Literary geography

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Until quite recently it was possible to recount the history of literary geography as a subfield of human geography in a relatively straightforward manner, with geographical work with literary texts following the shifts and turns of research trends in human geography quite closely. For example, early use of descriptive literary passages as data for regional geography was modified and complicated by a growing humanistic emphasis on the subjective experience of place. That shift was in turn challenged by more radical and critical approaches; and then, under the influence of the cultural turn, literary geography became more explicitly influenced by literary and cultural theory.

In the last few years, however, rapid development in three areas has complicated the definition of literary geography. First, work at the intersection of literary studies and geography has become more actively interdisciplinary, and as a result literary geography today appears to be moving into an era of greater cross-disciplinary collaboration. Second, and partly as a result of this first development, it has become more difficult to identify what should be included within the interdisciplinary configuration of “literary geography.” Third, bibliographic efforts to record the history and present range of work combining literary studies with geography have made a wider range of relevant material visible and accessible, and this has complicated the understanding of the history, spatial distribution, and multidisciplinary range of the field. While these developments make coherent overview and collaborative consensus more difficult to sustain they reflect the currently energetic state of work in literary geography and cognate areas.

Literary geography before 1994

The origins and early stages of geography’s literary geography have been well documented, with works from the mid-twentieth century on the role of the imagination in geography and on regional literary geographies such as Hardy’s Wessex and Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County most commonly cited as marking the establishment of the field. In these early stages of literary geography, emphasis was commonly placed on the depiction of setting in fiction and the relations between fictional and lived regions. Related work in literary studies that would in time become significant for literary geography from the same era includes M.M. Bakhtin’s argument for the connectedness of literary time and space in his theory of the chronotope and Joseph Frank’s introduction of the concept of spatial form. Where Bakhtin was interested in how distinctive literary space-time configurations shaped and characterized particular genres, such as nineteenth century French realism, Frank drew attention to the nonlinear structure of works in which the narrative is distributed spatially throughout the text.

Although the first comprehensive review articles would not appear until the 1990s, as a subfield within human geography literary geography was already gaining coherence in the 1970s, partly as a result of the emergence of humanistic
geography. Within human geography, literary geography in this era was performed in the context of an increased interest in human perception of the environment and a new approach to the idea of place as location invested with cultural and personal meaning. Humanistic literary geography tended to look to literary texts, usually fiction, for universal truths, and to literary authors for particularly acute and well-written descriptions of place and landscape. Not yet a combination of geographical and literary studies, literary geography turned to literary texts for geographical evidence while maintaining a disciplinary distance from the “complementary field” of literary criticism. Meanwhile in literary studies “landscape in literature” or “literary landscapes” remained an established theme.

In the same way that humanistic literary geography had emerged in reaction to positivist and quantitative geographies, over time it became subject to critique itself from various lines of work associated with more critical and radical geographies, as attempts were made to add a more socially critical and political dimension to the field. The 1970s and 1980s also saw the beginnings of work on the inclusion of maps in literary works and on the use of fiction in the geography classroom. In this period, even as debates continued over the extent to which literary texts could be understood to constitute geographical data, early work began to appear in various areas that would later become major themes for literary geography: literary tourism, for example, science fiction, children’s geographies, regionalism, empire, and postcolonialism.

Literary geography from 1994 to 2005

The appearance of Brosseau’s 1994 review essay in Progress in Human Geography marks an important moment in the development of literary geography for two reasons. First, Brosseau argued for a literary geography methodology built around close reading techniques characteristic of literary studies, criticizing the redirecting of attention toward the ways in which literary texts generate “particular modes of readability that produce a particular type of geography.” Second, because he was familiar with both French and English language literary geography and published in both languages Brosseau initiated early moves toward a greater internationalization of the field. If the period before 1994 could be characterized as the era in which literary geography was primarily focused on description and as a result, typically, realist description and recognizable settings, Brosseau’s work added a focus on the space-generating aspects of narrative as a second major stream in geographical literary geography.

Another new line of work in geographical literary geography beginning to appear in the 1990s emphasized the social, cultural, and political contexts of literary creation and reception. This new emphasis on reading and consumption developed from Sharp’s reminder (2000) that not all readers are trained in literary criticism and that in literary geography the reader-response of nonprofessional readers cannot be ignored. Meanwhile work on literary tourism continued to develop, as did work on the fictional representation of historical places, children’s literature, and the mapping of literary settings. Science fiction first emerged as a significant genre for literary geography in the late 1990s, with the collection Lost in Space (Kitchin and Kneale 2002) marking an important moment in literary geography’s expansion of range, as an interest in the textual production of imagined worlds was added to the conventional emphasis on realistic description and representation. Major themes in human geography in this era which influenced
work in literary geography included the post-colonial, feminist geographies, and geographies of identity and positionality.

