

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## *Themed Section*

### **Relational Literary Geographies: Co-Producing Page and Place**

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This themed section of *Literary Geographies* emerged from a Social and Cultural Geography group sponsored session at the 2014 Royal Geographical Society (including the Institute of British Geographers) Annual Conference. The session invited papers that investigated the ways in which geographies of fiction co-produce the real and imagined places around us. It invited scholars to explore the complex relations which produce the ‘geography of fiction’ (Piatti & Hurni 2011:218), specifically the ways through which page and place are co-produced in reading and writing practice. In using the term ‘geography of fiction’, Barbara Piatti and Lorenz Hurni write in the tradition of Franco Moretti (1998); they are interested in how we cartographically produce the imagined world of fictional texts. Here we use ‘geography of fiction’ to initiate a different journey into the fields of literary geography and literary studies. Our journey is less concerned with cartographically rendering the fictional world and more interested in examining how the real and imagined come together and

move apart. Put another way, our approach focuses on how lived geographies seep into imagined ones and how imagined ones spill beyond the confines of the page. Thus, at the heart of these papers is a concern with relational thinking, with thinking about literary space as something made through connections that happen within, before, beyond and across the text.

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Relational thinking approaches the world as a complex of actor-centred networks. In practice this means that relational approaches employ the orthodox, individualised categories of the modern – accepting that ‘things’, ‘objects’ or ‘components’ have significance in the western imagination – but arguing that their meaning and definition are derived from their positioning within broader sets of cultural, temporal, and geographical networks. Relational thinking therefore does not consider ‘things’, ‘objects’ or ‘components’ to be ‘a priori’ in the world, but rather considers their meaning and definition to be continually ephemeral, (re)composing, and emergent (see also Whatmore 1999:31-2). In terms of literary geography, a relational approach thus involves moving away from considering literature as ‘a priori’ in the world, as some *thing* that exist without makers or is productive of universal meanings. This is not, of course, a new departure for literary geography. Sheila Hones (2008; 2014) has consistently argued for a more geographically engaged approach to the discipline, one that attends as much to spatial theory as it does to literary theory. It is an approach Hones elaborates through the idea of the spatial event of the text, which argues for the text as a relational happening that is made and remade over space and time. For Hones, the text is a geographical process that arises from complex spatial relationships, generates multiple readings, and initiates subsequent writings. Where Hones has tended to explore this from a position downstream of the text, undertaking close-reading of the worlds within the text, Jon Anderson (2014) has turned his attention to the coingredient relations between text and territory, or page and place. Developing the idea of plot as the crucial narrative or story line of creative writing, whilst also being a locatable, geographical territory, Anderson explores more directly how the world as a rich, lived experience simultaneously folds into and out of the imagined world of the text. The entangled nature of these different yet connected aspects of plot is indicated by a third definition – the ability to intrigue, subvert, scheme, or imagine. Just as we think we have pinned the plot as ‘simply’ a story telling device, or a geographical location, it loosens its independent moorings and re-tangles its-‘self’ with its ‘other’ – our plots are therefore never singular in meaning, but always plural. These relational literary geographies mean that a text (and perhaps the discipline itself) is a site of ongoing composition (after Anderson 2010; 2014); it is impossible to offer any stabilised or essential definition of the subject, rather we can only say what a text is *now*, stamped with a particular set of

positional relations – cultural, temporal and geographical signatures if you will – that implicate a specific set of actors in constituting this understanding.

Thus central to this relational turn is the valorisation of ‘actor-centred’ ways of seeing the world (Jones 2009). Within literary geography this has led to a renewed interest in the reader. Unlike the author, the reader has never been declared dead (after Barthes 1977), but as Hones (2008) observes, we have tended to privilege certain readers and readings over others. It has also led to a resurrection of the author and an interest in the text as an object that has been made and crafted over time and space (Brace and Johns-Putra 2010; Saunders 2010). These relations though require further and more detailed work, for as Martin Jones (2009) argues, relational thinking has tended both to work through established spaces and to imply openness only to conceal internal difference. Jones makes this argument in the context of regionalism and the persistent dominance of London/South East and certain groups within this space, but the wider point is that we have tended to focus on the exceptional or the singular to the detriment of diversity and complexity. As the relational turn in literary geography gathers pace these are not criticisms that can be levelled at what is yet a small field, but as a cautionary tale, Jones suggests that we need to be more aware of the nature of relationships, of who or what is involved or related and to how we conceptualise these relations.

