LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Whither the City, Withered City:

On Abandonment, Absence, and Sociality

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Domestic Isolation, Urban Desolation

The COVID-19 pandemic radically disrupted the spatial circuits of social, political, and cultural life. Its geographical upheavals were decidedly multi-scalar: from regional and international travel restrictions to the bodily practices of masking and extending personal proxemics. Perhaps the most notable spatial consequence of the pandemic for many was the near-total relegation of life to domestic space. In a recent piece, Hones (2020) reflects on the role that literary geographies—its methods, theories, and practices—might play during such a moment of radical flux. Her essay focuses on a longstanding concern with where stories 'happen' (Hones 2008; 2014), a phrase whose multiple senses evoke questions of literary setting, but also of literary production, distribution, and reception. Hones applies this lens to what is probably the dominant affect of the COVID-19 era: isolation. Literature is frequently *about* isolation, written by authors frequently imagined to *toil* in isolation; but literature is also a means of *overcoming* isolation. It evokes and gathers diverse temporalities and spaces, forging connections between readers, writers, and fictional characters. In this dramatic moment of homebound isolation, therefore, literary geographies are more relevant than ever.

Extending Hones' line of inquiry, this essay redirects attention toward the city under pandemic conditions. The city's vibrancy is, in many ways, inversely correlated with domestic isolation. The conceptual objects of geography are always interrelated (Jessop et al. 2008). Spaces transform relationally (e.g., Soja 1989 on 'interjacency'), as do places (e.g., Massey 1994) and scales (e.g., Brenner 2001). During the pandemic, as domestic space became the

primary site of (un-)social life, urban landscapes were emptied of their usual throngs. Restaurants closed, shops shuttered, traffic thinned. The markers and practices of urban existence became untenable with a contagion blazing through the world's cities. The imperative to stay home—which of course excluded so many precarious workers deemed essential—yielded a widespread sense of isolation. This *isolation* is linked to a host of associated concepts also worthy of consideration. It acquires semiotic distinction in relation to other terms like seclusion, loneliness, atomization, confinement, separation, and solitude. Many others could no doubt be added to the list. Each connotes and emphasizes different facets of a generalized experience currently foregrounded by the pandemic.

If this constellation of terms reveals nuanced shades of the domestic experience under COVID-19, what, then, are the corollary concepts that attach to the contemporary urban? When our own stories no longer "happen" at the scale of the urban, what literary treatments of the city become relevant and resonant? Put differently, what might a literary geography of *absence* look like? As the pandemic rampaged across the human and geographic landscape, a genre of media coverage became prominent, one highlighting the seeming abandonment of once-bustling urban spaces. Nonfiction writers bemoaned the unpeopled *piazzas* of Rome (Poggioli 2020), the unusual quiet of New York (Cohen 2020), and the uneasy stillness of pandemic Paris (Gunther 2020). The *New York Times* project "The Great Empty" exemplifies the photo essay variant of such coverage. Photographs from around the world depicted urban scenes emptied of their normal human flurry: Times Square and the Spanish Steps; darkened streets in Bangkok and London; monumental architecture in Sydney, Seoul, and Washington D.C.; highways in Bógota; pedestrian thoroughfares in Barcelona and Milan; transit hubs in Munich, New York, and Tokyo; concrete expanses in Paris, Berlin, and Caracas. The photographs are artistic and beautiful, but also shot through with a deep sense of anxious unease.

In all such coverage, the urban is conveyed as a site of abandonment, desolation, emptiness, and desertion. The writings in these treatments frequently employ affective terms to narrate the images: uncanny, eerie, haunting, ghostly. This, then, is the flipside of stay-at-home orders and their attendant affects of isolation and confinement. As most stayed home, and as elites fled to second homes elsewhere, the urban lost much of its cultural lifeblood. The sociopolitical response to the virus reduced living cities to haunted ruins. Their newfound abandonment stripped them of sociality. The pulsing civilization—of which such cities are simultaneously a reflection, manifestation, and symbol—suddenly felt lost to another (pre-pandemic) time.

One striking aspect to all of this is the degree to which fiction offered the template through which the emergent spatiality became legible. References to literature and popular culture helped us make sense of our new cultural geographies. The pandemic's unfolding was described as "like" so many apocalyptic books and films. Newspapers, blogs, and bookshops circulated lists of what to read during lockdown. Jill Lapore's (2020) wonderful *New Yorker* essay on "contagion fables" mentions several of the recurring works common to such lists: Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Stephen King's *The Stand*, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Jose Saramango's *Blindness,* Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Literature became a means through

which many came to understand their new routines and spatialities. There was a distinct anti-mimesis to it all, echoing Oscar Wilde: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life."

