013). A provincialized urban studies is required, it is argued, to take account of the fact that the center of the urbanization process has shifted from the Global North to the Global South, and as a result urban epistemologies inherited from Anglo-America are not suitable to analyze these urban process in the South. Ananya Roy (2009) has argued most explicitly for urban studies to engage area studies. Roy contends that area studies can assist in the creation of a new urban theory, which theorizes from the Global South, and is attentive to how particular concepts are produced in certain world-areas (2009: 820).

Across geography there seems to be an implicit consensus for the discipline to formulate categories that resonate with Chakrabarty’s call to ‘create plural normative horizons specific to

our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities' (p. 20). Even radical geographers now appear committed to bringing history and theory closer together, with their call for theory to be attentive to, and shaped by, 'actually existing circumstances' (Harvey, 2012). Furthermore, post-colonial theory is not the outright rejection of universals or modernity. Chakrabarty's thesis is a call for a negotiation around the requirement for the recognition of geo-historical difference rather than a negation of social science's categories. 'The point is not to reject social science categories', Chakrabarty explains, 'but to release into the space occupied by particular European histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives' (p. 20). Yet amongst all this consensus on the need to expand geography's horizons, the debate in urban geography (and the discipline more broadly) regarding its relationship to the non-West has been highly acrimonious (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Roy, 2016; Van Meeteren et al., 2016).

The negativity of the dialogue around geography's relationship to area studies and the non-West is perhaps in part a result of the sediments of modernity's dualisms, structured by negative relations between terms (Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, 2012: 115). The debate regarding the relationship between geography and area studies is still structured along the negative dualist distinctions between the subject and the object, regional and systematic geography, representational and real, place and theory, regional and global, sameness and difference. For instance, the call for a 'theorizing from the Global South' places it somehow in opposition – and in a negative dualism – to theorizing from the North. This negative relationality inhibits the facilitation of expanding plural horizons by shutting off the world, locked as it is in a dualist framework, rather than exploring new ways of forging commitments, connections and

ultimately geographical knowledge. Geography should embrace the affirmative relationality that area studies fields offer through their milieus.

Geography and area studies should reconcile not on the basis that area studies offers a unique 'approach' to represent difference (the non-West) more 'accurately' or a bounded space of the 'South', or the 'Middle East', in which to theorize. Rather, area studies can be central to the future of geography because it can, to borrow from new materialism and specifically Donna Haraway (1997), 'diffract' geography and provide a social setting through which the discipline can more than merely represent difference but facilitate the *practice* of difference.

Taken from physical optics, as defined by Haraway (1997), diffraction is an optical metaphor that attends to the relational nature of difference. Importantly, diffraction traverses the negative binary opposition noted above and establishes a relationality that is affirmative. The feminist physicist Karan Barad (2007), drawing on her quantum understanding of diffraction, builds on Haraway's optical metaphor, noting that diffraction operates on a number of different levels. Diffraction, Barad contends, is also an apparatus that measures the effects of difference in which it offers a relational ontology: quantized diffraction becomes 'entangled', forming an onto-epistemology. Diffraction is a tool of analysis for attending and responding to the effects of difference (Barad, 2007: 72).

In framing area studies' fields as a tool of diffraction for geography, I argue that they can assist the discipline in attending and responding to the effects of difference rather than merely representing it. Area studies, as an apparatus of diffraction through its distinct social setting, can assist geography in undertaking a commitment to a critical practice of engagement with the world and 'to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom' (Barad, 2007: 90). For example, planetary urbanism when diffracted through MES/MEG fields have noted how this thesis gives little attention to the role

of military urbanisms that have been so dominant in the contemporary Middle East (Gregory, 2014). As Barad writes, the nature ‘of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the apparatus’ (2007: 107). If we change the social setting in which geographical knowledge is produced the observed phenomenon will also change, creating in turn new forms of geographical knowledge.