This themed section then, seeks to further enrich the relational turn in literary geography and to open up some of the many and multiple relationships that go into a text’s making or meaning. Bearing in mind Jones’ words of caution this should make us consider the diversity of agents which are part of the entangled complex of literary geography, including but not limited to the author and reader. The trajectory of these agents, their direction of travel, pace, and resonance over the other agents cast into temporary relation must be understood, along with their material and interpretative effect on the ongoing composition. Literary geography therefore becomes a process of identifying the causes, products, and consequences of these many-to-many relations; in short, it explores how these different agents come to cast their spell over the ongoing composition of literature and place. The articles collected here explore the literary geographies that issue from the lived to the imagined world, and the imagined to the lived world, and how they circulate and transform one another.

Firstly, Jon Anderson engages directly with the work of Hones to emphasise the role that fiction plays in a reader’s understanding of ‘real world’ or ‘extra-textual’ geographies. The article argues that assemblage theory may provide a practical tool to account for the ‘components’ that have agency and influence on fiction (including authors, translators, publishers, readers, places, etc.), as well as an intellectual space in which scholars from both literary and geographical positions can locate their writings in the broader set of approaches that define literary geographies. Taking as its case study Welsh writing in English, this article offers a relational geography of literature that sits outside the canons of ‘English’ literature.

In the second article, Luis Campos Medina similarly explores literatures that sit outside this canon, de-centring attention from the literatures of Britain and of the professional writers therein, to Chile and to the popular creative writing contest ‘Santiago in 100 words’. This article explores how

this writing contest creates a particular geography of meaning within, and representation of, the city. Paying close attention to the form and style of Santiago's micro-fiction, Campos Medina traces several of these fictions to see what they do within the world; how they produce new geographies of the city, unleash new ways of knowing and narrating place and transform shared social meanings.

Like Anderson and Campos Medina, Ceri Price's article is similarly interested in the work in the world, but calls for us to extend the remit of the literary text to include formats beyond the printed page. Drawing parallels with literary tourists who are keen to walk the paths of their literary heroes, Price argues that the picture postcard is similarly involved in the production and performance of fables that shape our lives and motivate our practices. In the spirit of relational thinking that Jones (2009) urges, this article pushes us to consider how our experience of place is never motivated by singular relations, and how the postcard overlaps with the literary text in shaping the footpaths we pursue through the world. Put another way, it underscores the living and textual complexity of our relational world.

In the final article, Angharad Saunders explores the world before the text, arguing for the importance of everyday objects and the materiality of everyday spaces in a text's making. In this reading, such mundane things as wall coverings, interior layout and furnishings take on a critical importance in the practice of literary making. Yet as this article makes clear, the relation between writer and interior object or space is neither singular nor self-enclosed, other actors and other spaces intervene and influence the making of plot and page. In drawing attention to the place of creative labour, this article teases out not just what happens in this place, in terms of literary output, but some of the possible trajectories or becoming of these happenings.

The articles collected here suggest that there are many relations that traverse the event of the text--relations of action, thought, influence and imagination--following these offers a different way in to the geography of fiction. It is one that regards the world of the text as important, but one that is interested in exploring where the lines of this world come from and go to. A relational approach to literature, and literary geography, then, suggests, borrowing Tim Ingold's terminology, that any book is not 'fixed' or 'finished', but is a moment in a trail of action (2005). Where Ingold suggests that there is no single route through the world but rather manifold trails of action, we argue that a relational interpretation of any literary geography is similarly a complex of "interwoven *lines*. . . . The lines . . . are the trails along which life is lived. And it is in the entanglement of lines, not in the connecting of points, that the [literary geography] is constituted" (2005, page 47, our emphasis). Thus, as with Hones' reading of the multiple geographies ongoing within the textual world, we do not see these literary geographies as singular threads that move clearly across space and time; rather they are tangled, converging, gathering and moving apart and it is at these points of convergence and dispersal that things happen.

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