LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Bird Watching with *The Peregrine:* Towards Literary Geographies of Comfort Reading

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Introduction

Above Winnemucca, Nevada, the parched-gold grass and silver sagebrush on Water Canyon's west-facing slopes are still richly lit. At the canyon's head is a stand of trees. Aspen leaves rustle in the evening breeze. Their straight, white trunks (scarred black in places with carved letters and hearts) suggest a temple to the young man who set his tent beneath them for the night. He sits at (or rather on) a concrete picnic table, quiet. Also on the tabletop: trail mix and two beer bottles, one empty, one half-full. He reads John McPhee's *Basin and Range* (1981) until the fading light dims and blurs the words. It's his first time in Nevada, he's been driving two days, and McPhee helps dispel the deep, anxious thrumming he feels in his neck after passing double-hitched semis on I-80 the whole day through. Tomorrow, he'll rise early, break camp, and drive the last leg to his uncle's funeral service in California.

Another place and time: Bozeman, Montana, during a dark, bitter-cold Rocky Mountain February. The same young man—older, now, than the evening above Winnemucca—is bone-tired and frozen after a late evening at the office and an exposed walk over the pitted ice and blowing snow that make the sidewalks of his mile-long winter commute treacherous. He stops for a moment at his mailbox, pulls at the latch of its door and breaks its thin seal of ice, reaches inside. Standing in snow and rifling through bills and advertisements, he suddenly feels warmed. Who hasn't smiled at a postcard, mailed from a faraway place you only know by the card's image and the familiar handwriting of a friend?

These vignettes happened, more or less. I share them because they depict two moments of 'comfort reading,' loosely defined here as a *creative practice readers use to gain a sense of well-being or healthfulness from engagement with texts*. In Winnemucca, I read McPhee to calm my nerves after a long day on the road, but I also learned to view unfamiliar landscapes with new eyes, shaping my subsequent journey across Nevada's basin and range geological province. Surely this co-production of Nevada landscapes out of the intersections of literature and geographical knowledge is a form of creative practice. And reading a postcard from a friend certainly promotes a sense of well-being for the recipient—warm feelings that come with being thought of—but the person sending the postcard, too, makes a complex set of creative decisions that include purchasing just the right card and writing the note on its divided back.

In a recent Thinking Space piece, Sheila Hones asks how we might use literary geographies 'to sit with other people, other places, and other times, as a way to look out into the dark, even when we are inhabiting cubes of loneliness' (2020: 13). It strikes me comfort reading does just that. In this essay I ask one fundamental question: How might literary geographers engage with comfort reading?

To answer it, I propose two thematic starting points. First, I explore possibilities of understanding texts' therapeutic qualities, particularly through their ability to represent therapeutic landscapes. Second, I turn towards comfort reading as particular form of relational literary geography. I end with a creative narrative documenting my experiences of comfort reading J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (2005) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By concluding this way, I adapt from Cresswell (2014) to document the merging of seemingly distinct streams of practice—reading and bird watching—that I performed during the pandemic. I intend this narrative to achieve several related outcomes. It reflects how my thematic starting points were never all that theoretically far from each other in the first place. In particular, the narrative positions comfort reading as an actor-centered spatial event (Hones 2008; Anderson 2015), where I demonstrate how text, author, reader, and landscape intersect to produce an improvised sense of healthfulness and well-being. Moreover, this task reflects how in this instance, both comfort reading *The Peregrine* and creative narrative as a geographical method represent what McLaughlin (2018) terms expansionary literary geography.

Specifically, it does so because I want to share new stories about how reading *The Peregrine* intersected in healthful ways with a particular social practice—bird watching—during the pandemic. The resulting narrative attempts to make legible my assertion that the 'comfort' of comfort reading is not passively received, but rather actively practiced, to other interested social communities—particularly those communities of literary and cultural geography. Inspiring these efforts are previous works by cultural geographers, who position creative writing as both method and mode of making geographical knowledge (DeLyser and Hawkins 2014; Ward 2014; Olstad 2015). Relatedly, it represents one geographer's experimental response to the late D.W. Meinig's long-standing call for geographers to create literature as well as borrow from it (1983).

