

# Alice's Journey from Lost Little Girl to Curious Feminist Psychogeographer. Empowerment by Wanderlust, Dysgeographia and Playable Cities in Contemporary YA Fantasy

Plenary Lecture

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The embodied experience of geographical and narrative disorientation are epitomized by Lewis Carroll's Victorian nonsense fairy-tale fantasies about Alice's adventures: falling down the rabbit hole, crossing through the Looking Glass, wandering aimlessly in Wonderland, getting lost in the woods where things have no names, or returning to an unhomely home which will never be the same after the incredible journeys, are all affectively charged, transgressive moves in and out of enchanted loci, driven by the title character's relentless, girlish curiosity. My analysis of contemporary young adult fantasy rewritings of the Alice-theme explores how the heroines' mapping of make-believe spaces – a futuristic, chaotic Manchester in Jeff Noon's mock-dystopic steampunk fantasy *Automated Alice* (1996), a nonsensical mirror-version of London in China Miéville's urban fantasy *Un Lun Dun* (2007), and an oral historically mythified Sunderland region in Bryan Talbot's graphic novel *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* (2007) – allows for an affirmation of women's creative/ spatial agency. The stories recycle and challenge archetypal figures like the 'lost little girl' associated in cautionary tales with the vice of curiosity and a resulting debilitating spatial dyslexia; the 'nymph' as an eroticized tutelary divinity of a landform, a genius loci reduced to a mere symbol of the fertility of nature; or the modernist *haute bourgeois* 'flâneuse' whose 'spectacular invisibility' participated in the 'ocular economy' of the city (Pollock 1988, Wolff 1990, Nead 2000) and was both threatening to and threatened by the white, masculinist urban space. Disgeographia and curiosity – identified with a multiplicity and mobility of perspectives and sensations, a resulting environmentalist empathy and a female authorial empowerment fuelled by the embracement of unpredictability — are reinterpreted in terms of the feminist psychogeographer's capacity to explore "a new way of walking [or meaning formation!] that changes our city [or fictional!] experience, a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities [or narratives!]... just about anything that takes pedestrians [or readers!] off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban [or literary!] landscape" (Bucher-Finka 2008). Starting out from contemporary feminist psychogeographical theories (from Duncan (1996) to Rendell et al. (2009)) I trace how counter-arguments in fictional forms challenge masculinist geographical discourse's claims to "transcendent visions of neutral truth by detached observers" (Rose 2007) presumably untouched by the contexts of knowledge-production; and study how literary space can resonate with current design trends of urban planning which create Playable Cities by means of an affectionate re-appropriation of public places to redeem city-life from isolation and to facilitate a collective ludic interaction with our environment.



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