

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Thinking (about Literary) Spaces: Ideas from the Cambridge Literary Geographies Conference

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This journal was first published in 2015 with a commitment to encouraging ‘cross-fertilisations at the juncture where geography and literature meet’ (Hones et al. 2015: 1). This commitment is nowhere more apparent than in the number of special issues in recent years which have grown out of conference panels. After all, conferences are spaces where, unleashed temporarily from the disciplinary shackles which constrain our day-to-day working lives, cross-fertilisations can be seeded and can grow. This special collection of Thinking Space pieces is no different. The short but compelling pieces collected here are the product of a conference on literary geographies held in Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in March 2017. This international gathering of geographers, literary scholars, literary cartographers and literary geographers was greatly encouraged by the editors of this journal to further the intellectual interactions between scholars working in this discipline – and to better help its advancement. In this introduction to the eleven Thinking Space pieces collected here I will provide a context for the ideas they put forward and the debates they illuminate.

The Cambridge conference on literary geographies began with a broad-reaching question: ‘What is literary space, how is it defined and how does it relate to the extra-textual world?’. This question was raised by a special issue of this journal, published late in 2016, in which papers discussed the interaction between ‘the work and the world’ (see McLaughlin 2016). The pieces collected here, which mostly grew out of the conference debates, approach the question of what literary space is and how it may be defined from such various angles as literary cartography, intertextuality, toponymy, politics and pedagogy. The

conference attendees went further, finding possible answers and new directions in such diverse topics as sixteenth-century theatre studies, historical geography, questions of scale and collaborative fiction making. For ease of reference, I have presented here the pieces and the related conference debates in three broad groups: mappings, the shape of literary space, and literary geography's futures.

Mappings

Literary cartography is a key methodology within the broad field of literary geography. Many of its practitioners, including Franco Moretti, Barbara Piatti and David Cooper and Ian Gregory, have made literary cartography central to the practices and debates of modern literary geography. Not content, in their discussion of literary cartography, with rehearsing arguments about the *what* of literary maps, our roundtable participants began by questioning the *why* and the *when* of these artefacts, too. This began with a reminder from Sara Luchetta – whose insightful points led this discussion – that maps are not static records or flat objects. Rather, they are ontogenetic creations made by multiple actors at different points of engagement with a text. The group probed the role that literary maps play in relation to the creation of literary space – questioning their relation to texts as apparently secondary or *post hoc* creations. We considered whether maps were always useful tools for representing or creating space.

The three Thinking Space pieces presented here reflect the key themes of this debate. First, Sara Luchetta's piece on 'so-called reader generated mappings' speaks to the complexity of literary mappings and the varieties of work they do in relation to texts. She reminds us that literary maps are more than simplifications of 'true' literary spaces manifested in texts. Rather, maps play their own role in creating and mediating literary space. 'Mapping', she writes, 'metaphorically and materially, affects how we view relationships between the geographies of the texts and of our world'.

Our next two pieces provide differing perspectives on how we can use literary mappings to understand and to analyse the relationships between literary spaces and extra-textual spaces. Joanna Taylor, Christopher Donaldson, Ian Gregory and James Butler's 'Mapping Digitally, Mapping Deep' takes as its starting point the use of digital maps as a critical tool in 'investigations of the material, discursive and imaginative geographies that inform our conception of a location's topography and cultural identity'. Like Luchetta before them, Taylor et al. warn against a simplified understanding of digital mappings as mere representations of 'actual' landscape or 'original' literary space. Rather, they argue that the practice of 'deep mapping', which 'involves the accumulation and layering of various different kinds of geo-locatable media' provides a means of visually representing the overlap between literary and extra-textual spaces and of conveying how text and world occupy the same space.

Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza's piece takes a different view. He presents mappings as a means of interrogating fiction's claims to be grounded in or connected to the extra-textual world. By following toponyms – place names – Aseguinolaza argues that we can uncover a

critical fact about literary space and its relation to non-literary space. In a tacit reference to the questions thrown up by Luchetta and by Taylor et. al., Aseguinolaza notes that the ‘places to which toponyms refer are not always as fixed or certain as one might suppose’. Rather, he argues, authors’ claims to place their fictional events in real settings through the medium of toponyms result in extra-textual cultural practices which ‘inscribe fictions within geographical spaces’. In other words, as he writes, the referential links between text and world reflect the fact that ‘fiction lacks its own, proper territory, and that it uses that of its other’.

The shape of literary space

The core of our roundtable discussions focussed on the issue of what literary space might look like and how it can be defined. As such, many of the Thinking Space pieces published here demonstrate their authors’ different approaches to this broad topic. The first two pieces in this category – Kolson Schlosser’s ‘Intertextuality and Psychic Space’ and Emily Potter and Brigid Magner’s ‘Expanding Australian Literary History Through Geography’ – evoke a central theme in the conference debate: that literary space is an accumulation of various experiences and representations and that there is no ‘objective’ or ‘authentic’ space which lies underneath this, waiting to be uncovered.

These two pieces approach this idea in different ways. Schlosser brings Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic analyses of literary space to bear on questions of textual space, because, as he argues, her theory ‘invokes psychic and political registers that remain very useful to a critical understanding of literary space’. In Schlosser’s hand, Kristeva’s theory enables us to think about the Barthesian ‘shared fabric of social consumption’ out of which all literary spaces emerge, in an abstractly spatial way, through the three-dimensionality of textual space – dimensions within which readers’ relations to authors, and texts’ relations to other texts, can be plotted and analysed. Meanwhile, Emily Potter and Brigid Magner urge us to consider ‘the power that stories have on emergent communities and their more-than-human worlds’. Presenting a study of what they call place-stories, in the Wimmera-Mallee region in South Australia, Potter and Magner stretch our understanding of ‘literary text’ by including oral histories and other stories in their account of how there are no places without stories.

