

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## In Spite of Cosmic Loneliness: Exploring Literary Geographies of Folklore from Lockdown

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One can experience loneliness in two ways: by feeling lonely in the world or by feeling the loneliness of the world.

Emil Cioran, *The Heights of Despair*, 1992: 50

Now, more than ever, we find ourselves living in a time of great loneliness. A necessary and often mandated isolation separates families, friends, colleagues, and entire communities across the globe, and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Loneliness, both personal and professional, fuels the isolation that has come to characterise our existence as we enter the third decade of the new millennium. The current pandemic, and we must call it as such for it is neither the first nor last of its kind to affect us, has initiated a state of being previously unimaginable to most of the world's population but which has come to be spoken of as "the new normal". It is under these circumstances that we find ourselves facing the challenge of "resetting" our lives, of finding new and creative ways to deal with the isolation imposed upon us, new ways to escape the loneliness of "the new normal". Loneliness can be experienced at both an individual and "cosmic" level: while the former is suffered as a subjective, emotional withdrawal from our surroundings, the latter emerges 'from an awareness of the world's isolation, of objective nothingness' (Cioran 1992: 50). Today we can

feel the loneliness of the world: we share the cold hard truth of its isolation for it is, of course, our own. And so, like many others, I'm sure, loneliness and isolation have occupied much of my thinking over the last few months; themes which have ultimately led to and necessitated a reconsidering and renegotiating of the way(s) in which I work *with* and *in* literary geography.

While it has been only recently that I have consciously invested time into considering isolation and the ways that it (now) affects both the academic community and my own research, as a British geographer living and working in Japan, more general feelings of an isolation from Western cultural geography had formed prior to the current lockdown. Geographically speaking, I have experienced a growing sense of isolation for much of the past four and half years, becoming physically separated both from the landscape and community of geographers from which I and my research had emerged, a feeling amplified by the departure and relocation of colleagues and collaborators, whose work has inspired and influenced my own.

As a literary geographer interested in the connections between reading, experience, and the extra-textual in British folklore, my work is based on a process of site visitation and fieldwork outside of Japan, a practice often made challenging by distance and finances. Furthermore, Western conference schedules often clash with the Japanese university year, which begins in April, making major events in geography's academic calendar, such as the AAG annual meeting, near impossible to attend. Events that were feasible in terms of scheduling, such as the RGS-IBG annual conference, fall during the summer months when flights to the UK are at a premium, which comes on top of the already exclusionary attendance fees the society demands. On a professional level, the lack of attention that literary geography receives in Japan, as well as the limitations of working on the subject in the English language, and as a foreign scholar, no less, have often converged to distance me professionally and culturally from many of my colleagues; thus it has largely been through fieldwork, collaboration, and teaching that I have maintained a connection with the interdiscipline, all of which have been impacted as a result of recent lockdown conditions.

Over the last three years I have been teaching a combination of classes in English on cultural geography, literary geography, and folklore at The University of Tokyo, and while the classes themselves remain popular (thankfully!), they, too, have been taught in isolation from the numerous other classes taken by my students. Due to an increasing demand for internationalisation, and particularly for the acquisition of English as a second language, students at Japanese universities are required to take classes taught in English as part of their undergraduate studies, some of which are based on practical skills (composition, fluency etc.), while others are content-based. However, these content-based classes are commonly offered specifically by a language department and thus are not integrated with the various subject classes offered to students by other departments. The bulk of my teaching load falls into the latter category, and so while my students might elect to take classes in literary geography with me, they do not study the interdiscipline as part of a specific geography or literary studies programme, and will likely take the class without the possibility of pursuing similar courses elsewhere in their studies. Even at the taught level then, literary geography, for me and my students, is often practiced in some sort of isolation. It came as a tremendous shock, then,

when, in May this year, I learned that I had been awarded a four-year Early Career Researcher's Grant from Japan's Ministry of Education to undertake a project on the "Literary Geographies of Folklore". Finally, the funds were available for me to attend conferences, network, undertake fieldwork, meet collaborators, and conduct archive research, breaking free from the isolation that comes with living and working so far from the UK and where much of my professional network and fieldwork is based.

The proposed project, however, is/was primarily based on fieldwork and experiential readings of extra-textual locations, aiming to demonstrate how representations of place in folklore come to shape real-world encounters and are integral in creating the bonds people forge between themselves and specific geographic locations. Additionally, through geographic readings of literary works by writers such as M.R. James, Ithell Colquhoun, and Arthur Machen, as well as communal writings on regional folklore and superstition in public archives, I intended to show the ways in which traditional cultural narratives (i.e. folklore) became embedded in literary texts that utilised extra-textual locations, inscribing actual-world places with specific folkloric meanings and thus shaping their role within the geographic imagination on local, regional, national and international levels. Furthermore, to coincide with my research, I had created a class on the 'literary geographies of folklore' for third- and fourth-year undergraduates, aimed at exploring a series of folkloric texts and their associated extra-textual locations. But how exactly does one work *on* and *in* extra-textual locations when confined to our own home? And how could students engage with readings of extra-textual sites when they, too, are in isolation, some not even permitted to reenter the country? This shared experience of isolation and the "cosmic loneliness" mobilised by the pandemic has forced me to explore new routes and entry points into both my research and my teaching; rendering visible the connections between folklore, literature, and place has paradoxically become something I've been able to do more precisely while I've been on lockdown.

