

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Plotting Race

Sophia Bamert

University of Virginia

[sbamert@virginia.edu](mailto:sbamert@virginia.edu)

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Geography is central to critical race studies, and cultural geographers have made major contributions to the field (e.g., see Gilmore 2002; Kobayashi 2004; Lipsitz 2011; McKittrick 2006; Pulido 2000). Yet literary geography remains at the fringes of this conversation. It is therefore worthwhile to articulate what our interdisciplinary approach to narrative and social space has to offer the theorization of race. The history of racial formation is a story about geography and ownership: as legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris emphasizes in her foundational article ‘Whiteness as Property,’ the development of property rights in the United States was premised on both ‘treating Black people themselves as objects of property’ and ‘acknowledging ... [o]nly white possession and occupation’ of Native American land (1993: 1716). Over time, that is, racial meanings have been plotted—both in narrative and in physical space. When read through the lens of a critical race literary geography, texts, ranging from creative works like novels to bureaucratic documents like the Federal Housing Authority’s Underwriting Manual, display how space comes to be racialized, as well as how uneven geographies are challenged.

The ‘plot’ is a generative concept for this endeavor because it formally links narratology and geography. It allows us to think through the interplay between geographies *in* and *of* the text (Brosseau 1995), between the real-world places a text represents and the spatial form of the text itself. This is because of the term’s three meanings: the plot of land, i.e. a locatable and circumscribed territory; the plot of a narrative, i.e. the sequencing of its story; and the scheme or conspiracy, i.e. an act of imagination. The triple meaning of plot has especially led scholars to explore the geographies of genre fiction: in these texts, crimes and conspiracies are traced as ‘itineraries’ where ‘the representation of movement ... enacts the story’ (Kneale 2011: 171, 176). Plots themselves ‘are *composed*’ by a variety of actors, including writers and

readers, and this process of composition co-constitutively shapes both texts and material geographies (Anderson 2014: 26, emphasis in orig.). Plots show us that to define a space means to tell a story about it, and to tell a story requires locating it in space.

The spatiotemporal and narrative movements of a plot—temporal sequencing and spatial demarcation—produce encounters with difference, which demonstrate how multiple stakeholders, from readers and writers to inhabitants and users of those spaces, tell competing stories that imbue space with racial meanings. The term is therefore operative to Thomas Heise’s articulation of ‘the gentrification plot’ in crime fiction. Focusing on historically redlined neighborhoods whose communities of color have now been displaced by redevelopment and gentrification, Heise illustrates how the confrontation between ‘self-congratulatory narratives of urban revitalization’ and ‘stories of urban displacement, racial conflict, class grievance, community erosion, and cultural erasure’ is a contest ‘over who has the right to tell the stories of the city’s past, present, and future; and over what kind of stories get told’ (2022: 7, 10). Importantly, the *narrative form* of crime novels stages this geographical struggle. What is typically read as a temporal delay that generates suspense is also a spatial form: ‘the genre’s circumambulatory structures and scopic point of view ... are the pathways by which the branching and weaving narrative investigates myriad social spaces of the city that it calls into being’ (18). In other words, plots trace and encode the relationship between identity and geography, both textually and materially. A reading practice that follows the construction of the plot can demonstrate how those linkages have been created and reproduced in the cultural imagination.

The imbrication of race and plot is perhaps most salient in phrases that tether visibly demarcated spatial boundaries to their racial connotations, such as ‘ghetto’—the name for walled-in Jewish districts in Europe that took on new meaning in the context of the Great Migration and anti-Black housing segregation in the U.S.—and ‘inner city’—a seemingly neutral geographic descriptor that, due to redlining and white flight, signifies those districts’ impoverished communities of color. ‘Plotting race,’ as I call it, can work to disentangle these oversimplified geographic associations: this approach sheds light on the complex histories and interactions involved in their cultural and material production and emphasizes the heterogeneous competing stories that they obscure.

An umbrella term, ‘plotting race’ encompasses a range of methods that bring literary geography to bear on critical race studies, and vice versa, through attention to the relationship between narrative form, material geographies, and racial formation. For example, the mapping of real-world locations referenced in texts can serve as a counter to hegemonic cultural assumptions about who lives, moves, thinks, and writes where. Elizabeth Evans and Matthew Wilkens (2018) have tabulated and mapped toponyms that appear in London fiction across four corpora of texts from the period 1880-1940, challenging critical wisdom about modernist geographies developed through the study of a much smaller set of canonical works, which are predominantly by white, male, British-raised authors. Most pertinent here is their finding that texts by foreign-born authors, and especially nonwhite foreign-born authors, ‘contained a significantly higher rate of mentions of three types of public sites’: parks, rivers, and political locations (Evans and Wilkens 2018: 38-9). They hypothesize that ‘colonial writers of color[]

