

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Teaching Literary Geographies: Visual Analysis

Sheila Hones

The University of Tokyo

hones@literarygeographies.net

Richard Carter-White

The University of Tokyo

richardcarterwhite@gmail.com

This third of three Thinking Space pieces on pedagogy also expands on conversations from the literary geographies workshop held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in the spring of 2017. Where Rob Briwa's piece developed the theme of teaching literary geography as an introductory level geography course at a US institution, and Dave McLaughlin's provided a complementary view of teaching literary geography in the context of a UK geography department, this third, co-authored piece reports on teaching literary geography to students with English as a foreign language.¹ In particular, it focuses on the method of having students produce visual analyses (sketches, diagrams and annotated maps) during or after reading literary texts. While we originally developed this method as a strategy for generating academic discussion in classes with widely varying levels of confidence and fluency in English, we believe that this approach to teaching literary geography could be usefully incorporated into monolingual English-language classes.

At the University of Tokyo, our literary geography classes have to be able to accommodate a wide variety of students, both in terms of English-language experience and also with regard to their major field of study. In some cases, the literary geography component is the substantive element in a content-based English development class for

junior division students, while in others literary geography is the approach taken to an American Studies class for senior division students. All of the classes discussed here were taught in English, and for many students they fulfilled English language course requirements. At the junior level (first and second year students) our classes are typically part of the ‘general education’ stage and students will not yet have enrolled in a specific department (e.g. Area Studies), whereas at the senior level some students take our classes as part of their American Studies requirements while others take our classes as options. One recent upper division class, for example, included American Studies majors, for whom it was a required American literature class, as well as students majoring in East Asian studies and in Environmental Studies, for whom the class was optional.

This diversity in student backgrounds means that we cannot assume any shared knowledge in cultural geography or literary studies, let alone literary geography.² In fact the first question in class from upper division students – even those majoring in interdisciplinary fields such as American Studies -- is frequently ‘is this a geography class or a literature class?’ Another factor is that students have very different ideas and assumptions about terms and concepts such as ‘space’ and ‘place.’ Many students will by default mentally translate these terms into their first language, and this complicates even further the need to resolve the differences distinguishing ‘common sense’ from ‘geographical’ understandings in class discussion. While this language issue has its challenges, for us these difficulties are outweighed by the positive aspects of working on literary geography with students whose native language differs from our own. The need for continuous negotiation of meaning pushes us as instructors not only to clarify our own understanding of terms and concepts but also to become more aware of what we take for granted while thinking through the ways in which our approach to literary geography has been framed. In addition, the need to adjust the complexity of explanation in response to the wide range of language levels in the class usefully forces us to clarify our thoughts, particularly in the process of ‘downshifting’ for less fluent students. The main challenge is to simplify the language without simplifying the ideas: even students who struggle to articulate their ideas in English are typically well able to deal with sophisticated academic concepts. This practice in being clear without being reductive is very useful for scholars working in what McLaughlin calls the (inter)discipline of literary geography. In an increasingly interdisciplinary field we have a responsibility to make our work accessible to colleagues whose disciplinary ‘native language’ might very well be different to our own. In an increasingly international field we also have a responsibility to develop academic reading and writing skills appropriate for a context in which many colleagues are not native speakers of English.

Just as the use of visual materials can support communication at multilingual conferences, the use of graphics can provide a mixed-language classroom with a powerful tool for processing readings and for sharing ideas and collaborating. One of the challenges faced by students whose native language is different to the class medium is that their thinking is so far ahead of their expression that they are unable to do justice to the level of sophistication and innovation of their analytical and conceptual thinking in written and spoken language. This often inhibits discussion in class. The ‘visual analysis’ method –

asking students to produce diagrams and sketches while reading and re-reading a shared text -- is a useful strategy for dealing with this gap between thought and expression. We have found that this emphasis on the visual has three main advantages: first, it nudges students away from comprehension and toward analysis. Where their typical response to a literary reading for a class taught in a second or other language might be to mentally translate it and confirm understanding at the sentence level, faced with a visual response task students are encouraged to think through the spatiality of the text as a whole while processing their reading in creative graphic analysis. The second advantage is that in a class in which the medium is a foreign language, where it can be very difficult to generate free discussion, the graphic analyses students bring to class provide concrete material which stimulates collaboration, questions, and explanation. The third advantage is that in classes where students with higher English language proficiency can sometimes dominate discussion, utilising visual analyses as the basis for discussion can help to renegotiate the established dynamics of a class, providing opportunities for more visually or spatially-minded students to make meaningful contributions.

This visual analysis technique has been central to our approach in a current senior division seminar. Listed under American literature, the seminar is based around *Yokohama, California*, a collection of short stories by the American author Toshio Mori. In the first class we introduced students to the idea of ‘the literary text as a spatial event’ by eliciting from them as comprehensive a list as possible of the people, processes, and organisations that have to come together to make *Yokohama, California* ‘happen.’ We also worked through a set of photographs of Toshio Mori’s life, in order to generate an early grasp of authorial geographies: his family and community context, literary influences, publication processes, author networks, and so on. In the course of these group tasks, students came to recognise the multiple agents involved in the spatial event of text and also came to realise that they themselves form part of this ongoing process. Once they had grasped this basic idea, students were able to outline their own version of the “spatial event of the text” in visual form. As students reflected on the impossibility of assigning our case study text to a specific geographical ‘location’, we had a chance to expand the discussion to include the larger question of how national literatures and literary canons are constituted. After this introduction to a few of the main themes in contemporary literary geography, students were asked to bring to the second class a graphic reader response to an assigned short story. We emphasised that this should be analytical rather than simply illustrative.

In subsequent classes, the student visualisations produced for homework formed the basis of the seminar. Students present their graphics to the group, explain the thinking behind them, answer questions, and comment on other visualisations. As instructors our responsibility is to use the graphics and the group discussion as a springboard for brief teaching interventions, bringing in the points we want to make about literary geography in response to student-generated content. The challenge for the instructor in this phase is that they are unable to prepare lectures or plan the class in detail; instead they have to have a clear enough overview of literary geography’s history and present practice to be able to introduce themes, concepts, and key works in response to the sketches and diagrams

students contribute to the seminar. In other words, the students set the agenda and the instructors respond, comment, and expand on the ways in which their drawings exemplify or relate to themes and methods in literary geography today. This capacity of student visualisations to help re-frame the seminar as a collaborative event, responsive to the unique, unexpected and often insightful spatial analyses of students, is further demonstration that the visual approach described in this piece has potentially productive application well beyond our initial aim of negotiating language-related challenges in the classroom.

Notes

¹ While most of the students were native speakers of Japanese, there were also some for whom Japanese and English were second or third languages.

² 'Cultural Geography' in Japan is typically taught in quite a different way to a cultural geography class in the UK, although it probably bears more relation to the US approach.