Therapeutic Landscapes in Literature

The therapeutic landscape is an underexplored concept in literary geography. First proposed by Gesler (1992), therapeutic landscapes are a key conceptual innovation of medical geographies (Kearns and Milligan 2020). Therapeutic landscape research examines the 'dynamic material, affective, and socio-cultural roots and routes to experiences of health and well-being in specific places' (Bell et al. 2018: 1). To date, little research examines the intersections of therapeutic landscapes and literature, with a few notable exceptions (Baer and Gesler 2004; Willis 2009; Houghton and Houghton 2014). Literary geography's methodological toolkit—including close readings and content analysis—means practitioners operating within the tradition of using texts as a means to understand geographical concepts have much to contribute to exploring literary therapeutic landscapes. Two research avenues present themselves. First, literary geographers can explore how therapeutic landscapes are represented as special places and settings, paralleling work in medical geographies (e.g., Bell et al. 2015; Finlay et al. 2015). Second, they may continue exploring how literature subverts or complicates therapeutic landscapes (Baer and Gesler 2004; Willis 2009).

Another way to examine comfort reading is to connect the types of genre, literary settings, and narratives readers collectively engage with as comfort reading to their wider extratextual socioeconomic, historical, and geographical contexts. For example, numerous articles by journalists document changing patterns of book sales and consumption during the pandemic (e.g., Charlton 2020; Knibbs 2020; Milliot 2020). These suggest consumers are reading specific genres and topics at higher rates than normal. Preferred genres include non-fiction outdoor skills; histories of past pandemics; and diverse forms of fiction. These findings may come as no surprise, inundated as we are in our present moment.

Yet if literary geographers consider patterns of historical comfort reading, they might find different stories. What literary texts did people turn to for comfort reading during the 1918 pandemic? During the Great Depression? During global conflicts? Why? Answering these questions requires literary geographers to continue making connections with the subfield of historical geography. Historical geographers pay attention to historical methodologies as an integral part of understanding spatial phenomena (Meinig 1989) and their goal of writing empirically rich narratives about particular places offers windows into understanding past patterns and practices of comfort reading. Furthermore, at present historical geography is exploring imaginative ways to better understand past geographies (Wyckoff 2018), suggesting these two geographical subfields are ripe for further cross-fertilization in methods, materials, and perspectives. The common grounds are there, with literary geographers drawing from historical perspectives in their research and historical geographers making productive inroads into exploring the intersections of literature and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, these two subfields continue to have shared research goals. For example, recent calls by Price (2015) to broaden literary geographers' understandings of what constitutes a literary text align with historical geography's renewed interest in examining diverse media to better understand past geographies.

Finding Comfort in Literary Encounters

Hones's (2020) call for literary geographers to consider how we might respond to conditions imposed on us by the pandemic finds its focus in the understanding that texts are spatial events. Grounded in work by Hones (2008; 2014) and expanded on by work in relational literary geographies (Saunders and Anderson 2015), this perspective destabilizes notions that literature has some inherent therapeutic quality that 'brings' or 'gives' comfort. Instead, it suggests the comfort of comfort reading is found somewhere in the relationships between diverse sets of actors—including texts, landscapes, authors, and readers.

Recasting comfort reading as an actor-centered process highlights the plurality of ways comfort reading occurs. Any text—whether short story, religious book, postcard, or novel—may be implicated in comfort reading by way of its relationship to other actors operating and shaping that process. Furthermore, when bound into this process of comfort reading, literary texts 'overspill their textual boundaries and interact with the world,' (McLaughlin 2016: 123) and do so in ways promoting health and well-being for at least one type of actor: the reader. Yet as the introduction to this piece suggests, other actors may be involved as well. For example, does the person who sends a postcard—choosing the image, composing its brief message, and mailing it to a friend as a gesture of care—engage in creative practice promoting their own wellbeing?

David McLaughlin's (2018) expansionary literary geography is a useful concept for engaging with comfort reading's extratextual spillovers. For McLaughlin, expansionary literary geography is a type of spillover that occurs when readers of specific communities harness creative literature to co-produce literary spaces and communicate the results of their encounters with literature to other members of their community. For example, McLaughlin explores how Sherlockian societies deliberately employ creative writing to consciously expand on the literary spaces of Holmes's world. In the following section, I attempt my own expansionary literary geography to highlight comfort reading as a creative practice. To do so, I deliberately record my experiences of my literary encounters with *The Peregrine* as a bird watcher and literary geographer. My purpose is to demonstrate how this literary encounter spilled over into my extratextual world—and brought comfort when I most needed it.

