Routes and Roots: American Literature as a Means of Understanding Contemporary Space and Place

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Abstract: "Routes and Roots: American Literature as a Means of Understanding Contemporary Space and Place." One of the most concrete trends in the study of America’s contemporary literature has been the analysis of its spaces. While the locations of literature have often been relegated to the background of textual considerations -- treated as if they are inert props for the drama of the text -- theorists in recent decades have shown the dynamic and urgent role space serves. This paper explores the reasons why analyzing literary space can bring us to a fuller awareness of infrastructures that influence our choices, material designs that shape our identities, and structures of power that exist invisibly in our daily lives but which literature can make us see more clearly. It draws upon personal anecdotes and a handful of recent American works by authors working across different genres (Katherine Boo, Sherman Alexie, Alice Walker), to demonstrate how and why reading literature through a spatial lens continues to be a productive way of understanding humanity’s dual need for cultivating stable roots while pursuing mind-expanding routes.

Routes and Roots: American Literature as a Means of Understanding Contemporary Space and Place.

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“... the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.” – T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

In recent years, I’ve shifted my thinking. I’ve been a student of American culture all across my life. And I’ve always pursued it in a direct manner. I centered my college studies on American culture’s stories, I’ve driven thousands of its roads to encounter America’s variety, I’ve watched its hundred-year archive of films, listened attentively to its two centuries of music. And from coast to coast, I’ve lived in seven of its cities.

While this strategy of direct experience has enabled me to gather a great amount of information about American culture, I’ve come to realize its limitations: there’s so much data that I can’t distinguish what’s valuable and what’s not. To know what American culture is, should I pay attention to Malcolm Gladwell or Malcolm Forbes, The New York Times or People Magazine, Miley Cyrus or Miles Davis? Because the world’s cultural conversations, technologies, economies, and values change so rapidly these days, I feel a decreased ability to know which artifacts of American culture will be part of our global future, and which should be relegated to the dustbin of history.
So I've decided to step away: I've come to India in order to be an outsider rather than an insider. It's said that fish are the last to understand what water is -- because they live in it all their lives. By inhabiting an outside perspective — a space apart — I'm hoping I can better understand what's most alive and important in American humanities.

This idea of cultivating an indirect point of view was not my own idea, but that of our field of literary study, particularly in its recent “planetary turn.” In the past decade, a number of literary critics have urged us to move from the micro to the macro: to stop thinking about the small scale of the regional or national, and instead read literature through a planetary lens.

Columbia University's Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls this the scale of “planetarity,” arguing it's the most fitting one for literature, compared with the leaky level of nationality, or even the overly-financial scale called “globalization.” Similarly, Wai-Chee Dimock, at Yale calls for us to reconsider American literature through the defamiliarizing lens of deep time — that's an enlargement that brings the imagination to ponder a far wider chronological framework that of literature’s existence -- or even humanity's. Deep time is a period “binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations” (3). In this way, Dimock explains, we can find connections that leap across geology’s 600-million-year record, or perhaps even the universe’s 14 billion years. Such scholars invite us to bring to bear on literature a larger concept of both space and time.

I'm drawn to these astonishing enlargements of scale as a way of seeing things in a perspective that is arguably more clear, more true, and more ethical. For example, this move from the local to the planetary could help us know when to abandon myths of national exceptionalism. It compels us to notice patterns across nationality's imagined communities. I'm convinced that American Studies — and any nation's studies — would be better served through these wider perspectives, through the nearly-inconceivable dimensions of deep time, the radically post-national scale of the planetary, and the ethical notion that no one on our planet is any more or less valuable than ourselves.

My family has been fortunate in acquiring this outside perspective through the Fulbright-Nehru scholarship that brought us here to India to study and teach for a semester. Above all other countries, we were drawn to India: because it's an area whose layers of civilization reach back so deeply through time (compared with America’s recent vintage). It's a country that's justifiably called Earth’s most heterogeneous (with superlative diversity at the levels of language, ethnicity, culture, religion, and so on). Unlike America, it achieved its independence through love rather than violence. India’s a fellow democracy soon to be the most populous and economically dominant country. So, given India's major role in the planetary present and future, as well as its parallels and differences with America, we felt we could better understand the U.S. by viewing it from India's ghats, its roads, its temples, mosques and stupas, its rivers and mountains, its ancient villages and its truly modern cities. I'm arguing that you, here, occupy an excellent place for studying American literature. And I'm pleased to join you on your perch, knowing that
our ultimate goal is not merely to learn about our mutual countries, but most importantly to know deeply what it means to be human on our planet.

