

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Spatial Literary Studies

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In a recent article, Sheila Hones distinguishes between the emergent field of spatial literary studies and the more established field of literary geography (Hones 2018). Using my edited collection *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* (2017) as a prime example, Hones laments that the two terms have been confused, and she endeavors to set the record straight. Specifically, Hones maintains that '[w]hile literary geography today increasingly incorporates theory and methods developed in literary studies, actively encouraging and valuing the input of literary critics, it nevertheless retains a strong orientation toward geographical and, more generally, social science aims and methods' (2018: 148). By contrast, spatial literary studies, even when engaging in interdisciplinary research, remains fundamentally situated within literature and the humanities. I tend to agree with Hones, although I am not sure that the definitional boundaries are so clear and stable, and in this essay I would like to discuss my understanding of these terms.

When I first used the phrase 'spatial literary studies' I was not referring to a particular methodology or approach, but trying to characterize a wide variety of work in literary studies that paid attention to space, place, mapping, spatial relations, geography, architecture, and related matters. As Hones points out, the phrase does not appear in my *Spatiality* (2013) and the 'term seems to have come into use a year or so later, initially as part of the general title for Palgrave Macmillan's series on *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*' (Hones 2018: 147). Others may have coined the phrase before me, but Hones is correct in noting that I employed it in connection with this book series. Shortly after the publication of Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism* (2011) and my *Geocritical Explorations* (2011), I was invited to propose a book series on 'Geocriticism.' I agreed but, concerned that this term might be too narrowly understood, I offered 'Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies' as a more open and welcoming sign. Perhaps naively, I thought that the word *spatial* could function as a mere adjective, but in so

doing, I effectively created a category that appeared to encompass an array of scholarly and critical practices, including literary geography, within its rather expansive ambit.

The significance of the word *spatial* is, of course, broader than that of *geographical*. Spatial criticism may just as easily deal with architecture as geography, not to mention other areas of critical inquiry in which space or spatial relations play important roles. Though my own work has focused especially on what I have called *literary cartography* and is therefore related to a certain sense of literary geography, spatial literary studies as a field could include rather different sorts of work. For example, volumes in the ‘Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies’ series include books on cosmopolitanism (Johansen 2014), women and domestic space (Ng 2015), Virginia Woolf’s rooms (Zink 2018) and weird or fantastic spaces (Greve and Zappe 2019). Others in the series have engaged more directly with geography and geographers, but Hones is right in thinking that spatial literary studies, to the extent that this series or my own writings are representative of that field, should not be confused with literary geography.

I have acknowledged this ‘potential for confusion’ elsewhere. In my introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, I observed that

the variety of critical approaches, theories, methods, or emphases appearing under the banner of *spatial literary studies* (among other labels) indicates not only the diversity and flexibility of the field, but also the potential for confusion. [...] As an editor, I have tried to err on the side of expansiveness and inclusiveness. In my estimation, what is broadly referred to as spatial literary studies—whether it operates under the banners of geocriticism, geopoetics, literary geography, the spatial humanities, or something else along those lines—would cover multiform critical practices that would include almost any approach to the text that focuses attention on space, place, or mapping. (Tally 2017: 3)

Citing *The Routledge Handbook* in particular, Hones takes issue both with the conflation of these terms and the apparent subordination of literary geography to spatial literary studies. In my broad characterization, I suggest that spatial literary studies would include literary geography, as well as geocriticism and geopoetics, *within* its categorical scope, whereas Hones maintains that there are crucial generic differences between them.

Most importantly, Hones insists that literary geography is intrinsically connected to ‘human geography as an academic discipline’ (2018: 146) and that it ‘retains a strong orientation toward geographical and, more generally, social science aims and methods’ (148). She makes reference to ‘a tradition of geographical work with literary texts dating back at least as far as the 1920s,’ specifically citing the American geographer John Kirtland Wright’s 1924 essay, ‘Geography in Literature,’ before adding that the ‘geographical subfield’ was ‘[f]irst termed ‘literary geography’ in the 1970s’ (147). Spatial literary studies, by contrast, remains part of the humanities, such that the ‘appropriation’ of literary geography by spatial literary studies ‘not only disregards a century of human geography historiography, it also strips the interdiscipline of the geographical component of its aims and methods’ (148–49).

