

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Teaching Literary Geography: An American Perspective

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Introduction

Literary geography is experiencing a renaissance. Recent scholarship illuminates increasing recognition of literary geography's interdisciplinary and inclusive nature,¹ increased engagement with theory, and towards consolidating disparate bodies of scholarship across disciplines and with a spirit of collaboration. This journal epitomizes this trend, as does the bibliographic website documenting new publications, dissertations, and theses that examine the intersections of literature and place. Furthermore, recent publications reflect on scholarship in the past with a view towards how it might inform literary geography's future (Alexander 2015; Hones 2015). The indicators described above and the participants' enthusiasm at the first Literary Geographies conference all suggest that literary geography has momentum as its practitioners consider how to forge future paths.

Thinking to the Future

Literary geography's future growth and development might benefit from interrogating two related areas of enquiry. First, there is the realm of theoretical development and integration of insights from across disciplines. Research in this area is flourishing, as seen by recent works that offer further insights into the field's core concepts, such as literary space (McLaughlin 2016).

Conversations I had with my colleague Dr. Dave McLaughlin, however, piqued our mutual interest in a second area of enquiry critical to literary geography's further growth: pedagogy. Scholarship generally overlooks this dimension of literary geography, with the

notable exception of Hones (2010a). My intention in this short piece, then, is to continue where this conversation left off through offering an American geographer's perspective on the possibilities of literary geography in the U.S. undergraduate lecture hall.

Developing a pedagogical framework for an introductory literary geography course aimed at U.S. undergraduates brings several benefits to the field's future growth. First, the early years of an American student's three-to-five year university career are often spent in high-enrollment lecture-style courses that often lack any prerequisite knowledge or coursework. Thus, developing an introductory literary geography course would increase students' access to literary geography at a scale of enrollment that upper-level and graduate courses would be hard pressed to compete with. Students introduced early to literary geography via an introductory course may choose to pursue it as a focal point to their subsequent studies. This increased recruitment has downstream effects that will benefit literary geography's development in two ways. Not only will developing (and implementing) such courses increase literary geography's visibility amongst a broader group of the public and potential future scholars, but it also offers a complementary argument for, and early illustrative example of, oft-overlooked qualitative research oriented coursework, a perennial lacunae within geography departments, especially in the United States (Delyser 2008).

In the remainder of this Thinking Space piece, I explore the possibilities of what an introductory undergraduate course in literary geography might look like if taught in a United States public university. To do so, I reflect upon the following: 1) my own experiences as both student and instructor, for these illuminate the characteristics of the U.S. public university system and drive my discussion; 2) previous work addressing the intersections between literature and geographic in U.S. university education; and 3) conceptual and structural foci for an introductory course surrounding literary geography, with a brief, although necessarily incomplete) identification of relevant and accessible readings.

Personal Reflections

My identity as a geographer was born of happenstance. As an undergraduate, I attended a public liberal arts university in the U.S. During my first year, like many of my cohort, I was an 'undeclared' student: I had not yet chosen a program of study. Like others, I used this first year to take a variety of courses to fulfill general education ('core') requirements and explore potential majors. My most memorable class was a high enrollment introduction to physical geography. Here, anecdote illuminates the value introductory courses have in 'snaring' undergraduate students in U.S. universities: thanks in large part to that 110 course, I was thoroughly hooked by geography, and declared it as one of my two major areas of study.

My graduate school application reflected my interests in geography and literature. Under thoughtful mentorship from my masters' adviser, Dr. Kevin Blake, I explored novelists' constructions of Provençal senses of place. Now pursuing a PhD under Dr. William Wyckoff, my dissertation topic utilizes concepts and methods developed in the Anglo-American traditions of cultural and historical geography, and my funding comes from

grading (and now teaching) high enrollment sections of introductory human geography courses at a U.S. public university.

I share these experiences because it highlights my position vis-à-vis the literary geographies community. I received my training within an Anglo-American humanistic tradition, one that understands literature as a source and shaper of geographic knowledge, a means of understanding place identity and sense of place, and an articulation of territorial consciousness (Lando 1996). My ongoing teaching and learning experiences shed light on the expectations U.S. undergraduates have when engaging with introductory courses. In my experience, new undergraduates respond well to evocative writing and case studies—and so whenever possible I aim to use geographic scholarship written with what John Fraser Hart declares ‘imagination, verve, flair, panache, [and] enthusiasm,’ (Hart 1982: 28).

These experiences color my subsequent discussion of course development—and I acknowledge the blind spots generated by these experiences because I do not mean to exclude any of literary geography’s plural research foci. Instead, I share them to underscore that my discussion offers but one potential means to develop literary geography in the classroom, and there remains a need for continued cross- and inter- disciplinary collaboration in developing literary geography’s fullest pedagogical potential.