Bird Watching with *The Peregrine*

In March 2020, universities across the United States transitioned to remote learning for the remainder of the spring semester. My own, located in Texas, followed this trend. Witnessing half-hearted local and state government measures to limit COVID-19's spread amongst a city populace seemingly determined to carry on life as usual, I imposed my own limited lockdown—leaving home for exercise along a local path and purchasing groceries every two weeks. My new solitude meant my daily rhythms changed. Each morning, I'd brew coffee and sit on my porch, reading until the day's heat drove me back inside.

I encountered J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* prior to lockdown, but turned to it again as lockdown days turned to weeks. In some ways these returns were comfortable. While re-

reading, I enjoyed anticipating some favored passage, and I liked how sections 'flowed' easier through my mind. But then I noticed how *The Peregrine* haunted in peculiar ways which crept unbidden into other aspects of my pandemic life, including the hobby that took on great importance to me: bird watching. It was in this spillover into extratextual space where reading *The Peregrine* became more fully realized as a creative practice promoting well-being.

Before we go any further, however, it may be helpful to explain *The Peregrine* to the uninitiated. A critically acclaimed work of twentieth-century environmental writing, *The Peregrine* is notable for Baker's intense focus on the book's eponymous birds; his rich descriptions of a patch of anonymous East Anglian countryside; and by what Baker hopes to achieve by following peregrines:

> Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of color that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified. (Baker 2005: 41)

Robert MacFarlane notes that Baker wants to engage in 'becoming a bird' (MacFarlane 2005: viii). Baker's goal of purification, of a retreat from being human, connected with a fundamental goal of my own bird watching: to find distraction from the pandemic's human troubles, if only for a short time. Baker's observational powers first crept into my bird watching involuntarily. Baker is a keen observer of landscapes and birds, and through long, patterned and repetitive practice, he learns how to identify what is significant about his local landscapes and ecologies to better observe the peregrines. In my own bird watching, there were no peregrines, of course, but I found myself recalling shadows of how Baker went about his observations. Once I noticed these early infiltrations, I began deliberately folding them into my own birding practices. Like Baker, I picked out birds' distinct flight patterns as a key way to distinguish them (181); observed birds' daily routines and movements (71); examined kill sites (91); and became motionless to acclimate birds to my presence (120). Moreover, Baker's language adapted itself to my experiences, from feeling the 'clattering rise' (39) of White-winged Doves or witnessing flocks of Great-tailed Grackles 'pouring up' (40) into an evening sky. Where my earlier vignette of comfort reading in Nevada revolved around a creative act imagining and re-imagining geographies to dispel tension, my reading of Baker's *The Peregrine* suggests comfort reading as a creative practice extends into the corporeal realm. Reading Baker led me to new modes of embodied practices across and within West Texas landscapes: new mobilities, new immobilities, and new viewpoints adopted in pursuit of birds.

In what has become a daily ritual, I raise binoculars to my eyes and my world slips away to tighten again around the focal point of a bird. In this instance it is a Mississippi Kite, lofting alone above the arroyo. The grey bird floats a bounded blue circle of sky. From my fixed position below it seems centered and in control of its space. It controls its watcher, too. Almost imperceptibly, it moves me, my torso and shoulders turning unbidden to keep up with its sweeping aerial arc. Abruptly, its wings tighten in a plunging drop from the circle's frame—

the momentary emptiness comes with a start, and I am suddenly aware of myself rotated ninety degrees from my original orientation. Binoculars down, the circle broken, and I find myself back into a sweating, sunburned body, tongue dry, shirt sticking to my ribs in the searing 103-degree Fahrenheit heat of a West Texas summer day. Beyond that, awareness of a relentless human present: pandemic, a boiling American political scene, an uncertain return to university, family far beyond reach, isolation.

It takes a moment to re-orient myself around the kite. There—with a turn of my pagan head, I spot its crescent body folded onto a mesquite tree branch, one among a dozen of its roosting kettle—and I raise the binoculars to my eyes again.

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