While I agree with Hones's sense of the disciplinary affiliations of literary geography and geography, I think the definition of literary geography is a bit more slippery. For example, Neal Alexander has observed that 'there is currently general disagreement over what literary geography means' but adds that this 'may in fact be a sign of vitality' (Alexander 2015: 5), since this would allow a great many approaches to be undertaken in the name of literary geography. In that very article, which Hones also cites, Alexander points out that 'literary geography is often carried on under other names: imaginative geography, literary cartography, geocriticism, geopoetics, geohumanities' (5). After mentioning several examples of the diverse forms that such work has taken in recent years, he goes on to assert that '[m]uch of this research is theoretically eclectic, synthesising ideas drawn from phenomenology, historical materialism, structuralism and poststructuralism, art history, urbanism, anthropology, and gender theory, as well as geography and literary studies' (5).

As Alexander notes, the earliest known uses of the term come from literary critics rather than geographers—William Sharp in *Literary Geography* (1904) and Virginia Woolf in her 1905 essay 'Literary Geography'—for whom 'literary geography means little more than the particular places, landscapes, or regions associated with individual writers, although it can also refer to the various ways in which those geographical entities are reimagined in their texts' (Woolf 1977: 3). The literary geography that Hones presents as an interdisciplinary subfield of geography emerges later, but literary critics (and, presumably, geographers as well) over more than a century have had different ideas of what literary geography might entail.

My looser sense of the term *literary geography* is rooted in some disciplinary ambivalence, as I refer not so much as a field of study as the terrain examined through various types of spatially oriented critical practices. A famous example I cite in the chapter titled 'Literary Geography' in my *Spatiality* is Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), which Alexander has referred to as 'a seminal text for literary geography.' But Alexander also notes that 'Williams makes almost no reference at all to relevant studies of rural, urban, and regional geography' (2015: 4). In this way, Williams's 'literary geography' remains within the disciplinary parameters of the humanities, specifically literary criticism, theory and history, and it is thus perhaps best viewed as a prototypical work of spatial literary studies.

Spatial literary studies may not be so much interdisciplinary as potentially multidisciplinary. Rather than operating 'in between' the towering disciplines of geography and literature—'two well-established structures, with independent foundations, which afford different views', to cite Hones's evocative metaphor from her book *Literary Geographies* (2014: 5)—spatial literary studies would maintain its base within literature or the literary humanities at large. Further, scholarly or critical activities within spatial literary studies could consider matters of literature and space without regard to other disciplinary fields such as geography at all. To the extent that practitioners within its ambit also take up the works of geographers, or, for that matter, architects, urbanists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, artists, mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, engineers, and any others who work deals with matters of space or spatiality, they will almost certainly be doing so in support of projects rooted in various forms of literary scholarship, literary criticism, literary history, and literary theory. Thus, spatial literary studies might encourage transdisciplinary encounters while also

staying focused upon those questions or topics associated with literature *per se*, including matters related to poetics, aesthetics and rhetoric, as well as to the criticism, interpretation, and evaluation of texts.

In this manner, spatial literary studies would distinguish itself from the interdisciplinary field of literary geography, as well as from some of these other spatially or geographically oriented approaches to literary or cultural artifacts, precisely by maintaining a firm foothold within the arena of literature. I would hope that, as with such earlier literary critical texts as *The Country and the City*, literary geographers will still find such disciplinarily specific writings valuable to their own projects, but should these types of work be deemed too humanistic or insufficiently social-scientific, then at least most of the confusions between spatial literary studies and literary geography will be henceforth dispelled.

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