Literary Geographies of Urban Abandonment

My primary ethnographic research explores the convergence of urban place-making, multi-scalar mobilities, and cultural transformation in Nepal (Linder 2017), and it is this work that initially brought me to literary geographies and geocriticism (Linder 2019). At first, however, my own COVID-19 reading list was unrelated to my academic pursuits. It was only later that these interests dovetailed. The media coverage of abandoned urban landscapes had coalesced through a set of well-defined, recurring themes: haunting, desolation, eeriness, uncanniness, ghostliness, desertion. The journalistic narratives seemed to acquire potency through their implicit appeals to art. Journalism offered literary and cinematic portrayals of the contemporary urban. Such treatments made sense of a geographical reality with recourse to a preexisting cultural idiom. Specifically, they did so by evoking an archetypal abandoned city forged in various literary treatments.

Among the most famous, formative, and enduring of these treatments is Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, whose setting has the added relevance of being the product of a horrible pandemic. The novel, which innovatively blended horror and sci-fi elements, follows Robert Neville in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. He is apparently the last man alive after a disease has turned the rest of humanity into vampires. He hunts the vampires by day, when they are in vulnerable hiding. One could certainly focus on the "isolation" of Neville, particularly when he is fortified in his home every night, as the vampires try to coax him out with threatening taunts and temptations. Neville drinks himself into stupors, listens to classical music, reads, conducts experiments. He is consistently, explicitly torn between two poles: on the one hand, the need to steel himself against nostalgia and despair in order to remain vigilant in a dangerous present, and, on the other, the need to connect and forge human relationships by remembering the past and/or entertaining hopes for the future.

It is the moments when Neville ventures beyond his home that interest me here. Driving across an (apparently) abandoned Los Angeles, he procures supplies, visits the empty library, seeks out vampires. But the urban stillness is anything but peaceful. Such scenes become even more stark when rendered visually. *I Am Legend* has been adapted into three major films: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007). Filmed in Rome, Los Angeles, and New York, respectively, each adaptation diverges significantly from the source novel, but all of them feature striking images of desolate urban landscapes that are simultaneously silent and unsettling. Such landscapes provide pivotal establishing shots in the early minutes of each film. A motif emerges: the singular figure traversing geographies that "ought" to be peopled. To film the same character's actions inside a home (or within a vast *natural* landscape) would not have the same emotional impact. It might evoke a sense of solitude, but not of abandonment. The motif's symbolic power depends precisely on the urban backdrop. It is the city, as a material remnant of a bygone civilization, that transforms *i*solation into *de*solation, that turns loneliness into loss. Only once-

populated spaces can be deserted, only built structures can become ruins. The gap between what clearly once *was* and what clearly now *is* creates a tension. The geographical space acquires a haunted quality.

Of course, the abandoned city-as-ruins imagery occurs elsewhere in literature and popular culture. It pervades the more recent comedy series *The Last Man on Earth* (2015-2018). Another prominent example is 'Where Is Everybody?', the pilot episode of *The Twilight Zone* from 1959. For a series notoriously adept at instilling dread, fear, and eeriness in its viewers, it is telling that the first ever episode depicts a man wandering through an abandoned town. Signs of life are all around him: coffee brewing on a diner stovetop, a ringing telephone, the illumination of streetlights and a theater marquee, a still-smoking cigar resting in an ashtray, a movie projector running in an empty cinema. Yet if all of these register as signifiers of human habitation, the signified humans are conspicuously absent. As the protagonist in the episode states, 'If there was a bomb everything would be destroyed. Nothing is destroyed.' In popular music, this theme reappears in Bob Dylan's 'Talkin' World War III Blues.' While war and devastation are specters in the song, Dylan's unspecified city seems generally intact. Once again, it is the sociality of the urban, as opposed to its materiality, that has disappeared. The signifiers of humanity still exist, but without the signified human community:

> I was feelin' kinda lonesome and blue
> I needed somebody to talk to
> So I called up the operator of time
> Just to hear a voice of some kind
> "When you hear the beep it will be three o'clock"
> She said that for over an hour
> And I hung up

Again, the tension arises from the fact that what plagues the city is *not* destruction and devastation, but abandonment and desolation. The material city remains, but its human culture has vanished. The consequent sense of loss and absence results in an uncanny urban geography riddled with invisible phantoms.