Such creative experiments with space have long informed my interest in literature. Since college years, I’ve anchored my research interests around how literature responds to the material world. I’d been drawn to architecture and city planning from an early age, but switched to literature and American Studies as an undergraduate. That decision happened because I found the imagined world of the text can bring us closer to humanist truths than just the existing, built-up world alone. Literature reminds us not just what is, but also what can be.

At the University of California, Los Angeles, my Ph.D. dissertation explored American literature’s fascination with the highway system. Roads evolved across the 20th century from a humble collection of dirt trails to become the American superhighway network that forms earth’s largest engineering project. I found that writers like John Steinbeck, Vladimir Nabokov, Jack Kerouac, and Emily Post used their novels and nonfiction not just to comment on the system, but to “rewrite” its spaces. They aimed their narratives to redefine such things as who should use these new roads of high-speed circulation, how they should be used, and how roads should be thought of. Using the critical lenses of feminism, new historicism, and cultural geography, I found new ways of looking at the classic American genre of the road narrative, including how the genre so closely identified with macho masculinity was largely begun by women writers. I also found how a genre associated with freelwheeling, liberal, and libertine behavior also features an equal measure of conservative values, impulses, and anxieties -- a dialectical mix that I found all road narratives share.

At the University of Portland, I teach curriculum built around the literature of certain spaces: for example, Literature of America’s Pacific Northwest states, or the literature of cities. This latter class, on how American literature has responded to urban existence, looks at key tensions that arise across the 250 years of American urbanization. Through such authors as Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and Wright, we look at the classic narrative of country-to-city migration, frustrations and liberations within the experience of social compression, the genius of connectivity, and the implications of urban riots (as forms of both progressive social expression and dehumanizing mob mentality). What adds urgency to such a space-based course is that over half of humanity now lives in cities. (And while only a quarter of India chooses an urban existence, as you know, that percentage is rising rapidly). Such a class gets readers to think about solutions to the problems with which our inevitably urban future confronts us.

All of the areas I’ve talked about -- my switch to the English major, choice of dissertation, and courses to teach -- were made possible once I learned about the opportunities of literary spatial theory.

Now, I don’t know what your feelings are about literary theory. Some find it fascinating, full of astonishing paradigms. Others find it arid, useless, or even damaging by turning people off from literature. Of late, a number of pundits have even claimed that literary theory is dead.

Personally, I often find theory hard to understand. Or unnecessarily convoluted. Or I read and instantly forget it. But I still champion it’s existence. I define literary theory as more of a process than a thing, and believe that anyone reading a book is practicing some form of theory, whether they’re aware of it or not. As William Germano suggests (via a computer metaphor), literary theory is like "a big Refresh button poised smack in the middle of the humanities curriculum."
He values theory because it can refocus one's "attention on one's own tool kit" (142). It helps us both see literature freshly, and develops our self-awareness of what we seek from the practice of reading. It also helps us maintain a scholarly rigor against those who think of the sciences as hard and the humanities as soft and squishy, literary theory helps us avoid flabby self-indulgence or nostalgia, ensuring we hold ourselves to providing strong evidence for our literary interpretations. In short, literary theory helps us be, in Germano's phrase, "professional readers" (143).

So, let us peer into what spatial literary theory might teach us about contemporary American literature.

A few words on the concept of space. Clearly, I'm not using that word to refer to cosmic outer space (despite India's impressive venturing recently to Mars and beyond). Rather, we're talking of the space around us, at our human scale—such as this auditorium and everything in it. Most often, we think of this space as inert, neutral, as a silent background upon society's stage. This is wrong. In fact, space is a dynamic, active constituent—a creator—of our economic, social, philosophical, and political worlds.

Winston Churchill, in his lifetime said many misguided and uncharitable things. But he was wise when he wrote this sentence: "We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us." In other words, we might be conscious architects in pushing the world around to meet our needs—but the built world will inevitably push back. We'd be wise to become more conscious of the ways the spaces around us push us to exist in certain ways, do certain actions, and believe certain things.

In his essay "Clearing a Space, Amit Chaudhuri notes that space is the "domain of the 'real' in the secular world" (35). It is therefore something to be taken seriously. But as Chaudhuri notes, the nature of space is transitional—it's always becoming—and always highly contested. Moreover, space is valuable not only in making us aware of what's present, but also nurturing "a consciousness of absences" (14).

