Paradigm Dramas in American Geography

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That my book can be read in many different ways and generate so many questions and debates is probably the first thing to notice about the commentaries collected here. I do not think this is a bad thing, in and of itself. Hopefully our scholarship does provoke and challenge ways of thinking, not just about the discipline of geography but about ways of thinking in general. We all read into books what we are looking for, based on the questions we ask. Meanwhile, we as writers are inescapably part of a process of constructing and producing histories rather than simply uncovering them—and for that we are, whether we like it or not, inherently tied to the “social theories” that help us do that. That said, if my methodology has rocked the boat of more positivist treatments of the history of geography, I would consider the book a success.

With that, I want to first offer a sincere thanks to all the commentators for taking the time to read the book and for providing such collegial and provocative comments about it; and to Kent Mathewson for organizing this forum as well as the “Author Meets Critics” panel discussion about *Civic Discipline* at the 2012 meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in New York City.

I did not intend to write a biography of Charles Daly, nor did I intend to write a history of the American Geographical Society. Both of those projects had already been done, in any case. My interest began with what I saw as a missing piece, a relatively unstudied period in the history of American geography before it was codified as an academic discipline and before the National Geographic Society and later the AAG came on the scene.

Because it was the premier geographical institution in the country, I began the research primarily by reading councilor and meeting minutes from the early days of the AGS. But after a while these started to read like something of a flat surface of details—membership lists, treasury reports, and so on, and I sought a way to link the material, ultimately finding it in the figure of the thirty-five-year president of the society, Charles Daly, who was also a well-respected New York judge and civic leader. Most of the material on Daly, though, is held at the New York Public Library (NYPL), so the preponderance of my research was conducted there, not at the AGS headquarters then located on Wall Street. Although anyone with access to JSTOR can read many of Charles Daly’s influential annual addresses and writings, there is also a wealth of archival material at the NYPL—handwritten speeches, letters, diaries, account books, scrapbooks—mostly works that Daly saved about himself. That Charles Daly was tantamount to the AGS organization in the nine-

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* My title is borrowed from Gene Wise’s 1979 article entitled “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies.”
teenth century was widely presumed, and thus I do not regret that everything else potentially relevant to the workings of the AGS be brought to bear on my research. A number of AGS-affiliated people gave me valuable guidance in the writing of the book and one offered me a fellowship to continue my research. Thus it is important to acknowledge that even within the AGS organization there exists a range of viewpoints about the history of the Society, about the purpose and role of geographical knowledge and practice, and about Civic Discipline.

The research took shape then around the nodal figure of Charles Daly as one very powerful influence on nineteenth-century geography. It became a story about how Daly’s geographical sensibility and imagination, situated within other social parameters—American expansionism, industrialization, and urbanization—manifested in social and commercial projects, at home and abroad. Through a close reading of the archival record I found circuits through which geographical knowledge flowed and came to an understanding of how Daly played a pivotal role in popularizing geography among the public, improving the infrastructure of New York City, and aiding American expansion and development. As Mona Domosh and Neil Smith both note, though, my work does suffer from a tendency toward the implicit rather than the explicit connections among these spaces and knowledges. They are right to invite me to think further about the co-constitutive nature of the American imperial projects with which Daly and the AGS were involved. Smith further asks whether the book tells us anything unique about imperialism. Probably not, although my main objective was, in any case, studying geography’s disciplinary roots.

Charles Daly’s civic improvement work in New York City was an important expression of his geographical imagination—he often walked in his old neighborhoods of the Lower East Side while relating strongly to the “Irish cause.” I attempted to provide a balanced treatment of his work, aware that it carried its own contradictions, especially as his decision in the Astor Place Riots case went against Irish protestors and set the U.S. precedent for criminalizing rioting. It seems to me that Daly’s patriarchal “compassionate conservatism,” as we might term it today, is always going to carry this kind of baggage and is also going to look somewhat like the “good liberal” reforms that Jeremy Crampton mentions. I find Smith’s comments on this quite instructive, although I am not convinced that it makes much difference in the end what we call such activities. Daly’s reputation as a “friend of labor” was an attribution given him by the local press. Ultimately, the fact is that power and influence are always going to be exercised somehow; and we can recognize that there are better and worse ways of exercising them. I also appreciate Mona Domosh’s and Jeremy Crampton’s reiterating that such social-reform efforts at home can and should be connected to those abroad. Although Daly sought to improve Irish and Jewish neighborhoods in New York, he had practically no interest in the spaces or uplift of “other others,” such as freed slaves or Native Americans. In other words, his civilizing mission as a rhetorical device for blacks was much easier to exercise “out there”—in Liberia or the Congo—rather
than here at home, because, among other reasons within the Reconstruction-era political economy, freed slaves represented competition to Irish workers.

