

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Worldly Texts and Geographies of Meaning

Abdul Aijaz

Indiana University, Bloomington

To test her hypothesis about ‘a kernel of universal human experience’ in *Hamlet*, Laura Bohannan (1966) shares the story with the Tiv people of southeastern Nigeria, where she was doing her anthropological fieldwork. Apart from the general difficulty of translation across two very different languages, she is also faced with the almost impossible task of invoking the cultural and ritual background of English society – the birthplace of the play – to make it comprehensible for her audience. At every moment the story is appropriated by the audience within the larger sociocultural landscape where the it is narrated, even against the wishes of the narrator (and by implication the author). This is how the audience responds when told that Claudius marries his dead brother’s wife and steals his throne:

‘He did well,’ the old man beamed and announced to the others, ‘I told you that if we knew more about Europeans, we would find they really were very like us. In our country also,’ he added to me, ‘the younger brother marries the elder brother’s widow and becomes the father of his children. (29-30)

Bohannan is completely baffled by the appropriation of her story. Interestingly, the universalist claims on both sides convey an ethnocentric desire of appropriation which predicates on a simultaneous production and conditional erasure of difference. The Tiv elders further ask her whether Hamlet’s father and his brother had the same mother? Bohannan reminisce, ‘Rather uncertainly I said that I thought they had the same mother, but I wasn’t sure—the story didn’t say. The old man told me severely that these genealogical details made all the difference and that when I got home I must ask the elders about it’ (30). In the very act of being told, the story acquires a new iteration and gets appropriated in its new world. The meaning of the story depends not only on what the story narrates but also on the contextual geographies of power and constraints which resist, appropriate, and ascribe meanings to the text.

Bohannon's story affords an example of the theoretical concerns that the essays in this theme section share. The four essays trace geography of meaning as a process of the contextual instantiation of text. The authors read texts not as having a singular hermetic/hermeneutic identity, essential or internal to them, but as 'things of the world' whose meanings depend on their contextual articulation. As Elizabeth Fowler suggests, 'Art is a complex explosion of old, possible, and wildly wrenched meanings that are played out in the interface between artifacts and their users' (2013: 614); the worldmaking potential of literary artifacts is realized when the different trajectories of production and consumption of literary texts intersect. Acknowledging the worldliness of texts (Said 1983) and reading them as 'spatial events' (Hones 2008) allows us to pay attention to the contextual geographies of power which inform their production and circulation, sanction their meaning, and impact the ways in which they operate in the world. In reading and narrating this encounter between text and context as spatial event, literary geography offers insights into how texts are, and how they mean, in the world.

Combing the theoretical energies of Edward Said (1983) and Sheila Hones' (2008) works offer multiple benefits. A detailed discussion of these benefits is beyond the scope of this introductory essay, what follows is a brief suggestive list. First, it acknowledges that texts are not mere inscriptions on a surface, but actors and throbbing energies which participate in fashioning the world. In other words, texts *matter*: as Karan Barad suggest 'matter and meaning are not separate elements (2007: 3). Second, this approach helps us democratize reading, avoid master narratives, and attune to the internal plurality of texts. Since reading and interpretations are spatially informed practices, the same texts can have different geographies of meaning and being in the world. Avoiding a master narrative does not necessarily mean all readings of texts are equally wrong or equally right. Differences in interpretation can be theorized as the function of the context of reading (Hones 2008). Third, it allows us to go beyond representationalism to perceive the co-constitutive nature of the word and the world. The text does not necessarily *represent* a world discursively or conceal a world behind it but creates a world in front of it. Literary scholars (Best and Marcus 2009; Crane 2009) have recently argued in favor of 'surface reading' against the 'depth reading' approach to pay attention to the way texts are implicated in the making of the world, rather than what they conceal in their 'depth'. Fourth, this approach helps to appreciate that texts are not innocent. As Fowler suggests, texts frame, invite, and desire us to inhabit their proposed world, what she terms their 'propositional space'. However, it is within the 'ductile space' (2013: 595) of the encounter those texts are approached, appropriated, or resisted. Fifth, this approach also helps us to question the fact-fiction binary. A growing body of literature at the intersection of environmental humanities (Buell 1993; Heise 2008; Morton 2009) and geography (Aay 1994; Cronon 1996; Lamme 1996; Lando 1996; Massey 2005, 2014; Tuan 2013; Moore 2015; Anderson and Saunders 2015; Creswell 2018) explores how environmental imaginations, fictions of climate, and sense of place impact cultural and material practices, shape socio-spatial landscapes, and inform the notions of subjectivity and identity.