The politics of space has never been more pressing than in the present era, which geologists have recently dubbed "the Anthropocene"—the epoch of humans—due to the overwhelming impact our species has had in shaping the planet's habitation, appearance, ecology, weather, and temperature. As I noticed during some recent local travels, this is an era when at Jog Falls, we can turn off the mighty Sharavati River like a washroom tap through hydroelectric diversion. On a perch above Shravanabelagola we can carve a 60-foot human out of a single rock to inspire ten centuries of visitors. We can abandon a city's infrastructure for 500 years—as happened at Hampi's Vijayanagara (with it's former 5-lakh population)—yet still see its traces everywhere among the boulders of its desolate landscape. We can dam the Kabini River to reinvent the area's ecosystem from a tiger-filled forest to a fish-filled lake. And the thousands of lightbulbs adorning the Wodeyar palace in my city of Mysuru can turn night into day.

So I would like to offer some productive ways to read texts for their spatial implications in the Anthropocene era. And India is an ideal place to do it. This country has been deeply influenced by its history of space-making, with such phenomena as its continental pushing-up of the Himalayas, its historical tides of northern invasions, maritime contacts, British colonialism, and
the Partition, each event imposing a new set of maps for shaping the nation's societies. These maps are both real and cognitive, and like literature, every spatial map is also a story.

Recent literary critics have demonstrated the fertility of interrogating the Subcontinent's spatial dynamics. They've done this within many contexts: literary history (I've mentioned Chaudhuri's Clearing A Space [2008]); post-coloniality (Sara Mills Gender and Colonial Space [2005]); feminism (Malashri Lal Feminist Spaces [1997]); mobility studies (Marian Aguiar Tracking Modernity: India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility[2011]). Perhaps the work of other scholars of Indian space now come to mind.

Reading literature through a spatial lens has no single, stable political stance: it's not necessarily oppositional, it's not inherently Marxist or feminist or any other "-ist." But it does seek to shed light on the invisibility of space, unearthing hidden agendas of our material surroundings and bringing to light the power structures involved. If there's an agenda to spatial literacy, it's about opening up opportunity by raising awareness of the full range of options a person has. It provides alternate maps of reality from the official ones, distinguishing imagined walls from the real. Whether your focus is America, India, or any other place, exploring the spatial implications of literary texts can offer a deeper awareness of the seemingly-inert world around you.

So: how do you apply a spatial lens to literature? Since all stories take place in space, just about any novel, story, drama, or poem from any region can work. It's useful to ponder first how space gets constructed. This happens not just through bricks, concrete, and tile, but through language, stories, and tensions.

Let's call language the first major component. Language is a tool that orients our lives in space as much as our eyes do. Dale Carnegie, in his 1930s book How to Win Friends and Influence People, invites his reader to ponder this question: what's the most beautiful word in any language? Carnegie's answer is: your own name. Of course! No other word can match its emotional appeal to you. No generic "miss" or "madam" or "sir" can replace the siren song of hearing in public discourse your own name — a word that validates your existence in the universe and signifies to you something of the unfolding story of your life. From there, language offers further words of affiliation, which like a garden of forking paths serve to connect or disconnect us with various others. At one linguistic crossroad, we usually identify with either the word "male" or "female" while regarding the other as "Other." We feel warm kinships through the labels of certain interest groups, political parties, occupations, religious memberships, regional locales, and sports teams. And at the same time we cultivate a deliberate distance from the labels of other groups. The language of affiliation and disaffiliation thus builds in our minds a virtual world of spaces — of things and people that are "us" and "here," and those that are "them, over there."

Language "chunks" the world into categories that organize the storehouses of our minds. The nation-state is a salient example: we've split the world into some 200 chunks called nations. And we think of them as if they were natural and transcendent, despite the fact that they are the products of our social imaginations, with borders that can't be seen from outer space. We organize our identities and even our literature classes along the category of nation, though academia now offers alternative models, whether Paul Gilroy's multi-regional literary space of
the "Black Atlantic," or even Mercy College's innovative curriculum of "Diaspora Studies." Scholar Amitava Kumar of Vassar finds that his true sense of belonging these days is no longer to his home-country of India or to the U.S. of his present, but to the human tribe of which you and I are members: the tribe of academia. As Kumar says, "I realize that I'm a sad provincial; for years, I've been living in a place called the English Department. . . The most significant turns in my scholarship, and in my writing, have been attempts to first fit into, and then violently move away from, the existing codes of naturalization for gaining citizenship in the English Department" (20). As shown by the category of nation and its alternatives, language and its categories are a major spatial shaper of our sense of identity.

