# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

# On Doing Regional Geography with Literature

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'Region', 'regionalism', 'literary region', 'regional literature', 'imaginative region' – these are all important concepts when scrutinizing links between spatiality, human creativity and the problems and challenges in our society. The use of the concept of 'region' has a long history in literary geography, going all the way back to the end of 19th century when geography was institutionalized as an academic discipline. Alfred Hettner's (1907) argument that the main core of geography should be the study of regions, for example, provides the background answering the question of why using the concept of region and studying regional literature was the main concern during the early years of literary geography (Ridanpää 2017a: 187-9). Without going further into the methodological weaknesses of the early literary regional geography (see Brosseau 1994: 335-7), and noting that other conceptualizations and approaches have partly replaced the use of the concept 'region',[1] still, regions do matter today. A few years ago, John Tomaney published an interesting three-piece series of articles in *Progress in Human Geography* discussing the main orientations of contemporary regional geography. Tomanay divided the main directions into three separate thematic groups: 'institutions' (2014), 'belonging' (2015) and 'well-being' (2016). In what follows, I am going to scrutinize not only how these thematic groups can be and have been used in literary geography, but also show how these three themes become interlinked.

Although, as Tomaney (2014) argues, approaching regions within the context of institutions refers mostly to discussion over regional economic development and territorially based political struggles, literature has its own institutional role within the context of regionality. This approach leans mainly on the key arguments of the late 1980s' 'new regional

geography' when regions were understood within the context of interaction between human agency and social structures (Gilbert 1988). From the viewpoint of this new regional geography, literature was one of those socio-cultural institutions through which territorial awareness and the symbolic shaping of regions become established. Literature constructs and offers ideals and criteria about regional identity, stories about the grounds on which 'we' position ourselves as different compared to 'them' (Paasi 1984a: 56). Although regions are often discussed as formal pre-given linear drawings, it is important to underscore that all geographical abstractions or conceptualizations originate from the human imagination. The institutionalization of regions (see Paasi 1997) would be impossible without human creativeness and regional literature has played an important role in terms of how early and modern regions have attained their territorial shape, particularly at the intranational level (Ridanpää 2017a). Tomaney (2007) emphasizes the storied nature of regional identity and argues that 'collective identities are not pre-given, but draw on discourses to which intellectuals, cultural producers, and political leaders contribute' (357), at the same time implying that literary story-telling works as a social institution which can also have political implications.

The institutional "power" of literature is a key point when discussing how literary narrations and the wider society interact and influence one another. According to Hsu (2005: 36-7), 'the relation between literature and regional production involves not only the production of literature about regions but also the ways in which literary works produce, reimagine, and actively restructure regional identities in the minds and hearts of the readers.' As the constructivist approaches of the late 1980s emphasized, literature situated in a certain region, instead of reflecting and describing people and their regional identities, functions actively in the processes by which regional identities are socially constructed and mediated into people's territorial consciousness (Paasi 1984b: 114), as well as how the sense of belonging comes into being at the scale of a region.

As a concept, 'belonging' refers to subjective meanings attached to places and their connections to identity formation. Marco Antonsich has studied identities and belonging extensively, highlighting how 'belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)' (2010: 644). Compared to 'identity', 'belonging' is thus a much more geographically embedded concept, a term referring to a feeling of being 'at home' in a place, as argued by Antonsich. Correspondingly, Eleanora Rao discusses the links between places, belonging and literature, asking:

> How do characters make sense of the place they are seeking or fleeing? What makes a place a 'home'? The complexity of the notion of home involves a wide scale: domicile, home, and homeland. House is contiguous with a domestic dwelling construction and homeland addresses one's sense of national belonging. 'Home' as domicile summons geographies of settlement or a residence where a sense of self, place and belonging is shaped, articulated and contested. (2017: 118)