Classroom Literary Geography: Past Work, Future Directions

One practical means to develop an introductory literary geography course for an American university is to design it around a regional theme. This design structure builds on the relatively scant literature within U.S. contexts examining the potential to use literature as a means to illuminate geographic concepts. Wyckoff (1979), for example, proposes the use of what he terms the ‘prairie novel’ to illuminate oft-overlooked aspects of settlement histories and cultural geographies in the American Midwest. Parallel examples include Hoy’s and Elbow’s (1976) use of Latin American novelists in advanced regional courses and Gunn’s (1974) restructuring of world regional geography courses around novels in lieu of textbooks. Shortridge’s (1991) discussion of place-defining novels, meanwhile, compiled a comprehensive list of American novelists, organized along regional divisions, which he suggests merit further study and integration into class rooms.

A regional structure to an introductory literary geography course, however, cannot stand alone if it is to be considered a true pedagogical foray into contemporary literary geography. As Hones (2010a) and others (e.g., Jones 2008) imply, literary geography has often been framed as exploring textual landscape description. To offset this trend, an introductory course should introduce and include literary geography’s historiographies, core concepts, and methodological approaches, and these course components should be articulated in a way that is accessible to new college students.

Nonetheless, an introductory course structured around a regional theme offers two benefits for literary geography’s future in U.S. universities. First, courses taught along regional themes might effectively fit into a variety of undergraduate programs and fulfill early ‘core’ or elective course requirements, thus increasing literary geographies’ visibility in

the U.S. public sphere. Second, the previously mentioned forays into regional courses via literature also identify texts appropriate for reading for geographical concepts and themes, which means that they could conceivably offer a core set of case study materials for classroom instruction and student projects.

Literary Geography for the American West

In this penultimate section, I suggest some readings with a regional focus, and many are representative of ‘place-defining’ works of literature. These texts also, however, have sections that would make powerful case studies to introduce students to ongoing topical discussions within the broader community of literary geography, especially when paired with supplementary readings and in-class discussion. For each reading, I offer brief qualifying rationale as to why it is included. Given my current status as a graduate student at Montana State University, I choose to frame this list within the regional theme of the American West—and because this is a short piece, I offer a selection of readings rather than an exhaustive list.

Topic: Narratives and Space

Basso, K. (1996) *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Although more properly American Southwest than West in regional scope, excerpts from this text concretely and evocatively conveys how storytelling—narrative—shapes space and place in enduring ways, and how spaces and places themselves shape how narratives are developed and articulated.

Doig, I. (1978) *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Doig’s memoir of his youth in western Montana highlights how narratives are produced about and within places and spaces how texts’ internal geographies may differ from their geographies of production. The genre also complicates and destabilizes temporal dimensions of narrative, offering fruitful discussions about the qualities of space as well as entrées into complicating how students conceptualize place and place identity.

Williams, T.T. (1991) *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Random House.

Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge* is a powerful meditation on the relationship between people and place. In this sense, it represents a premiere text for exploring notions of place attachment and identity. Williams’s use of a deeply symbolic setting and narrative structure,

however, also offer an opportunity to introduce and discuss thematic settings, or those that drive narrative (see Hones 2010b).

Topic: Literary Geography, Past and Present

Lando, F. (1996) 'Fact and Fiction: Geography and Literature.' *Geojournal*, 38(1), pp. 3-18.

Lando's review offers a broad yet accessible overview of work in literary geography up to 1996. It does, however, need further exploration of recent scholarship, and so might be effectively bolstered by instructors' incorporation and introduction of insights from other scholars addressing the intersections of literature and geography (e.g., Brosseau 1994; Sharp 2000; Jones 2008; Saunders 2010; and Hones 2015).

Topic: Intra- and Extra-textual Geographies

Shortridge, J. (1991) 'The Concept of the Place-Defining Novel in American Popular Culture.' *Professional Geographer*, 43(3), pp. 280-291.

Here, Shortridge discusses the ways literature might shape extra-textual geographies through establishing how a text might be place-defining to varying audiences.

Blake, K. (1995) 'Zane Grey and Images of the American West.' *Geographical Review*, 85(2), pp. 203-216.

In this accessible article, Blake builds on Shortridge (1991) to show how place-defining novelists craft the intra-textual geographies of their works, but also discusses how literary landscapes shape real world perception in meaningful ways, particularly in policies and self identity. Blake also illustrates one method of 'doing' literary geography by blending archival research and textual interpretation—and so can act as an introductory model in the realm of methodologies.

Conclusion

In this Thinking Space piece, I've made a short foray into the possibilities of introducing fundamental topics of conversation within literary geography via a course set upon a scaffolding of region- and place-defining literature, with a particular audience of U.S. undergraduates pursuing a liberal arts education—and one that aims to turn American geographers' thoughts towards teaching literary geography.

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Notes

¹ In using the term 'literary geography,' I do not wish to exclude the plural ways of understanding a vast array of scholarship written under the banner of literary geography or literary geographies.

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