The four essays in this section explore the different ways texts come to inhabit the world in different contexts. Their paths first intersected in San Francisco in April 2016

where they were presented in a series of sessions titled ‘Geography and Literature,’ at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers. As geographers interested in the worldmaking potentials of literary texts, our objective was to explore the spatial articulations and material geographies of fictional texts. While literary critics have emphasized the need to understand the spatial articulations of the text (Alworth 2016; Said 1983; Tanoukhi 2008), geographers have used literary texts to make sense of space, place, and regions (Sharp 1996, 2000; Massey 2005; Tuan 2013) for instance, postcolonial geographers have made use of literary texts and devices to understand the socio-spatial configurations of power and subjectivities (Jazeel 2005; Ridanpää 2007). These sessions invited papers that explored the ways in which fictional texts travel through the world and create different geographies of meaning.

Eric Magrane’s essay, ‘Healing, Belonging, Resistance, and Mutual Care’: Reading Indigenous Eco-poetics and Climate Narratives’ explores aesthetic responses to climate change in the critical and creative works of indigenous poets in the US. Magrane reads four poems by indigenous poets as ‘stored energies’ and ‘actors in the world,’ which can help us reorient our relationship with the environment. Because the western narrative of culture and progress is based on an imagined binary opposition between nature and culture, the stories of civilization and development could only be told as stories of control over nature and the native. Climate change has revealed that this separation is no longer sustainable. Time has come, as Anna Tsing points out, for inventing new true stories of the world which are ‘simultaneously true and fabulous’ (2015, viii). Magrane’s essay points out that those stories have always been there, and it is high time that we paid attention to this indigenous aesthetics of care, belonging and healing. By carefully tracing the intricate internal topographies of meaning and form of poems and the external landscape of power and precarity, Magrane’s essay allows us to appreciate the multiplicity of the ways in which texts and contexts inform each other.

In his essay, ‘Geography, Landscape and Identity in Spanish Writers of the Generation of ‘98’ Nicolas Ortega explores how the spatial imagination informs a sense of collective identity. Focusing on the works of the writers collectively known as ‘the Generation of ‘98,’ Ortega traces the connection between the national crisis and the desire for regeneration expressed through reimagining an historical landscape in search of new national identity. The literary texts Ortega works with are simultaneously readings and writings of the Spanish landscape as spatial text. The readers are invited to inhabit these spatial texts by attuning to the aesthetics of regeneration and a sense of collective identity. Ortega explores this textual mediation of places and peoples as a geography of meaning making.

Opening with three different versions of the same story Evan Carver’s essay ‘Graffiti Writing as Urban Narrative’ complicates the reading-writing and fact-fiction oppositions and reveals a mutual becoming of the text and the context. In his reading (writing) of graffiti at Cuvry Brache site in Berlin, text emerges as material accretion of socio-spatial struggles. The wall at Cuvry Brache provides the ‘narrative space’ where the textual, discursive struggles around the collective identity of the people and place are played out. This complex production and erasure of the multi-authored text, and the ways it is consumed and mobilized across actual and virtual contexts reveal the tragic

contradiction of the urban life itself – that people are responsible for what happens in the city while not being in total control of the situation. The loss of this ‘narrative space’ does not constitute a failure but a tragedy because while it lasted it allowed the community to create ‘public time’ and negotiate the larger questions of their collective future.

Building on Jean Paul Sartre’s theory of subjectivity, Abdul Aijaz’ essay ‘*Yazīd: Configurations of the self around interests and identities*,’ explains the co-constitutive nature of the material and symbolic struggles around water resources between India and Pakistan. The essay argues that resource struggles do not merely stem from the scarcity or abundance of a specific resource but equally stem from, and are contested in, a symbolic economy of meanings which informs identities, interests, notions of rights, strategy, and collective action. Reading Saadat Hassan Manto’s short story *Yazīd* (1951) against the backdrop of the water conflict between the two neighboring countries provides an example of how material struggles are internalized through symbolic and affective apparatuses.

By reaching your hands and eyes these essays set off new geographies of meaning. While the authors hope to contribute to the debates at the intersection of geography and literary studies, this will always be only half the story at best. By resisting, appropriating, or critiquing them, the readers will tell the other half of the story.

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Author contact: aijaz@iu.edu