

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Collaborative Embodiment: Literary Geographies of Female Health and Illness

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### Introduction

When thinking about the scope for interdisciplinary collaboration, it is always interesting when one comes across the same term being used across various disciplines, as it suggests a shared vocabulary ripe for exploration. Embodiment is one such term. Originally a Western philosophical concept regarding the Fall, embodiment has come to focus more on the nature of subjectivity, or, as Justin E.H. Smith puts it, ‘the extent to which one’s own subjective experience of the world is forged or inflected by the particular sort of body one has’ (2017: 1). If we take this quotation as the starting point of discussion, we can pinpoint three particular ideas of note. Firstly, that embodiment relates to our subjective experience, a key-component of much literature. Secondly, that the focus of that experience is in and of the world, a distinctly geographical concept. And thirdly, that bodies can come in different ‘sorts’, familiar ground to anyone with an interest in any kind of ‘othering’ be that in relation to race, gender, class, ability or fitness. Building on these three ideas of subjectivity, geography and bodily matter(s), I will consider ways in which literary geography, feminist theory and health geography might collaborate and co-mingle around the concept of embodiment.

### Subjective Literary Geography

Important work is being undertaken regarding subjectivity and the body within the field of literary geography. Sheila Honess’ study of the aural elements of Colum McCann’s novel *Let the Great World Spin* investigates the importance of going beyond the visual when considering

the extent of ‘embodied literary microgeography’ (Hones 2015: 80). Attention needs to be paid to the manner in which authors create engaging landscapes by reference to sound, smell, touch and taste as well as vision. Richard Brown considers the relationship between modern architecture and Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on embodied familiarity in J G Ballard’s *Concrete Island*, tracing the relationship between the pain experienced by the protagonist and his environment (Brown 2016). Jonathan Bratt goes beyond subjectivity within the text to consider the phenomenology of literary production, the relationship between the author and the audience, and the embodied experience of reading, arguing that a three-way unity exists between the world, the author and the work and that any act of reading involves the entire body (Bratt 2016). Even such a brief consideration of the field highlights the importance of embodiment to literary geography and the variety of investigation to which the concept lends itself.

### **Literary Global Feminism**

Feminism’s particular emphasis on embodied experience as the launch point for critical exploration leads us to the ‘other’ bodies available beyond the white, male, heterosexual ‘I’ of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, the many-hued, female, queer, sick bodies which inhabit both the real geography of the world and the literary geography of the imagination. Thinking about the implications of what ‘sort’ of body a reader, author or character might possess has been the focus of a number of critical endeavours, from feminism to post colonialism via Marxism and beyond. Fischer and Dolezal’s recent monograph on *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment* highlights the ongoing relevance of questions of gender and body identity within a newly globalised theoretical framework. The contributors make interesting use of literary vocabulary in their discussions of ‘performing pregnancy’ and ‘the metaphors of commercial surrogacy’ whilst also engaging with the geographical concepts of ‘contested terrain’ and ‘sovereign bodies’ (Fischer and Dolezal 2018). This would suggest that collaboration between literary geography and feminist theories of embodiment might be particularly fruitful given the cross-pollination of terminology relating to embodiment which is already happening between the two fields.

### **Bodily Human Geography**

Neal Alexander describes literary geography as ‘situated at the interface between human geography and literary studies’ (Alexander 2015: 1). If we now turn to human geography we can find a growing interest in embodiment which corresponds to that expressed in literary geography. Hester Parr undertook an early centennial review of the development of the sub field of human geography referred to as medical or health geography, calling for more focus to be put on the embodiment of the subject within human geography, highlighting the growing significance of the individual as a site of geographical interest alongside the increasing attention being paid to the relationship between space and wellness (Parr 2002). The intervening years have witnessed a proliferation of bodily-focused work falling under the

umbrella of health geography such as disability studies, feminist health geography and gerontology (Dyck 2003; Imrie 2010; Andrews, Evans, Dunn and Masuda 2012). This growing awareness of the subjectivity of the body within human geography corresponds with the parallel interest I have outlined above within feminist theory and literary geography.

### **Collaborative Embodiments**

Given that we have a push towards the embodiment of the subject within medical geography, and an equal interest in the subjectivity of the body within literary geography, I would argue that there is real scope for genuine collaboration between the two spheres of enquiry. Medical geographers have started to engage with the humanities to add new depth to their research, borrowing isolated elements from literary criticism or specific genres to shed light on the normative experiences of patients. Coyle and Atkinson explore narratives of hopelessness in the chronically unwell within a complex framework of time, place and the body (Coyle and Atkinson 2018). Jennifer Laws points to the nuance literary magical realism can bring to a human geography perspective of some of the uncanny experiences of mental difference (Laws 2017). As social scientists engage with the more ephemeral aspects of bodily experience, they are turning to the poetic language of literature for the means to discuss unmeasurable subjectivities such as pain, grief or mental distress, but there is scope for much greater collaboration. Chris Philo's work on madness, romance and geography and Miguel Ángel Fraticelli's thesis on madness and geography in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* come close but I have yet to find any sustained engagement with the significance of location on the embodied experience of illness in literary characters, or the relationship between fictional depictions of health and the reader (Philo 2012; Fraticelli 2016). Literary geographers need to work with the insights of medical geography to bring new focus to considerations of female literary illness, and the wider role fictional representation of health and illness plays in the societal constructs of care. I suggest that using embodiment as a focus for combining insights drawn from literary geography, health geography and feminist theory would shed new light on how we understand literary texts. What, for example, is the significance of the Manhattan setting to Esther Greenwood's descent into illness in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*? Or the susurrant impact upon both the reader and the two female characters on either side of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*? To borrow a phrase *du jour*, what further entanglements might we discover if we explore collaborative embodiments between feminism, literary and medical geographies?

### **Conclusion**

Literary geography is ideally situated to explore the interface between literary studies and medical geography, bringing together the shared insights of embodiment from both sides of the divide. Literary texts offer us a wealth of discussion regarding the embodied, site-specific, experience of illness. To return to Smith, we could gain valuable insights if we were to consider the extent to which literary subjectivity is determined by embodiment, and the extent to which

our subjective experience of the fictional world is forged or inflected by the particular sort of body a character has, and the particular ways in which that body might (mis)function.

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