The middle piece in this category, Laurie McRae Andrew’s ‘Towards a Political Literary Geography’ emerges directly from a discussion at the March conference. Starting with literary geography’s claims that literary practices – from writing to reading to discussion – are firmly embedded within the world as social processes, McRae Andrew asks a pertinent question: ‘Who participates in the spatial event of the text, and on what terms?’. During the roundtable discussion some participants drew on literary geography thinking about the relational nature of fictions as events to argue that people can find their own way ‘in’ to texts, by relating them back to familiar spaces and thus creating multiple geographies and histories of one text. However, McRae Andrew’s work continues to remind us that the multiple events of fiction and their fragmented yet whole literary spaces are hardly devoid of political or ideological dimensions.

The final two pieces in this topic, Elizabeth Jones's 'What Literature is Spatial?' and Marcus Doel's 'Literary Space Uncut', unveil the role of literary geography's practices themselves in shaping literary space. Elizabeth Jones's piece takes literary geographical studies as a space or, rather, a collection of spaces, in itself. Reflecting the language of travel writing and postcolonial studies, Jones positions literary geography within a 'contact zone' which straddles (and which perhaps simultaneously divides) literary studies and geography. This contact zone, she argues, like all such liminal spaces, is defined and constrained by stereotypes and assumptions. It is only by consciously challenging these disciplinary assumptions – by asking questions such as 'what literature is spatial?' and 'what space is literary?' – that literary geographers can break out of this stifling restrictive place and broaden our horizons further into interdisciplinary.

Focusing on the questions around which the Cambridge conference was organised – namely 'what is literary space, how is it defined, and how does it relate to the extra-textual world?' – Marcus Doel uses metaphors of cutting and unfolding to tease out the implications of literary geographical analyses of spatial relations. He presciently notes that, as implied in the question of 'what is literary space?', 'the "where" of literary space qua starting point is self-evidently not "here"'. This sense that, in searching for a definition of literary space we are moving somewhere, allows Doel to posit literary geography as a mobilising act (one defined by 'spacing'), and to imagine space as an almost-indescribable in-between: 'Between slippage and spillage, between this world and the next'.

Literary geography's futures

The Cambridge conference ended with a collective look to literary geography's possible futures. A key point in this discussion was that any firm future directions must depend on an accurate accounting of the discipline's history and traditions. Encouragingly, as Sheila Hones noted, often when hunting for examples of literary geographical practice, the more one looks, the more there is to be found. A discussion ensued about what kinds of questions we, as literary geographers, should be asking: appropriately for this interdisciplinary field of study, this debate was never entirely resolved.

Exploring literary geography's many possible futures and how we can attain them is a collective idea underpinning the last three Thinking Space piece in this collection, which each take teaching as their vehicle to discuss new and developing ways of advancing literary geography, in theory and in practice. Rob Briwa's 'Teaching Literary Geography: An American Perspective' and David McLaughlin's 'Teaching Literary Geographies in British Classrooms' grew out of their shared discussions in Cambridge, particularly Rob Briwa's challenge to the conference to consider what a literary geography curriculum might look like. Briwa's piece takes up this challenge in relation to the large undergraduate lecture system that operates in many universities in the United States. He proposes that a literary geography course, 'structured around a regional theme' can help develop our discipline within an American context. He suggests that teaching literary geography to undergraduates as an elective course can both encourage the spread of interest in our discipline and provide

student with additional cases studies and geographical techniques on which to draw in their mainstream classrooms. In contrast, David McLaughlin's paper approaches undergraduate teaching from a British university perspective. He notes that the rewards of teaching literary geography in this setting are related more to the role that teaching plays in helping to advance academic research. Classrooms can provide the right environment for literary geographers to unpack the history, traditions and future directions of this discipline. Teaching literary geographies can also empower a new generation of readers – whether they become scholars or not – to better understand their role in the definition of literary space and its relation to other spaces.

The final Thinking Space piece in this issue, Sheila Hones and Richard Carter-White's 'Teaching Literary Geographies: Visual Analysis', challenges the perceived hegemony of Briwa's and McLaughlin's Anglophone classrooms by focussing on the benefits and challenges of teaching literary geography in an internationally-populated Japanese classroom. Hones and Carter-White confront the fact that literary geography is an international field. They note that fluency (or a lack thereof) in the many languages of literary geography need not be a barrier to the practice of our discipline: 'even students who struggle to articulate their ideas in English', they write, 'are typically well able to deal with sophisticated academic concepts'. Their solution to draw out scholarly thinking from linguistically less-fluent students is through visualisation of literary space. In so doing, they present a new angle on the relation between literary space and extra-textual spaces, one which emerges from the gap between thinking and expressing.

Works Cited

- Hones, S., Alexander, N., Cooper, D., Kneale, J. and Ridanpää, J. (2015) 'Editorial.' *Literary Geographies*, 1(1), pp. 1-2.
- McLaughlin, D. (2016) 'The Work and The World: Mobilities and Literary Space.' *Literary Geographies*, 2(2), pp. 122-127.