One way in which I've been able to counter the turbulence brought about by imposed lockdown has been through rethinking the ways in which we relate experiences of actual-world places to their description in literary texts and vice versa. Folklore conveys interpretations of place and space in narrative form and as such is loaded with geographic information. It is both a temporal and spatial process and one which details the way that people imagine, relate to, and engage with their surroundings. Folklore has played (and continues to play) an important historic role in place-making – imbuing specific geographic locations with cultural meaning and disseminating information about them in narrative form. While the intended fieldwork would have allowed me to better understand the ways in which authors working with folkloric narratives use actual-world places in the production of their literary worlds, isolation has now deemed it necessary to privilege the analysis of text and narrative over such physical sites. Forced to step back and reconsider literary geographies of folklore from this position, and with isolation in mind, it has become apparent that while folklore inscribes places with meaning at a local and regional level, the impact of literary texts, which we might see as circulating spatial meaning to a wider audience, can also be seen as an extension of this place-making process. Moreover, understanding literary texts as generating a specific type of folklore has also become a key part of the project. I have discussed in a

previous article the ways in which the ghost stories of M.R. James have come to influence people's understanding of the archeology of the UK's East Anglia region (Thurgill 2018). Arthur Machen, a contemporary of James, also blurred the boundaries of actual-world and fictional spaces for his reader in his 'The Bowmen' (1914). Published in London's *Evening News*, 'The Bowmen' provided a fictional first-hand account of the Battle of Mons, where a British soldier is seen to conjure the phantom bowmen of Agincourt to protect the British forces against an encroaching German threat. However, in publishing the short story, the editor failed to label the piece as fiction and it was received by many as a factual account of the events at Mons, leading to accusations of fraud. Machen relays the episode in another of his short stories, 'Out of the Earth' (1925), creating a sort of metafolklore that is both self-referential and mocks the institutions that produce it (Dundes 1966). Refocusing the project to explore the ways in which folklore both inscribes and describes place(s) through literary narratives in such a way allows the project to move forward while being conducted remotely and provides an alternative route for exploring the extra-textual.

### **Folklore: isolated and in isolation**

As an academic subject, folklore itself has long been isolated, both in terms of research on the subject, which is often conducted outside academic institutions by dedicated enthusiasts with expertise in regional myths and legends, and also in the teaching of folklore studies as an academic subject, something that, historically, has been rather limited compared, to say, the subjects of anthropology, history, and literature from which it borrows much of its methodology. The word 'folklore' did not come into use until introduced by William Thoms in 1846 (Dundes 1980) in an attempt to bring together previously disparate, isolated studies of various festivals, dances, ballads, proverbs, and so on, and unify them through the creation of a single discipline (Bronner 2016). The purpose of such a project was to bring folkloric narratives and customs to the forefront of nineteenth century cultural analysis, and to bring to attention the disappearing regional practices, superstitions, and beliefs of rural people in a rapidly changing and technologising society. Thoms, along with other emerging folklorists of this period, founded their study of cultural customs based on tradition, demonstrating a preoccupation with folklore as the representation of a spatial past. However, by the turn of the nineteenth century the very notion of tradition as a historical process was being challenged. Folklorists such as Joseph Jacobs argued that traditions were, while often historical, chosen not followed; some traditions survive the test of time, while others are rejected and forgotten. Jacobs pointed to tradition as an inherently democratic process, one that was selected, practiced and/or discarded as the people saw fit, a practice largely dependent on a tradition's relevance to the actual-world and lived experiences of the individuals who perform it. As such, tradition came to be viewed not as a sign of cultural stagnation, but as a timely, modern, and continually evolving process (Jacobs 1893). The relevance of this today and particularly to this prolonged period of isolation that we are living through, is that we can see the evolution of tradition and the production of folklore in real-time. Certain cultural traditions like the shaking of hands have been replaced, albeit, perhaps,

temporarily, by “fist pumps” and “elbow bumps” (Jeffrey 2020), while online folklore and conspiracy theories regarding the origins of COVID-19, the political motivation behind “lockdown”, and the dangers of vaccination appear to be rife and proliferating in social media and television, and have led to reactionary protests throughout Europe and America. Isolation and the ongoing pandemic have offered glimpses into the way that folklore is generated, circulated, and continuously adapted to suit the lived experience as it happens. The literature produced at such a time, whether it derives from professional writers or the general public, demonstrates the ways in which people imagine, relate to, and describe their lived environments and as such should be of great interest to literary geographers.

### **Re-centering**

The key point I am making here is that despite the limitations presented by isolation during the pandemic, in addition to those we might already have faced in our personal and professional lives, this period of “lockdown” has offered scholars opportunities to rethink their place in the academic world and to consider the new possibilities for producing and disseminating their research. Due to the pandemic, I have been forced to step back and (re)consider the ways in which literary geographies of folklore might be produced, experienced, and read in isolation. In doing so it has become even more apparent that folklore itself is isolated in academia; a peripheral subject and one that is all too often perceived as unworthy of academic scrutiny. The frustration that came from not being able to go out and conduct fieldwork, from not being able to *do* literary geography in the way I had been doing it prior to the pandemic, led to sparks of inspiration and creativity that have no doubt improved the project I’m undertaking. Paradoxically, then, to be stuck inside and thinking about folklore and literary geography with isolation all the while resonating in my mind has allowed me to start thinking about the difficulties of isolation for folklore studies and literary geography more generally, and has ultimately offered me new and exciting ways in which to navigate the terrain of the two subjects and should allow me to more clearly demonstrate the connections between them. Folklore is unquestionably concerned with narrative; it looks to deepen our understanding of the world through an analysis of the stories we create and consume. As Arendt (1970) writes, ‘storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it’ (105).

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 20K12954.

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