may have employed topography to express their knowledge of and, by extension, their power within, the imperial metropolis and to place themselves on the map at “the heart of empire” (47). Literary mappings, whether computational or otherwise, ask us as critics to reexamine the relationship between race, space, and genre, as Evans exemplifies in her discussion of ‘reverse imperial ethnography,’ a mode employed by racialized outsiders documenting their movement through public urban space not through the *flâneur*’s detached and unnoticed gaze but ‘through heightened attention to the act of seeing others, and of being seen by them’ (2021: 327). Plotting race through literary mapping underscores the role that race plays in the construction of our geographical imaginaries.

Inversely (and yet always interrelatedly), the role of the built environment in the construction of a racial imaginary emerges through infrastructural and architectural reading practices. Looking at racialization on the scale of the city, Bo McMillan (2020) argues that urban planning is a narrative act, and its narratives are often countered and challenged in literature—although, as I will demonstrate below, there are also literary texts that contribute to and bolster the racializing plans that McMillan’s objects of study respond to. Specifically, the genre of the ‘urban planning novel,’ as exemplified by Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), ‘disrupt[s] the ways in which the production of urban space gets joined to racial narratives in a single cultural production’ (McMillan 2020: 660). The spatial and metonymic qualities of literature, Dean J. Franco (2019) suggests, demonstrate how racial identities are comparatively formed at material and cultural boundaries and intersections—for example, L.A.’s freeways materialize a spectrum of displacement and mobility that differentially produces Blackness and whiteness. Narratological approaches to plotting race may also focus on the scale of the architectural structure, which is designed and constructed within a particular racial context while also providing the setting for experiences of race. William Gleason identifies ‘homologies between narrative and architectural form’ (2011: 27), linking ‘the plantation piazza—perhaps the chief architectural marker of southern white racial superiority’ to Charles Chesnut’s use of frame stories, which ‘not only *depict*] the porch of a plantation-era mansion but also *function*] as the “porch” of the story itself’ (29, 26). The narrative architecture of Chesnut’s stories, Gleason argues, ‘claim[s] ground’ for African Americans in the face of racial and spatial oppression (29). Adrienne Brown expands on Gleason’s method by emphasizing that that ‘all architectures ... produc[e] and maintain[] site-specific phenomenologies of race’ (2017: 3). The height of the skyscraper reveals race to be ‘not only ... a matter of skin or blood but of scale’ (Brown 2017: 202): as registered through textual description, the supposedly visual signs of racial difference are no longer perceptible from a tall building. In other words, the formal features of narrative—from setting and description to narrative voice and sequence—guide readers through the phenomenological experiences that give race meaning.

Narrative perspective is particularly worth our attention when it comes to plotting race, for perspectival choices impact whose race is and is not registered, where race does and does not get mapped. As Sheila Hones (2011) demonstrates, narrative voice is a crucial element of a text’s spatial frames, which is to say, the movement and sequencing that compose a plot necessarily always emerge from a situated perspective. A reading of the narrative voice in

Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), for example, illuminates the rhetorical mechanism that shifted the meaning of American whiteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the European immigrants Riis writes about were not yet considered white, his inconsistent definitions of the 'line' dividing New York's 'Other Half' from his readers suggest that social, racial, and geographic mobility would come more easily to certain groups than to others. Chapters on the primarily Italian Mulberry Bend and neighboring Chinatown display a contrast between the chaotic spectacle of the former and the (to Riis) suspicious reserve and cleanliness of the latter, using racist tropes to draw rhetorical borders around the Chinese while inviting curiosity about the Bend. Although the text's overall impression is of a single 'Other Half,' its perspective shifts significantly and contradicts itself throughout—these are the rhetorical and spatial maneuvers that at once expanded and policed the borders of whiteness.

While some textual plots articulate and reify racial categories, others communicate experiences of being racialized and challenge reader assumptions. Using the first-person plural 'we,' the narrative voice of Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) describes witnessing immigrant neighbors move away from inner-city slums to the suburbs, but it does so from the stationary narrative perspective of African Americans immobilized in the Black Belt by racial restrictive covenants, the language in property deeds that proliferated throughout the early twentieth-century U.S. that prohibited sale or leasing to Black (and sometimes Jewish and Asian) tenants. As ethnic whites recede from view, able to purchase homes in the new suburbs, Wright emphasizes that the conspiracy, or plot, of whiteness, is an anti-Black map. A practice of 'plotting race' in literary geography thus reveals the contingencies, but also the long-lasting impacts, of racialization as a spatial project. From mapping toponyms to close reading textual description, literary geographers can show how spatial stories are always also racial stories.

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