What is interesting in Rao's description is how she links belonging and being 'at home' into the themes of nationality and nationalism. In fact, according to Tomaney (2015: 508) geographers have studied belonging quite extensively within the contexts of nationality and citizenship (e.g. Secor 2004; Nordberg 2006; McConnell 2013), while the explorations of local, let alone regional attachments and belongings have still been relatively rare. In case of literary geography, it most certainly has an impact that the concepts 'region' and 'regionalism' are still associated primarily with countryside romanticism, a much studied topic in the 1960s. The interest back then was focused on "regional novels", most typically taking place within the context of rural landscapes and rural communities, at the same time defining the concepts of 'region' and 'regionality'. Regional literature has thus been considered as offering research material for the studies of 'provincial dwelling' (see Rycroft and Jenness 2012), while the socio-political and socio-cultural aspects such as the power relations of regionality have not been adequately recognized. In fact, understanding regionality as a synonym for rurality, at the same time romanticizing it as a counterpart of hectic urbanity, makes regional literature a socio-cultural tool for difference-making. Making a difference between 'self' and 'other' through personal expressions such as 'I belong here' is always conditioned by various power relations (Antonsich 2010: 652-3), while regionalism is a theme embedded in social discourses of difference-making, emerging

> from the perception of modern geographic plurality; writers and readers understand a larger unit of space (commonly the national territory) to be diversified at its periphery according to topographical features, economy, history, dialect, and manners. A region is always one among many within a common container, characterized by uneven development between center and periphery. Regionalism indicates that a writer has chosen to focus on one of the areas outside the centers of power, and to organize the work around that region. (Joseph 2019)

Regional well-being, the third theme in Tomaney's article series (2017), is typically studied by analyzing statistic indicators of regional development. It may sound that well-being does not fit within the scope of the interests of literary geography, but in fact well-being is inherently linked with how regional literature can function for the benefit of improving the quality of life in marginal regions. Even though regional literature is a socio-cultural tool of difference-making, it can also be of benefit for those being marginalized. In northern Sweden, for example, the local writer Bengt Pohjanen has created an archive of regional heritage by scripting local stories and documenting folklore, thus providing a resource for local culture industries (Prokkola and Ridanpää 2011: 782). Pohjanen's writings on the regional culture and heritage of northern Sweden have provided material that has been commercialized in EU-funded cross-border projects, such as INTERREG III A North, at the same time offering both financial resources and symbolic legitimation for local minority language revitalization work, such as the implementation of the School of Language and Culture. At the same time the maintenance of basic communal infrastructures and services was enabled (Prokkola et al.

2015: 111). One of the central goals of the school initiative was to raise regional consciousness and identity, teaching pupils alternative regional histographies and cultures, thus creating a link between the basic structures of well-being and their regional belonging.

Although regional literature and literary regionalism have often been seen in a positive light, sometimes overtly romanticized, in many cases regional writing functions as a cultural institution through which the discourses of spatial otherness become constructed and maintained. As illustrated above, the self-conceptions of people living in marginal regions are shaped by the performances of art and popular culture and by that means regional belonging becomes also a matter of regional well-being. Although stereotypical representations of people living in marginal regions typically maintain an atmosphere of low self-esteem, through narratives with irony and dark humour, for example, marginalized regional identity can be turned into something to be proud of (Ridanpää 2014, 2019). These humorous regional narratives are small stories that can have a major impact in changing people's shared conceptions of 'who we are'.

As mentioned above, in literary geography it has been relatively typical to approach regions as formal, fixed geographical categories, whereas in contemporary regional geography the relationality and more-than-relationality of regions has been emphasized (Jones 2022). Although the relational turn has been recognised by literary geographers (see, for example, Saunders and Anderson 2015), in the case of doing regional geography with literature the approaches have often been more or less "traditional". Regions, both as imaginative and institutionalized spatial units, come into being by doing. The way in which regional institutionalization is a matter of belonging, or regional well-being a matter of institutionalized belonging, is a matter of regions coming into being by doing. Approaching regions as social constructions may sound like a return to late 1980s constructivism, but what I am pointing out here is that linking different theoretical understandings, old ones with the new ones, is a valid and most importantly, a creative option to achieve the comprehension of our culture and society.

**Notes**

[1] The way literary geographers use different concepts when 'doing geography with literature' (see Hones 2018: 147), is ultimately about making theoretical contributions to human geography by establishing new conceptualizations. While 'region' is an old concept, today fresh and innovative concepts are used even in those cases where the discussion is focused first and foremost on regions. In my own research discussing the connections of humour and identity, I conceptualized the study with the framework of 'spatial identity', even though the discussion was specifically about regionality (see Ridanpää 2017b). This question may sound trivial, but the way we understand regions and regionality within our society and their societal impact is inseparably linked with how we use, or don't use, the concepts and ideas of regions and regionality within our own academic work.

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