

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Literary Mapping: At the Intersection of Complexity and Reduction

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Answering the call to reflect on the definition of literary space and how it relates to the actual world, this brief paper focuses on one of the *practices* through which this space is engaged. More specifically, this paper conceives of literary space as a mobile category that materialises at the intersection of author, text and reader—a category shaped by the coming-into-being of these intersections. Ultimately, a theory of literary space requires (among other things) an account of the manifold practices (whether performed by authors or readers) that provide meaning, the core of analysis.

Literary mapping forms the foci of this paper, particularly so-called reader-generated mappings (Cooper and Priestnall 2011), mappings performed by readers during or after the reading of a literary text. Literary mappings create a space where the geography of the text is questioned, and where literary space emerges in new ways, informing different perspectives on the actual world. The literary mapping practice involves the wider field of literary cartography in a multidisciplinary exploration of the connections between maps and literary works. As an interdisciplinary and protean field, literary cartography has held many meanings and continues to develop new ones, depending on the stance that informs its emergence and materialisation. The field sometimes focuses on how the imaginative power of the maps *in* literature provide hints to cartographers (Muehrcke and Muehrcke 1974), but there is also interest in how maps in literature contribute to producing ‘new and intriguing dimensions of space’ (Ljungberg 2003: 160). It can be concerned with the relationships between maps and the imagination (Bouron 2010). Broadly speaking, literary cartography focuses on literature’s engagement with the cartographic realm as well as the ways in which maps seize literary imagination and power. As maps emerging from the intersection between

the text and the reader, reader-generated maps have much to say about literary space. Indeed, they are debated ‘tools’ (Moretti 1998), ‘starting points’ (Reuschel et al. 2009: 6) and “critical tools” (Young and Levin 2013, p. 154). These maps *of* literature are at the core of past and current reflections on the role of cartography. In particular, they suggest new ways of looking at ‘geography *in* the text’ (Brosseau 1995: 95), and at actual space—through the lens of literature. Furthermore, they contribute in producing new dimensions of literary space.

With the digital shift and the pervasive presence of mapping services in people’s everyday lives (think about the ubiquity of Google Maps), the mapping of literature has become a customary practice performed by very different actors, including research branches at universities concerned with digital/spatial/geo/humanities. This trend was well-documented in a recent collection of contributions edited by David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson and Patricia Murrieta Flores, *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age* (2016). This sudden transformation of the world urges us to re-engage literary mapping as a meaningful exercise for engaging literary space and the actual world, providing both with new meanings. Maps of literature are contemporary tools through which spatial perception and construction is performed using peculiar geovisualisations aimed at spatially (and graphically) re-narrating literary works.

In exploring how literary mapping practices engage narrative space, materialising and giving it meanings, I do not aim to focus on single literary mapping projects; rather, I seek to focus on the categories that inform this emergence. In particular, I centre on a binary of categories that has fed and kept alive literary mapping as a contested practice: the reduction/complexity binary.

An unexhausted dialectic emerges from the tension between geometric reduction and narrative complexity: it informs most of the contemporary literary mapping impulses (Mitchell 2017). Moretti, for example, suggested thinking about the textual space as an active force participating in the construction of the text (Moretti 1998), introducing a new method for visualising and analysing this force: the cartographic reduction. The Literary Atlas of Europe website ([www.literaturatlas.eu](http://www.literaturatlas.eu)) states that literary geography/literary cartography has the goal of visibly rendering the complex overlays of real and fictional geographies. The ‘Mrs. Dalloway Mapping Project’ (one of the numerous projects that can be found on the Web) was born to “essentially clarify the occasionally confusing novel” ([mrsdallowaymappingproject.weebly.com](http://mrsdallowaymappingproject.weebly.com)) by Virginia Woolf using interactive geovisualisations able to seize the narration while simplifying it through cartographic reduction. The category of textual complexity can be applied to many literary mapping projects because they have emerged precisely to engage this complexity through mapping. Literary maps participate in the international debate on literary space, evolving into innovative strategies aimed to mobilise literary pages beyond their textual nature. Nevertheless, as stated by Cooper and Gregory (2010), ‘The identification and mapping of key words and emotional tropes may lead to the distorting marginalisation of the complexities and inherent contradictions embedded within literary articulations of space and place’ (101). Cartographic reduction could lead to misinterpretations of the crucial ambiguity

produced by literature; fixing such complexity onto a planar surface can produce less meaningful interpretations of the text—and of the world. Many critiques have focused on the inherent reduction of literary mappings; both geography and literature scholars have emphasised the danger of misinterpreting the potentialities of the text as well as the geographical nature of literature. As such, mapping often has been considered geometrisation (Cerreti 1998) of the textual space. Many describe it as a reductionist practice guiding the reader into simplifying the text into a set of words to map while thinking about geography as a geometric relation of forces. Cartographic reduction has been the strength of literary mapping as well as its weakness. It guided the emergence of the practice and transformed it into a highly-debated methodology. But why—after all of the debates and deconstructions—are we still mapping literary texts?

There is an ongoing dialectic between narrative complexity and the cartographic reductive aim that keeps literary mapping alive. The narrative complexity, of course, is what Marc Brosseau (1995) would have called the geography *of* the text (its nature in formal terms, such as syntax and montage) that is very difficult to map out, while the cartographic reductive view still has much to offer. There exists a nervous tension between the two terms of reasoning, and it continues to evade easy solution: reduction never obliterates complexity, having it as an unexhausted premise; at the same time, complexity continuously demands cognitive tools that must be grasped. This dialectic invites us to look at literary mapping not simply as a map of the text produced by the reader, but as a set of processes: the reading, the envisioning, the mapping and all the other meaningful steps embodied by the practice. Moreover, because maps and mapping practices are ontologically (and cognitively) connected to the actual world, the mapping impulse guides the reader to conceive the textual space as connectable to the world.

Literary mapping is not a simply map telling us about the connection between the world and the text; it is not a graphic reduction of textual elements. Literary maps provide a way of seizing literary texts as well as a method for conceiving of the space and its relationship with the actual world. Mapping, metaphorically and materially, affects how we view relationships between the geographies of the texts and of our world. The continued tension between text complexity and the reduction lens of mapping tools creates a space where the geography of the text emerges as an active force, an active force that is able to guide our gaze outside the text. This view highlights the role of the literary space in informing new perspectives on the actual world, perhaps providing insight into why we still aim to map literature.

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