Beyond the discipline of geography, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw an increase in work that combined literary studies with geography and spatial theory in established interdisciplinary fields such as American studies. While this work was not formally presented as “literary geography” its themes and methodologies were compatible with the geographical work with literary texts that was emerging in response to the new cultural geography. In contrast, Franco Moretti’s Atlas of the European Novel (1998) brought quite a different idea of a literary geography, disconnected from any existing tradition within human geography, to a wide audience. According to Moretti, a specialist in comparative literature, literary geography involved the identification of suitable textual features (such as settings), the collection of data, the cartographic reformulation of that data, and finally the use of the resulting maps to generate new insights into literary history: “this is what literary geography is all about,” he argued. With no reference to work by geographers, or to existing definitions of literary geography, Moretti launched a separate tradition with the Atlas that only later began to reconnect with academic geography, for example, in the literary cartography project at ETH Zurich, A Literary Atlas of Europe. With the development of GIS and the push to merge qualitative and quantitative methods in literary geography, this kind of work is now an important element in the field. In terms of interdisciplinary connections, this line of work in literary geography – which tends to focus on the mapping of settings – docks quite comfortably at present with work in narratology, which generally assumes a hierarchical container-space metageography and which, as a result, is difficult to integrate with lines of work in literary geography more interested in rethinking the nature of space and in relational and network geographies.

The so-called spatial turn in cultural studies and the cultural turn in geography of the late 1990s and early 2000s generated an increase in the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and theories. Blair’s “Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary” (1998), for example, which appeared in American Literary History, concentrated on the overlap between the new cultural geography and work in American studies on literary texts, history, and historiography. This line in American literary studies later produced work on the literary production of scale, on fiction and maps, and on literary metageographies. Despite referring to the work of Lefebvre, Harvey, Massey, Soja, Smith, and other spatial theorists, however, Blair’s article typically made no mention of geographical work in literary geography. Work on literary texts, geographies, and spatial theory – even as similar themes and methodologies were being taken up in various disciplines – in this way remained quite fragmented.

**Literary geography after 2005**

The 2004 conference of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British geographers included a significantly interdisciplinary session on “Textual Spaces, Spatial Texts” that brought together geographers and literary critics, with papers being published in New Formations the following year. While the conference session and subsequent publication represented a new move toward interdisciplinarity in literary geography, the contributions also highlighted the way in which the invention of new variants of literary geography also sustained disciplinary boundaries. The literary critic Andrew Thacker’s
article (2005), for example, calls for the establishment of a “critical literary geography,” based on the practice of “reading and interpreting literary texts by reference to geographical concepts.” Thacker’s question – “What would such a ‘critical literary geography’ look like?” – suggests the extent to which the literary–critical and the geographical strands in literary geography at this point remained disconnected.

To some extent, even today, work at the more literary end of the spectrum tends to focus on the ways in which geographical methods and spatial theory can illuminate critical readings, while work at the more geographical end tends to focus either on the analysis of map data or on close reading employed in the discussion of issues such as the literary production of space and geographies of writing and reading. Remaining differences in purpose and emphasis notwithstanding, however, there has been a notable increase in the interdisciplinarity of literary geography in the past decade. Collections of essays and journals are today much more likely to include work by both literary critics and geographers, and there are an increasing number of collaborative projects underway involving combinations of disciplines. The new open-access online journal *Literary Geographies*, for example, was jointly established in 2013 by geographers and literary critics collaborating in an attempt to reduce the disciplinary sorting and distancing effects associated with conventionally distinct literary and geographical journals.

**Sorting work on literature and geography**

One of the major questions in generating an overview of current work in literary geography is whether or not to limit the scope of the review strictly to work which self-identifies as literary geography, or to consider the whole range of work dealing with literary writing and reading and questions of space, place, and geography. While the distinction between critical literary geography and the more traditionally geographical literary geography is not so clear that the two cannot be understood within the same framework, and while work at the intersection of literary studies and geography within American studies (for example) is often clearly compatible with work produced within human geography, other recently emerging fields such as geopoetics, green cultural studies, ecopoetics, and ecocriticism are less susceptible to inclusion within the broad field of literary geography. This can be ascribed in part to the fact that approaches such as ecocriticism tend to embody specific sociopolitical goals in regard to issues such as globalization, ecology, and human–environment relations.