Many critics have been skeptical about how I have portrayed Daly’s geographical knowledge as gendered. In the book I make some links to the grand spectacle of popular AGS meetings that Charles Daly orchestrated and centered on heroic explorers, and the cultural capital that he must have derived from them. All of us necessarily participate in the social reproduction of gender norms, and those in privileged positions—whether they consciously intend to or not—have greater impacts on these norms than do others. Elite white males in the public eye are unlikely to make explicit statements about their masculinity, especially if it is under threat, which means that other types of evidence must be called upon to analyze their actions. I am not the first to recognize that the hard bodies of heroic explorers and their experiences in the field helped constitute what many consider the geographical tradition. I took this a step farther, though, and speculated that this type of body—and the gendered knowledge that it produced—also influenced the AGS’s officially, in 1871, dropping its statistical orientation (a “counting” type of activity, of resources, people, and events) in favor of field exploration.

I thank Susan Schulten for her insights about the state of statistics at the time, though, as it was a field gaining in popularity with little unique applicability to geography. She mentions Daniel Gilman’s address to the AGS that showcased the statistical maps created for the 1870 census, pointing out the basic difficulty in trying to show a relationship between his enthusiasm for these maps and his masculinity. One observation I would offer in turn is that at the end of Gilman’s other lecture to the AGS he advocated for several geographical needs of the country, one of which was for more recognition for the legitimate work of what he called the “stay-at-home geographer” (Gilman 1872, 133)—as if such a person might have needed a morale boost. Like the devaluation of the “stay-at-home dad,” the notion of the “stay-at-home geographer” opens up all kinds of opportunities to link the home—often not considered a place containing much important or valuable geographical information—with how we construct our discipline.

And not incidentally, I do not find the term “armchair geographer” to be derogatory—it is simply a descriptor. My point in ascribing it to Charles Daly was in efforts to explain how he was able to wield a great deal of influence on scientific matters of the day even when his views came into conflict with those who were actual explorers in the field. This, to me, said a lot about how he exercised his position as powerful, influential judge, and was not a condemnation of him for not traveling to the North Pole to check it out himself.

How do those “stay-at-home geographers” convince others of what is out there, without going there themselves? How are so-called discoveries laid claim to? A great deal of this process has to do with one’s own embodiment, as well as one’s ability to claim authority over a subject. The main thesis of the Arctic chapter is that Daly was able to maneuver an authoritarian position on Arctic science by leveraging his position as a well-respected New York judge and, secondarily, that
this happened during a period when scientific achievement in the field was progressively being eclipsed by sensationalistic journalism. Daly’s agenda in the Arctic was very largely a scientific one—he claimed a sort of “scientific sovereignty” over the knowledge field—and I take pains to distinguish this from the more nationalistic race to the pole that characterized polar exploration of other countries. That said, I appreciate Frederick Nelson’s instructive statement about nineteenth-century Arctic science and acknowledge that much more could be said about it than I was able to cover in a single chapter. Nonetheless, I would quibble with Nelson’s handling of the facts of my book (DeHaven’s relationship to the AGS; Schwatka’s adoption of Inuit ways; women at the AGS, and so forth), but I will leave readers to judge these details for themselves.

More important is my basic argument that resource availability and commercial potential drove much of what constituted geographical knowledge in the AGS arena—an idea I must admit that I did not invent but borrowed from John Kirkland Wright, who in his 1952 history of the AGS argued that businessmen were attracted to the society precisely to obtain this sort of information. But bald expansionism and commercial greed never worked well discursively, so the added scientific legitimacy that Charles Daly provided often framed the narrative of commercial progress as progress itself.

Moreover, in my research I found a clear connection between the deployment of geographical knowledge and both the development of the American commercial empire and the amassing of Charles Daly’s personal fortune, nowhere more clearly than with respect to the transcontinental railroad. The AGS disseminated geographical knowledge about the western railroads obtained from railroad companies themselves as well as from various branches of the federal government; and it researched, debated, and published findings about their progress, routes, and regional resources, thus becoming an effective agent of American expansionism. Charles Daly was a decades-long major stockholder in the Northern Pacific Railroad (NPR) company and worked extensively to solicit potential immigrants from Germany to settle on land he bought and sold from the NPR. It is not a trivial matter, or inappropriate, to call attention to the fact that his vision for transforming space included making money.

