LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Teaching Literary Geographies in British Classrooms

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Introduction

The success of 2017's literary geography conference in Cambridge is indicative of the state of this (inter)discipline – my term for this area of research that stands between literary studies and human geography but which is more than a subdiscipline of either (see Hones 2014: 4). The international cohort of delegates brought a variety of research interests to bear on one of literary geography's current preoccupations: the relations between literary spaces and other kinds of spaces. The range of ideas, from scholars working inside and outside of English-language literary geography, demonstrated that earlier calls from Brosseau (1994), from Ogborn (2005) and from Hones (2014) that literary geographers look seriously at literature, that they consider the relationship between texts and spaces, and that they look beyond English-language scholarship, are being heeded.

One question that this conference sparked for Rob Briwa and me is: how can we keep pushing literary geography's development further? Our answer was to turn to teaching. DeLyser and Rogers argue that 'teaching is a significant public, accessible, transparent, and interactive way of forwarding one's own field' (2010: 186). Here, I will argue that teaching literary geography to university students can encourage them to consider the variety of ways in which they, as readers and as young geographers, approach and create literary spaces. Relatedly, it can help us as practitioners to recognise the variety of voices, both critical and not, that contribute to the creation of literary space and its interactions with other spaces.

Why teach literary geographies?

Teaching literary geography provides a useful means of defining the (inter)discipline and making it accessible to newer practitioners. Literary geography is marked by a plurality of possible theoretical and methodological approaches (Hones et al. 2015: 1). This plurality has evident benefits for advancing research in literary geography in innovative and creative directions. However, students could be dissuaded from engaging with this field if the question 'what is literary geography?' has too many answers. Teaching can address this issue because it represents a means of 'demystifying' both theory and practice (DeLyser 2008: 235). Exposing students to literary geography's range of theories and approaches – from cartography to textual analysis to autoethnography – in the academically safe space of the classroom can familiarise young practitioners with this growing (inter)discipline in a way that respects and encourages its productive plurality.

Teaching literary geography can also help researchers to take stock of where literary geography is going. This is an important question in the light of the competing claims (if that is not too strong a term) between literary studies and human geography for the past, present and future of literary geography. The underpinning philosophy of this journal, for instance, that literary geography is 'essentially a way of reading' (Hones et al. 2015: 1), usefully encapsulates this tension. As the editors write, thinking of literary geography as a 'way of reading' allows scholars to move in two directions at the same time: to read literature in a geographical or spatial way, but also to make connections between academic literature in geography and in literary studies: to continually remake the connections between the two. Teaching literary geography in the classroom would provide a forum for these two kinds of reading to be practiced alongside each other, better forging the connections between these twin aspects of our (inter)discipline.

Despite the benefits of teaching as an 'interactive way of forwarding one's own field' (DeLyser and Rogers 2010: 186), there is surprisingly little material that directly addresses the art of teaching literary geography. Fiction is certainly a tool used by those currently teaching human geography (see Aitken 1994, Brace and Johns-Putra 2010, Mcguinness 2009, Reich and Russell 2014, and Smiley 2017). However, to date few articles have been written specifically addressing teaching in literary geography: Sheila Hones's 'Teaching and learning guide for: Text as it happens – literary geography' (2010) is perhaps the best example. Yet, there is clear and growing interest among students: I have, for instance, taught four undergraduate students in recent years at Cambridge who were pursuing literary geography-focused dissertations. Now is the time to develop teaching strategies that can take our work forward.

Debating the work and the world

I have written this Thinking Space piece in discussion with my colleague Rob Briwa, whose own piece on teaching literary geographies comes from an American perspective. My own ideas provide a British perspective to complement his own. In Britain, students usually study

one subject in depth throughout their undergraduate career. As geography 'majors' from the outset, students are introduced to complicated ideas in human and physical geography from their first year. In Cambridge, for instance, 'Understanding Cultural Geography' is a first-year course.

Winders argues that a challenge for pedagogy is the fact that theoretical debates can be 'complicated and unresolved' (Winders 2014: 234). This is certainly true for literary geography. One such complicated and unresolved debate in literary geography involves the interaction between literary space and other spaces: as I have termed it elsewhere in these pages, between 'the work and the world' (McLaughlin 2016a: 122). A practical point at which students of literary geography can immerse themselves into this debate is the question of *how* this process of the production of literary space works and how we can best investigate it. Sheila Hones has pioneered the theory of fiction as a spatial event, providing a way for literary geographers to think about the messy and creative interactions between readers, texts and authors as happening in space and time – and contributing to the production of new spaces (Hones 2008, 2014).

Current research in relational literary geography gives students the tools to understand their role in the creation of literary space and in how that space interacts with other spaces to produce the world around us. Jon Anderson's assemblage approach to literary geography, for instance, could encourage students to pursue autoethnographic analyses of their own reading, to better understand how 'the "wheres" of writing and the "wheres" of reading' (Anderson 2015: 126) are remade through their own encounters with fiction. My own work provides a lens through which to understand readers' encounters with fiction as a component in the creation of social communities and the production of new actual-world spaces, which are dependent on readers' repeated and shared encounters with fiction (McLaughlin 2016b, 2017).

The value of exposing university students to this rich debate around the production of literary space is that these theories can be useful for students' own development. As Don Mitchell puts it, 'research becomes relevant by helping students develop a framework that can use to understand their experiences' (quoted in Winders 2014: 233). Teaching offers students 'a set of lenses through which to make sense of the world and their place in it' (233).

Practice and knowledge creation among students

Here I will propose one teaching activity involving group reading and the shared production of literary space. It emerges from my own research into the collaborative reading practices of American Sherlockians. These readers' encounters with fiction happen as part of a social group. Some encounters happen in person – such as the long and esoteric 'toasts' to various characters from the Sherlock Holmes stories that are given at social gatherings. Other encounters happen in the virtual presence of the group, as when individuals consume accounts of their fellow readers' encounters with the Sherlock Holmes stories alongside Doyle's texts themselves.

The purpose of this exercise is for students to investigate the role of social reading on their encounters with one, shared fiction. As I am writing this in Cambridge, I propose that students read Stephen Fry's *The Liar* (1991). This novel is set in a fictional Cambridge college and involves the machinations of a number of Cambridge dons, students and the British intelligence service. In this exercise, students would be encouraged to read this book in a variety of places, within Cambridge and outside, to investigate how their encounters with the text change depending on where they are. They would also be encouraged to share the experiences of their encounters with this fiction with each other, in a variety of ways: via an online forum, through in-class discussion, and by sharing their own interpretations or new creations of the story and its spaces in the corresponding actual-world sites that each reader understands to feature in the story.

This project has two benefits for students. First, it demonstrates to students the active role that their encounters with fiction play in the production of literary space. Secondly, it would complement more traditional fieldwork elements in students' other human and physical geography courses, better tying literary geography in to the broader themes and theories of university geographical education.

Conclusion

In this short piece, I have argued that teaching the next generation of literary geographers is one key way to develop literary geography. In a field as productively diverse and methodologically innovative as literary geographies, encouraging students to find their place in the world by understanding their own relations to literature's creative agency can only benefit the future of our research.

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