

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Literary Geographies in Isolation:

Introduction

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What kind of literary geography is possible and helpful when academic and social spaces are constricted by social distancing and isolation? This was one of the questions raised by a ‘Thinking Space’ piece on literary geographies in isolation published in the June 2020 issue of this journal (Hones 2020). Shortly after publication, we put out a call for informal and personal

responses to this theme, eventually selecting twenty-six essays for publication in this special issue of the journal.

As the original essay remarked, while experiences of the COVID crisis have differed widely according to national location and personal circumstances, almost everyone's ways of living and working must surely have been affected. As the essays submitted in response to our call make clear, many of us have been shut out of classrooms and libraries, have had conferences and meetings cancelled, and have been 'socially distanced' from colleagues near and far. In fact, the very concepts of the near and the far have lost much of their accustomed meaning this year. The essays collected here consider how we have been teaching under these conditions, how we have been doing research and writing, and how we have been collaborating. It has become clear in the process of putting this special issue together that one of the ways in which literary geographies can respond to a time of social and academic separation is through collaboration across distance.

In the early stages of this special issue project – as we worked with individual authors, reading, reviewing, discussing, copyediting, and proofreading – it was the editorial team who benefited the most from this collaboration. As a group we found ourselves encouraged by a sense of collective common purpose and companionship in a time of splintered sociability. Now that the issue is going online, as an open-access co-authored text, we hope that this sense of community will expand among readers as well as contributors, as we resist academic isolation and focus on the positive energies we have been able to salvage from this time of confusion and disarray.

Where the original essay spoke of the author Colum McCann's belief that literary fiction 'can promote empathy and understanding by allowing the writer and the reader to form deep connections with a novel's characters and so to see the world from their perspectives, and to grasp the profound interdependence of human society,' our experience with this special issue suggests to us that writers and readers can also form therapeutic connections with each other despite their very different experiences of the pandemic.

Many of the essays emphasise the importance of reading together across large and small distances: one essay describes a globally extended reading group that is engaging with speculative fiction, looking for 'ambiguous hopefulness' and ways to come together, to share and create new forms of knowledge as 'a form of collective care.' Another describes how the author re-read a favourite poet with her 94-year-old mother, one sitting on the landing and the other in the hallway, maintaining a safe distance while sharing poems and memories. Yet another describes a classroom in Bangalore that shifted online, reading Virginia Woolf on 'Kew Gardens' and rethinking issues of mobility in the context of personal and literary isolation. A final contribution to this thematic group engages with the way in which an online project managed the transition of narrative location from the actual threshold space of a creole veranda to a virtual version, located online.

While several essays describe disembodied online reading experiences and classrooms, others emphasise local experiences of the global pandemic: in Australia, Canada, Finland, India, Japan, Romania, the UK and the USA. Others consider the ways in which embodied practices of walking or running became entangled with reading during lockdown: one author

explores local walks with her children as they animate the landscape with story characters, another runs with Cormac McCarthy, a third walks with characters from *The Lord of the Rings*. Still another takes her ‘one walk a day’ in company with two Shropshire authors writing about women walking and social freedoms, finding that as she begins to focus more on the smaller details of her surroundings ‘the world began to open up around me and the space I inhabited seemed to become larger rather than smaller.’

In the essay on re-reading *The Lord of the Rings*, the author finds that ‘in moments of shadow, when the walls of the world seem to close in all about us’ there was comfort to be found in turning toward the hope voiced in the Hobbits’ road song, a positive anticipation of the unknown. In the same way that this author finds comfort in walking and re-reading a familiar story, another writes about bird-watching and comfort reading, considering ‘how text, author, reader, and landscape intersect to produce an improvised sense of healthfulness and well-being.’ Also therapeutic are the readings which provide authors with helpful ways of making sense of a ‘world turned strange.’ One writes of the way in which Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Wakefield’ offered him a useful parallel to the perplexities of life with social distancing, while another finds that fiction dealing with urban abandonment helped him conceptualise the current thinning of urban life as cities empty out. Literary geographies of home form another thematic group: how did the suddenly inescapable concern with home, sickness and lockdown come together in the UK, for example, in the collective engagement with the popular televised version of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*? Finally, another author turns to fantasy fiction to consider the relationship between being alone and feeling alone: reading Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* online with students, this author found that a shared engagement with fantasy fiction had the potential not only to enable an ‘escape from feeling alone’ but also to provide ‘therapy deriving from re-considering the nature of being alone.’

Isolation, incarceration, and memory form another thematic group, one which introduces a more critical note into the differentiated and often unequal experience of solitude. One essay deals with prisoners of war and their memories of and longings for mountains; another considers confinement in Bernard Stiegler’s account of reading in prison, looking at the potential of reading in transforming self, space and society. An essay looking at internment camp experiences contemplates the dynamic relation between concentration and isolation, noting the ways in which camp survivors tended to become isolated even from their own histories. An essay on the Southern Arizona Sonoran Desert and the precarity of migration also considers the tensions connecting intimate relations and isolation, while a contribution on living ‘in quarantine with Victor Klemperer’ offers another angle on reading to ‘make sense.’

Several essays consider the ways in which academic practice has been affected by the challenges of the past year. One author reconsiders the ways in which fiction and popular culture enable the contemplation of place while homebound. A group of essays engage with the practice of literary tourism in an era in which the opportunities for travel have been radically constricted. Should the practices of literary tourism be revised? If so, in what ways? Can literary geographies of elsewhere be incorporated into the experience of familiar, local

places? How has the year of COVID restrictions impacted the imagining and the visiting of holiday destinations? How has the experience of personal and academic loneliness and estrangement affected ways of working when research has typically been fieldwork-dependent? Finally, how might literary geographies of humour and crisis events be constructive under current circumstances?

The final essay in the collection comes at our theme from a rather different angle: while there has been a general emphasis on the way in which lockdowns have enabled solo and collective reading experiences, for some it's been more about 'trying to read' than actual reading. Too restless to read, this author turns to video games, although something about his reading still doesn't feel 'quite right.' 'Perhaps,' he thinks, 'it was never right to begin with. But reading goes on, for now. Even if that reading is a strange text adventure. Perhaps reading is what feels like home, too.'

Works Cited

Hones, S. (2020) 'The Cube of Loneliness: Literary Geographies in Isolation.' *Literary Geographies*, 6(1), pp. 11-14.