Likewise, my argument about why Daly supported the Nicaragua route of the eventual Panama Canal rested on the fact that he was the vice president, leading legal counsel, lobbyist, and stockholder for the company which wanted to build the canal through Nicaragua. This was a subject extensively debated at AGS meetings on the grounds of differing views of how physical geography, economics, politics, and engineering technologies would synthesize on the ground. In such meetings, and for decades, really, Daly argued that it was “commercial sagacity that will determine where the canal will be built” (AGS 1879, 152). This unambiguous position is what one will find in the archive. The company had secured a charter to build the canal and in fact had started to do so, and it would be a mistake to not connect the geopersonal with the geopolitical in this case.
The nineteenth-century AGS was not particularly systematic about what might be “next frontiers” for the American commercial empire. Daly reported on potential development in every region of the globe and relied heavily on a potpourri of information sent to him from numerous foreign and domestic correspondents to do so. Through this process the much more mundane, everyday business transactions that made up the empire came to be.

This is where the Africa story emerges. In this research I pulled out of the archive a forgotten—or never known—geographer, Charles Daly, who nevertheless should be remembered for having persuaded many, through his speeches, writings, and personal contacts and appearances, that central Africa was ripe for resource exploitation from circa 1870 onward. My research uncovered a great deal of evidence that Daly was interested in the commercial offerings on tap in Africa: He constantly enumerated them in his speeches and lobbied Congress and entities such as the New York Chamber of Commerce about them. Many who supported the Leopold scheme did so under the humanitarian, albeit dubious, goal of reducing the slave trade, a position that, as Crampton notes, a “good liberation intention.” Daly, though, never focused his attention on the suffering and conditions of those enslaved in Africa. The overwhelming preponderance of his geographical work about the Congo focused on the progress of Henry Morton Stanley’s explorations, the geopolitics of opening the Congo for free trade, and the fantastic commercial potential of the region.

Unlike many of his counterparts at the Royal Geographical Society, Daly deeply admired Stanley. This, combined with the hope that business investments would create democratic institutions and opportunities, led me to the overall conclusion that Daly “allowed” himself to be seduced by Leopold, as were many others who believed that their own commercial interests were best served by Belgian control over the region. The United States was the first country to approve Leopold’s claims. Today we find many examples of such good liberal intentions at work, yet we know that the rhetoric of bringing American democratic institutions to those in need around the world, for instance, can be self-delusional and/or can camouflage other agendas.

Finally, and as many of the commentators have alluded, we almost cannot talk about Charles Daly and the nineteenth-century AGS without considering their relevance for the present day. Schulten directly poses the question, What is the legacy of Charles Daly and the AGS? That the nineteenth-century AGS has received little scholarly attention is an interesting fact that, as I argue in the book, has to do with archival reasons as well as a type of popular geography Daly promoted. Crampton notes that the book is a doorway into several tensions that are still relevant today: scientific geography versus popular geography; geography as militant discipline with commercial goals; and geography as an epistemology of remembering and forgetting.

The archives demonstrate how much early American geography was embedded within the emerging political economy of U.S. expansionism and how great
personal wealth was produced from that. If there is discomfort around any of my findings, this probably has more to do with the present than with how I have constructed the past. Daly’s was a geography tightly connected to government programs, bodies, and research as well as to business and social ones. We might consider the extension and relevance of this in the present AGS organization, as it is one that continues to combine in its membership people from government, business, and academia. This could potentially be a strength, but it could also lead to problems, not least of which is the potential for the corporatization of higher education. The AGS has also remained devoted to geographical “firsts,” which seems to many—myself included—a throwback to nineteenth-century geography. The Society has gone through some tough times, starting in the 1970s—and certainly owing to more than a loss of philanthropic funding—so it does seem a fair question to ask whether it can acknowledge and repair such damage.

The “drama” of the AAG panel session in New York—including ad hominem attacks and heckling of panelists—unfortunately proved that a defensive stance will likely not serve the Society well. And yet such issues—controversial geointelligence, for example; see Bryan 2010—are of course not just relevant to the AGS; extensive and oftentimes questionable links exist among academic geography, business, and government, which is why it is so important to think carefully about what we are doing in the universities, how we construct geographical “literacy” within the discipline, and what larger purposes geographical knowledge should serve. In the book I lay the foundation for a discussion about geographical knowledge in the nineteenth century; the question is, What is supportable in the present century?

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Forum References