A second component in the construction of space is storytelling. Humans are the storytelling animal -- no other creature does it, and none but humans depend upon stories for our very existence. Our brains are hardwired to hammer and bend language into stories that construct our worlds, that shape a coherent narrative out of the chaos of our lived experience. American poet Muriel Rukeyser has said “The world is made of stories – not of atoms.” While this sounds anti-scientific, she’s absolutely right, in the sense that the only way the human mind can understand the truths and the things of the world is through the tool of stories. We come to understand history through the stories of historians; we understand scale through the stories of mathematicians; and we understand morality through the didactic stories of our culture. Even in Rukeyser’s example of the atom – a structure too tiny for humans to see – its reality is made understandable through a story about what an atom looks like and how it works. And when authors grow tired of describing the world’s existing spaces and things, they make up entire regions from their imagination -- the way R. K. Narayan invented Malgudi, or JRR Tolkien invented his Hobbit world, or William Faulkner invented his troubled Yoknapatawpha County of the US South.

A third component of space is tension. For any story to be of interest, it must have the drama of friction. It must have some dialectical pivot on which to seesaw. American novelist John Gardner identified two such archetypal tensions when he famously said that all stories are built around just two possible plots: a.) the hero goes on a journey or b.) a stranger comes to town. Since I'm sure you've personally experienced these two events in your own life, you can see how crackling tensions arise from either of these movements in space.

In parallel with Gardner's two plots of coming and going, the spatial tension I've found most useful to pursue involves routes and roots: between the desire to circulate and the desire to stay put. It could be said that modernity's defining characteristic is its opposing tendencies of mobility (the routes of networks and transportation) and stability (the roots of place-making and identity formation). Humans variously hunger for both. And a great many of our stories describe the tension of these competing appetites.

So let's turn to some literary examples to illustrate spatial literary criticism's attention to language, storytelling, and tension.

Spatial analysis does not merely consider a book's background setting, but interrogates that setting's participation as an active force in the narrative. Just to take an example I read recently, in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India, the first thing to notice is the novel's division into three sections: Mosque, Caves, Temple. These three spaces act not as mere background for the action, not as inert stage-settings, but as forces that push the characters to think of
themselves as one thing and not another, and to set into motion the tragic, comic, and wistful events that spring from the swirling forces of social politeness, sexuality, religious background, revenge, and forgiveness. Just as the author has chosen to structure these themes around the book's three spatial sections, any reading of the book should at least touch upon this structural ecology.

Complicating such discrete places as mosques, caves, and temples, is the fact that all spaces are composed of a deep and abiding hybridity. Humans hunger for pure and uncomplicated spaces, and we usually project them upon the past -- the Golden Ages we fantasize returning to, homelands we wax nostalgic about, and we rue how things became mixed-up by the changes of the present. But our fantasies get in the way of seeing the preexisting hybridities that always already composed those spaces. And we often forget how our presence also adds further hybridity. As Lucy Lippard notes, "Each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really all 'local places' consist of" (5-6). The strongest texts keep us aware of active hybridities within our most local of spaces.

Many texts might be categorized by what they do with their tensions in spatial terms. Consider the dialectical poem. Irish poet William Butler Yeats once said that an essay is what you write when you have an argument with the world, but a poem is what you write when you have an argument with yourself. Thus, many poems might be called "dialectical" in the sense that within their self-arguments they keep hopping between a thesis and its antithesis, in the hope of some eventual synthesis.

Take Robert Frost's 1914 poem "Mending Wall." It stages an argument about the use and uselessness of maintaining stone walls between ourselves and our neighbors (a topic as fitting in Frost's rural America as it is in today's Jammu and Kashmir). This blank verse meditation seems to involve a debate between the neighbor's stubborn belief that "good fences make good neighbors" and the speaker's playful mocking of the wall's absurdities. But the speaker is himself devoted to rebuilding the wall each year, half convinced by his neighbor's reassuring dictum of the goodness of wall-building -- an act Frost reveals as something humans have been doing throughout our history -- even as gravity and nature conspire to send our walls tumbling. We're offered no resolution to the debate over whether our walls are worth maintaining. We're only given a clear picture of why we hunger for both the building and the breakdown of walls between Us and Them. Like language, walls are something humans constantly shape, and so they end up shaping us across generations.