The relatively new field of geocriticism is commonly presented as an expanded form of the French–language concept of *géocritique*, a geocentered approach to literary criticism. In its English-language manifestation, geocriticism at present in practice bears many similarities with critical literary geography and in theory with cultural geography generally, but its relationship with literary geography is somewhat difficult to determine because of the way in which it has been presented as a new initiative in studies of literary spatiality and indeed spatiality more generally.

The field of literary cartography is more easily grasped in relation to literary geography, its history and current practices, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. While some studies dealing with literary texts and maps follow the Moretti “distant reading” path, relying on the accumulation of large data sets and (increasingly) GIS methods to generate cartographic representations of literary aspects such as fictional settings or author geographies, others take an approach more in line with the kind
of “close reading” typical of literary criticism, focusing in greater detail on single authors or texts. There is also a growing interest in the relationship of mapping to narrative: the use of maps within literary works, the mapping of fictional settings, and (particularly in the context of Web 2.0) the reading of maps as stories.

Bibliographies

One of the most significant developments in recent years in literary geography has been the establishment in 2012 of an open-access online bibliography providing a regularly updated database of work in the field. As of January 2014, the bibliography listed more than 1700 items organized into chronological and thematic lists with a separate bibliography for unpublished MA and PhD theses. Themed lists include literary geography and mapping, literary geography and tourism, poetry, science fiction, graphic fiction, and detective fiction, and there is also a page listing research project websites. Thacker’s (2005) and Hones’s (2008) review essays were able to specify clear limits to their reach, dealing, for example, almost exclusively with critical literary geography or with work on fiction published in geography journals. The pushing back of the horizons of literary geography and the increased visibility of similar work in other disciplines and on a wider variety of genres enabled by the literary geographies website means that this kind of strategic limitation is today much less likely.

The rapid emergence of online search engines and depositories in addition to the digitalization of journal archives has meant that the literary geographies bibliography website has been able to expand the horizons of literary geography by compiling citations for relevant but scattered and in many cases “lost” work, such as past unpublished doctoral dissertations or work published in collections and journals outside the mainstream of human geography. This bibliographic recuperation has rendered visible the very broad range of work in the field, bringing into sight work on such varied textual materials as English-language poetry from Singapore and the Niger Delta and from journals as diverse as Australian Literary Studies and the African Research Review. Taken together with the geographical range of the work included, the global spread of the page view metrics for the website indicate the extent to which even English-language literary geography today extends far beyond its traditional foundations in British cultural geography and literary studies and American studies and literary history.

New directions

In the period before 1994, literary geography was primarily concerned with questions of description and representation; the following decade saw the addition of a new focus on narrative and its role in the literary production of place and space. The shift in thinking that has moved geography from a view of space as a set of external coordinates to a view of space as something more unstable – the product of, not the container of, interrelations and networks – has led not only to a widening of the gap separating literary geography generally from narratological work on literary space but also to a closer relationship between literary geography and the work of textual theorists dealing with the concept of intertextuality, a combination which has introduced into literary geography the idea of literary space as a network of intertextual relations.

With continuing work on description, representation, and narrative in literary geography now including strong initiatives in literary cartography, the addition of a third major focus
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means that literary geography today is also concerned with various forms of writing and reading practice. This new emphasis, in part a response to the emergence of nonrepresentational theory, has led to increased interest in studies of the physical and social geographies of inspiration, creativity, and production, of author–text–reader interaction and historical geographies of reader reception (Saunders 2010). The idea that the literary text itself can be understood as a spatial or geographical event happening in the interaction of multiple agents (including authors, editors, publishers, and readers) is an emerging line of research. Progress is also being made in work on the historical geography of the book, on author-editor interactions, and on textual materialities.

Overall, in recent years literary geography and its cognate fields have been characterized by a notable increase in productivity and diversity. The fact that the list for theses and dissertations at the literary geographies bibliography website has 53 citations for the period 1980–2008 but 57 citations for the subsequent four years, 2009–2012, indicates the growing interest in this area. Once focused almost exclusively on nineteenth century realist fiction, literary geography in the last decade has diversified extensively now including work on a wide range of other fictional periods and styles: the modernist and the postmodern novel, for example, short stories, poetry, and drama. The 2013 collection Poetry & Geography: Space and Place in Postwar Poetry (Alexander and Cooper 2013) provides a good example of the way in which the post-2000 line of critical literary geography, grounded in literary criticism, and the tradition of geographical literary geography, which can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century, are converging. With the launch of the new journal Literary Geographies in 2013, it seems likely that literary geography will continue to become more varied, collaborative, and interdisciplinary in the years ahead.

SEE ALSO: Cultural studies; Cultural turn; Imaginative geographies; New cultural geography; Representation; Text and intertextuality

References