There is a parallel portrayal of space in (post)apocalyptic/dystopian fiction, one in which the empty landscape is pervaded by the threat of strangers. In this distinct characterization, the world has largely devolved into a chaos of violence, looting, and disorder. This is the socio-spatiality found, for example, in Cormac McCarthey's *The Road* or Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. There is a similar sense of desolation, but the vulnerability emanates from the presence of unknown others rather than from their absence. It is other people (and the violence they might commit) that instils fear and dramatic tension. An analysis of these kinds of works in the context of COVID-19 would be worthwhile. Certainly, the presence of other people in public spaces now entails a great deal of fear due to the imminent threat of contagion. However, this is distinct from the literary geographies of *absence* I am concerned with here.

The sources discussed above do not induce fear because of a threat of physical violence or imminent harm. Even in *I Am Legend* (and its film adaptations), the empty cityscapes are known to be relatively safe during daylight hours, when readers/viewers encounter them. A significant portion of the emotional response to seeing an empty urban landscape stems not from the presence of a (perhaps invisible) threat, but from the *lack* of other people. The absence of humans creates a sense not only of fear and vulnerability, but also of haunting. The city becomes ruins, a material reminder of something lost, an empty shell attesting to a bygone sociality. As real-life images of urban abandonment were circulated and curated by the media during COVID-19, they drew upon (and were interpreted through) this extant literary motif. Journalistic images—of empty airports, abandoned public squares, shuttered commercial streets—were emotionally animated by a long tradition of urban desolation in literature and pop culture. Of course, one must also spare a thought for essential workers, whose experience of urban desolation was not vicarious and mediated in the same way. Delivery drivers, health care workers, custodians, grocery workers, and more all had to inhabit the ruins, continuing their circuits of professional life within a geography devoid of its usual humanity.

Conclusion: The View from 'Ersilia'

Urban abandonment under COVID-19 is inextricable from domestic confinement and isolation. These processes are directly related, existentially intertwined. Literature helps us grasp the dramatic geographical upheavals wrought by the pandemic: processes of displacement and enclosure, immobilization and rescaling. From my own homebound isolation, fiction fostered an understanding of the contemporary moment in general, and of its urban geographies in particular. However, the literary source that resonated most in this regard was, perhaps surprisingly, not a post-apocalyptic novel, but Italo Calvino's (1974) *Invisible Cities*. Long celebrated by geographers and literary scholars alike, the work fundamentally concerns the nature of signs and meaning, legibility and illegibility, structure and agency. Each chapter consists of a little prose-poem describing a unique fabulist city. One of the lesser-quoted examples (Trading Cities #4) strikes me as particularly relevant to the present discussion. This is the city of 'Ersilia.'

In dreamlike Ersilia, residents affix strings between buildings to signify social relationships. The sociality of the city thus manifests materially in the built environment. When the strings become too numerous and tangled, the residents uproot themselves. They tear down the buildings in such a way that only a dense network of strings remains. They go elsewhere in the territory, feeling hollowed out as they look upon the pattern of strings they have left behind. They start over with a new Ersilia. The residents repeat this process endlessly, creating an expansive landscape littered with old settlements: 'Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spiderwebs of intricate relationships seeking a form' (Calvino 1974: 76). Though inverted, this is exactly the sense of loss we feel while isolated in our homes, looking "out" onto our empty cities. The

material spaces of our former lifeworlds remain, but only as reminders. Our experience of the urban during lockdown is reduced to anxious grocery runs and sporadic errands. We maintain relationships virtually, but always longing for the imminence, tactility, and presence of a "form." That form is the city, which has meanwhile withered into desolate ruins.

This is why literary geographies of absence resonate so deeply. Like the strings of Ersilia, the built environment of our cities now points to a disappeared referent. The social actors have receded to isolation in their homes, and so we can only collectively gaze at the eerie material remnants of a vanished sociality. The material signifier (i.e., the built city) points to an experience of human community that is no longer tenable in everyday practice. We are left, for now, with only the spectral traces of such sociality. Of course, we know that our cities will return to something like normal when the pandemic abates. Indeed, much of the world has already begun the tentative thaw. The post-apocalyptic imagery will not endure except in memory and representation. Eventually, the period of homebound isolation will end. We will emerge back into our old cities with new stories, and we will begin to re-tie the strings of our social worlds.

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