Area studies can offer geography new ways to think not only about its place in, but also its entanglement with, the world. With diffraction, ‘differentiating is not about Othering, separating, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments’ (Barad, 2007: 69). Creating geographical knowledge in the distinct milieus of area studies is a practice that can facilitate the formation of new forms of geography, allowing for geographic and social differing, which is critical to the formation of new geographical knowledge. Far from shutting itself off in an absolute area, area studies scholars and milieus can create new geographical configurations, engagements and possibilities for geography.

## V Conclusion

Even with the area studies turn in geography identified in this paper, to speak of area studies remains a fraught discussion within the discipline. In arguing for area studies, as a social milieu loosely organized around a geographical space, in which geographical knowledge can be diffracted, I hope that a more affirmative dialogue can be established regarding this field’s relationship with geography: a discussion in which the discipline is able to reach beyond the negative dualism of place versus theory, sameness versus difference, and consider the way in which a stronger relationship between geography and area studies can generate new forms of knowing and being. As Haraway (2011) has argued, ‘It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what

knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories’. It matters what geographies make geography and, equally, it matters what milieus make geography.<sup>5</sup>

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## Notes

1. The ‘spatial system’, for instance, at the heart of quantitative geography was a derivation from a Cold War project of managing complex military systems that was first developed by the American Air Force Research and Development (RAND) (the first ‘think tank’) (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016: 110). Notably, this shift in geography occurred in a social setting in which McCarthyite intimidations and left-wing expulsions from academia meant that modern social sciences were increasingly presented as depoliticized and links with socio-economic history increasingly purged (Reisch, 2005).
2. Although Said was highly critical of area studies it is important to note that *Orientalism* came out of his involvement in it. Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, in the context of the Arab-Israeli six-day war in 1967, founded the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) to rival the newly founded Middle East Studies Association (MESA) that continued to be reluctant to debate sensitive political issues, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. In the early 1970s, at an AAUG conference, Edward Said first elaborated his thesis for *Orientalism* (1978), which effectively founded post-colonial theory (Mitchell, 2004).

3. Most of the engagement with the War on Terror did not emerge out of MES scholarship but ‘think tanks’, many of which were established in the wake of 9/11 (Lockman, 2004b). Indeed, MES scholars came under sustained attack for their reluctance to engage the (American) national security state and the public. Martin Kramer (2001), for instance, in his polemical *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America* called for the reform of Title VI funds to MES, a critical source of revenue, to include more government officials and non-academics in deciding how money was allocated, and for Congress to pay more attention to how MES contributes to American public policy (p. 128).
4. There is a rich literature produced in English and submitted to Anglophone journals mainly by Israeli geographers on Israelis and Israeli geography that covers a range of topics and geographical approaches. But when geography scholarship does not focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Palestine and Palestinians largely disappear (Harker, 2009). It should be a serious concern to geography’s ethical and professional commitment that the presence of scholars working from within Palestinian institutions and organizations is largely absent from geography journals, in a context in which a significant part of the substantial work on Palestine/Israel focuses on the Palestine-Israel conflict and questions of violence and identity. Geography is failing to engage the small but vibrant Palestinian geography community (Falah and Abu-Zahra, 2014).
5. One reviewer who ‘does not see any argument for area studies per se in geographic research’ noted several objections to my paper. A central concern for the reviewer is the geographical concept of the region (or area), such as the ‘Middle East’, which they do not consider to be a meaningful way in which to frame research. They contend that taking up the regional scale ‘means studying how these ideas are discursively employed in particular situations to achieve particular goals or understand the world in a particular way’. Relatedly, the reviewer does not believe that there has been an area studies turn in the discipline, as this would involve a ‘much stronger stated commitment to regional training’ and that the current economic and political pressures in academia make such a pledge increasingly unlikely. This argument relies on a narrow understanding (or perhaps even a misunderstanding) of the constitution of area studies. As I argue in this paper,

area studies scholarship does not consist of an approach; there is no singular theory or set of methods that studies a bounded area or a group of scholars committed to the study of place over theory. Rather, area studies should be understood as a social setting, characterized by a common set of institutions and networks loosely organized around a space that is constantly shifting and subject to interpretation but which somehow overlaps.

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