As a case in point, consider Katherine Boo's National-Book-Award-winning spatial work of nonfiction Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity. The title involves an invitation to be spatially creative: to strike through the pasteboard masks of commercial ideals to confront the social realities behind them: in this case, behind the wall of roadside advertisements outside Mumbai's airport to concentrate on the slum it screens. As a sociological study posing as a vivid series of stories, the book charts the slum's levels of mutual dependency, independent ambitions, and foibles of character. We see in microcosm the recognizable patterns of humanity's dreams, desires, and follies. Behind the Beautiful Forevers builds its narrative around a problem of space: when one family makes itself wealthy by resourceful recycling, they decide to improve their kitchen by hammering apart and rebuilding the wall they share with a neighboring family that has long felt a simmering jealousy. This small incident leads to a tragic death and an alleged crime that drags the community into years of trauma -- all set off by the mending of a wall.
Wall-building has always been one of the ways that we establish the territory for our roots, whether the roots of an individual, a family, or a community. In an era of the world's increasingly bewildering speeds of globalization, mobility, and technological change, radical cultural sedimentation is one way to resist the way of the world; to root more deeply in place by building stronger walls of self-definition and conservative grounding.

But a counter-desire to such stasis is to crash through walls by pursuing routes of circulation: a generative, willed dislocation of the self in the world. The logic here is that place has come to be defined its opposite. Arjun Appadurai offers frameworks for our modern day flows of individuals and globalization. Place, he argues, is dependent on a deeper conception of the many non-places of the present: "we need to understand more about the ways in which the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms create the conditions for the production of locality" (69). He is thinking, for example, of the way Benedict Anderson has shown how print circulation could generate the imagined community of a unified nation in a case like the Indonesian archipelago (with its 18,000 islands).

But circulation doesn't need to be conceived of in epic distances or scales as big as the nation or globe. As Foucault and company pointed out a few decades back, we are not the sovereign authors of ourselves, but the product of discourses. While others are the primary author of these discourses, we individuals do have a certain limited agency to steer ourselves toward, or away from, ongoing discourses. As Michel de Certeau makes the case in The Practice of Everyday Life, the simple mobility of our feet gives us a degree of power over the architects and city planners of our inhabited world. Certeau points out our ability to steer our bodies to violate the grammar of social space and articulate our own chosen paths. Circulation becomes a creative strategy for resisting domination. Anthropologist James Clifford argues that a postmodern world of motion almost necessitates that one practice displacement -- to achieve a kind of existential insideness through making outsideness routine. Motion through shoes, bicycles, cars, trains, ships, planes would be one way of keeping pace with the 21st century, not to match its often immoral speeds, but for reasons of increased perception and problem-solving.

As an example, consider a 2007 novel by the Native American writer Sherman Alexie titled The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. Circulation has most often been the privilege of the rich and powerful, but Alexie shows how mobility can benefit one born into the lowest stratum of a culture. The title is a comic exaggeration, with irony arising from a work of fiction being an "Absolutely True Diary." By "Indian," Alexie is of course referring to Columbus's 500-year old misnomer for Native Americans, still used to this day. And the idea of a "Part-Time Indian" is Alexie's postmodern outlook on identity; his protagonist is the son of two Native American parents, but in a refusal to essentialize ethnicity, Alexie draws attention to the many simultaneous identities within a person, including being defined by habits, life-ways, outlooks, nation, clothing, and so on. For Alexie, there are no full-time identities.

Moreover, the novel insists that identity is contextual, rather than fixed; the space we happen to be in at any given moment alters and defines our persona, at least in that moment. As a result, the more spaces one moves within, the more fluid the identity -- a fluidity that can be deeply troubling, but also empowering. Alexie's teenaged protagonist, Junior, is faced with the challenge of being born into one of America's poorest spaces -- the rural ghetto of a Native American reservation -- while choosing to attend the academically stronger but all-white high school in an agricultural town 35 kilometers away. While this bright 9th grader enjoys the academics, he feels like a racial traitor to be the only student to leave the reservation for his schooling. He comes to feel not only alienated by the white culture of his school, but also that his fellow Spokane Indians no longer accept him.
But while this horizontal pivoting between two spaces exposes him to the anxieties of an unfixed identity, mobility offers a positive side: circulation raises his awareness of a broader spectrum of possibilities he has in life, which were invisible in his previous, sedentary existence. He comes to recognize how he has plural memberships at a variety of social scales: that of family, community, state, ethnic family, nation, economic class, and gender. The simple act of climbing trees -- of altering his vertical altitude -- is another way circulation raises his insights. Sitting high atop a 300-year-old reservation tree allows him to see the entirety of his reservation from a pine that he realizes is older than the United States nation -- thus undermining the seeming timelessness of nation-states and adding to his feeling of pride for his home.

