

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Towards a Political Literary Geography

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How might literary geography benefit from closer attention to the political and ideological dimensions of literary space? Much work has already been done within the evolving sphere of literary geography to move the discussion from literary space as a closed and finished object of study to texts as continually developing relational practices, networks or - in Sheila Hones' phrase - 'spatial events' (Hones 2014: 6). An important achievement of literary geography has been to bring into clearer view the social relations that are the material substance of literature as practice: the shift from literary space as fixed object to ongoing relational event helps us situate literary space within the 'indissoluble social material process' in which, as Raymond Williams argues, 'the actual making and reception' of literary texts form 'connecting material processes' (Williams 1977: 152). Indeed, the embeddedness of literary practice - writing, publication, reading - in material social processes was a persistent concern throughout the roundtable discussion that took place in Cambridge, cropping up in exchanges on topics from the 'mapping' of texts to the gendering of narrative spaces.

But this move to a relational understanding of literary space as ongoing practice seems to imply the question - not yet fully and explicitly posed - of whether and how we should think of these textual events as *political* events. Who participates in the spatial event of the text, and on what terms? How might materially unequal geographies affect the unfolding of the spatial event of a given text? How might literature as a spatial practice be bound up with dominant spatial ideologies and material geographical structures of power? Hones' important insistence on the relationality of literary geography draws on Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of space as 'constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations...always being made and therefore, in a sense, unfinished' (Massey 2005: 107; see Hones 2014: 33-4). But less attention has been focused on Massey's connected claim that 'space is the dimension which poses the question

of the social, *and thus of the political*' (Massey 2005: 99, my emphasis). How, then, might we begin to frame the question of the politics of literary geography?

On one level, we need to consider the issue of uneven access to the material spatial networks without which texts - and therefore textual events - cannot happen: publishing, translation, promotion, distribution. The concentration of economic and cultural power in particular parts of the world - and in particular intra-national regions - must entail an uneven geography of access to textual events. Those who find themselves located outside these networks might be represented, imagined or inferred in these unfolding events, but cannot participate in them as actors on their own terms. Of course, this question is not limited to the problem of living in a place where a given text is unavailable, or being unable to read the language in which it is published. Cultural barriers to participation in the event of the text might also exist in the form of assumptions about texts that are 'appropriate' for women, or anxieties over popular (working class) readership, for example. With this in mind, how might the existence of gendered places of reading (particular kinds of domestic space, perhaps), of racially coded geographies, or of class relations inscribed in physical spaces affect the kinds of spatial events that unfold around a given text?

The issue is surely more complex, too, than a binary of inclusion and exclusion. Are the terms on which writers, readers, publishers (and so on) participate in the text's spatial event fixed, and are they equal? Here we could think of the publication of Amos Tutuola's novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* by Faber in 1952 (Tutuola 1961 [1952]). The publication and reception of the text was an event fraught with ambiguity: was it to be considered a literary text, or an anthropological curiosity - a window onto the 'African mind' (Low 2006)? The question - which of course cannot be separated from the discourses of race bound into the political geography of late empire - must have profound implications for the construction of the spatial event of this text, because it structures fundamentally the relations that unfold between a writer of the colonial margin, a metropolitan publishing house, and a European readership. So there is a double and complex question to be asked: who gets to participate in the spatial event of a given text, and on what political terms?

One addition to the terminology of literary geography which might help clarify these questions is Raymond Williams' idea of the 'knowable community' of the novel. Here, the shape of the the social space represented within a text is determined by which parts of the social totality are rendered visible, to what extent, and in what ways. And, as in the political constitution of the spatial event, the issue is subtler than a binary of visible/invisible, included/excluded. Thus, in George Eliot's novels, rural labourers become visible - but only as dialect, and not as active subjectivities (Williams 2011 [1973]: 168); the terms on which visibility is attained are crucial. For Williams the object of study is primarily the knowable community *within* the text; what I want to suggest, though, is that we might bring his term with us as we follow Angharad Saunders in moving 'beyond the geography in the text to examine the geography of the text' (Saunders 2013: 285). Can we say that there is a knowable community not just *in* the text, but *of* the text as well? This would be the community of writers, editors, publishers, readers (and so on) that is actively involved in the generation of the spatial event of the text, as well as the imagined others that people the

text's represented space as it is construed by these actors; a community whose structures of participation (and non-participation) are embedded in broader social and political geographies. In other words, there is a community that is rendered knowable *through* the text (as spatial practice and event) as well as *within* its represented spaces, and this community both generates and is constituted by the event of the text as it unfolds in social and physical space. The constitution of this community, the terms on which its participants become knowable to one another, is the political aspect of the text's spatial event.

Perhaps a danger of re-thinking the textual event in these political terms is that we begin to think of such events solely in terms of their determination by existing social relations, and thereby close down the potentiality and unfinishedness that recent literary geography has worked to keep open. At worst, we might risk replacing the idea of literary space as a constantly unfolding happening with one in which all readings are merely replications of external relations of domination and oppression. To do so would not just be to reduce texts to instruments of a dominant ideology but also to deny the sense of plurality and openness that recent literary geographical work has emphasised. But it could be that in thinking of literary geography as political geography, we can also see the spatial event of the text as one through which ideologies are not only inscribed but circumnavigated, confronted, destabilised, perhaps resisted. Here we might take Teju Cole's novel 2011 *Open City* as an example (Cole 2011). Cole is a writer born in the U.S. and brought up in Nigeria. His novel's narrator is a German-Nigerian psychiatrist who walks the streets of New York in order to diffuse the pressures of professional and personal life; he becomes a quintessential Euro-American figure of literary space: the *flâneur*. Bringing different readerships, geographies, traditions, and identities together, Cole's novel seems to set the stage for a spatial event unfolding out of a series of confrontations with alterity. It gestures towards that moment of rupture in which previously unacknowledged relations are 'forced into consciousness' (Williams 2011 [1973]: 155); the knowable community constituted as an open field of possibilities rather than a closed structure of domination.

Asking this kind of explicitly political question seems to represent an important pathway for further development of the relational understanding of literary geography that has crystallized in recent work. Exactly how this might be done is a question I do not have space to consider in detail here; nor do I wish to impose any particular directionality. It might involve investigating different reading practices as they take place in different spaces and at different historical moments (private aristocratic libraries, book clubs in middle-class homes, radical bookshops), in order to ask how different knowable communities and different interpretations of the social and physical spaces represented within the texts emerge from these spatial contexts - and how the unfolding of the spatial events of the texts contributes in turn to the political constitution of these places and their relations to other spaces. It could also involve the genetic reading of compositional processes using archival material, in order to investigate how political encounters with particular social spaces affect the composition of texts on the part of authors. And it might also involve closer dialogue with material studies of book production and textual cultures, in order to consider how geographies of publishing and dissemination coincide with geographies of race, class or

gender, and how this interaction produces different spatial imaginaries surrounding particular texts and physical places. Whatever particular pathways are followed, the hitherto under-examined political dimensions of literary geography promise fruitful pathways for new investigations; and they surely must seem increasingly difficult to ignore.

### Works Cited

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