Junior's bitter friend Rowdy offers the book's closing insight. Rowdy, who never leaves the reservation, acts as a figure of frustrated stasis, in contrast to Junior's circulatory choices. But Rowdy mentions to Junior reading in a history book that Native Americans were previously nomadic. Rowdy tells Junior: "I'm not nomadic . . . Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you." (229). He continues with this renegotiation with Native American identity: "You're an old-time nomad . . . You're going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That's pretty cool" (230). By finding from the past a part of identity that no longer holds true in the present, Rowdy offers Junior a sense of cultural legitimacy, despite feeling like a cultural traitor. And the insight validates in the present the migratory moves of past humans, whether Native American or otherwise. Junior's heightened consciousness of power, richer sense of historical time, and acceptance of identity's flexibility all show how one in a position of low social and economic capital can use mobility to achieve a kind of cognitive capital.

It's a case of motion of the feet adding power to the head -- like Mohandas Gandhi's leaving his Gujarat home for law school in London and trials in Durban, South Africa. Or Charles Darwin's insights evolving by leaving England to take a worldwide walk with his Beagle. All exemplify disorientation as a tool in the service of what Arjun Appadurai would call "the politics of possibility -- against the politics of probability -- in the era of globalization (1). Circulation is a risky proposition, for you can always end up losing your seat. But Alexie's book suggests that only by moving can you learn whether or not your seat was worth occupying in the first place.

But for all the anxieties and insights and pleasures of routes -- as we see in the wild cross-country kicks, joys, and darkness of Jack Kerouac's On the Road, the consciousness-raising of Ralph Ellison's picaresque Invisible Man, the broadened horizons of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God -- circulation can be taken too far when one completely loses sight of a sense of roots.

The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novels like The Lowland and The Namesake wince and agonize under the growing pains of transnational and intergenerational existence. Newly married couples in her Interpreter of Maladies stories squabble as they try to re-shape their shared new homes into places that can accommodate their separate roots.

And in Alice Walker's much-anthologized short story "Everyday Use" (from 1973), losing sight of your family leads to bitter alienation. "Everyday Use" features two African-American siblings who have been raised by their single mom on a farm in the American South's rural Georgia. As teenagers, the monumentally shy Maggie stays behind on the farm as her bold sister Dee goes off to college in the city to become a true cosmopolite. Unlike her sister and mother, Dee has an appreciation for literature and learning, and bears the supreme confidence that comes from participating in the era's Black Pride movement. At college, Dee learns about the long history of
her African-American roots, adopts the vogue for wearing clothing from Africa, and abandons her given name out of a new awareness of its distant ties to slavery. We understand why her mother is deeply proud when her accomplished daughter finally comes home to Georgia for a rare visit.

But for all of Dee's learning about history and the world, she's willfully forgotten everything about her family and its recent past. She's cultivated self pride at the expense of community pride. And while Dee chides her unworldly sister for not knowing her heritage, it is Dee that has deliberately lost touch with her roots. The fact that Alice Walker's own biography resembles Dee's chosen path is a recognition of the value of circulating in the world. But the ethics of the book reveal Walker's insistence on not losing the connection to one's roots in the process. And so Walker dedicates the story to "your grandmama." "Everyday Use" involves a turning back to the past that mirrors the closing gesture of Sherman Alexie's Junior as he is reminded of his nomadic ancestors who retained a sense of community even in their motion.

I've always valued the disruptive power of literature – how it intrudes upon my life and pushes aside my established ways of thinking. These intrusions can be uncomfortable, disorderly, frustrating. But they are also rejuvenating, enabling me to grow even in middle age. This semester away from America serves for me a similarly disruptive role. And as T.S. Eliot urges, the point of humanity's restlessness is not merely to leave behind our native place, but to return to it with the tools and knowledge necessary to understand it truly and deeply. We should come home with renewed lessons: that our place in the universe is a humble one, that we truly have more options than we had previously dreamed, that difference is not deficiency, and that we should pursue our wide-roaming routes without losing touch with our stabilizing roots.

Literature, with its wonderfully spatialized perspectives, can draw our attention to the powers and politics lurking invisibly within the worlds we build and those we inherit. I'm convinced that when read through a spatial lens, literature can give us the tools to better see our 21st century world for what it is, granting us fuller possibilities and broader horizons of choice.

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