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Relational Spaces and Spaces for Relations: A Literary-Geographical Reading of The Brooklyn Follies and Plainsong

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Abstract

Stories have power. They can reveal the ways in which lives and bodies are entangled with the material and social world. They can help convey the lived reality of situations in ways that traditional academic writing cannot. Attending to stories can aid efforts to turn towards a more embedded approach to knowledge generation. Stories hold particular promise for New Area Studies, both as a source to be read for greater and deeper understanding of the globe’s many different worlds at a time of dramatic change, and as a source of new methodologies and theoretical practices to revitalise the field. This article draws on literary geographical theories of space and fiction to offer a new way of appreciating stories. Not as communicators of thought and feeling, but as lively, active and ever-renewing co-actants in the creation and co-creation of space itself. In this framework, reading is not an act of knowledge accumulation, but rather an experiment in which the ontological categories of fact and fiction blur into each other. Texts are not static reflections of a place but can be geographers themselves, actively co-creating spaces in the world. I demonstrate this through a literary-geographical approach to fiction called ‘reading for space’, using two classics of American literature: Paul Auster’s *The Brooklyn Follies* and Kent Haruf’s *Plainsong*.

Although formally and tonally distinct, both novels create space in similar ways. This reading for space treats two novels not as snapshots of specific places as they once were, but as lively and active co-creators of new spaces.

Keywords: Literary geography, literary space, reading, story, Auster, Haruf

Introduction: Stories in the World

Scholars across the social sciences and humanities have been (re)turning to stories in recent years. These turns reflect a recognition that ‘however much stories might seem “small” and “innocent”… [they remain] fundamentally implicated in the production of cultural, economic, political, and social power’ (Cameron 2012: 573). For New Area Studies (NAS), stories have been particularly important as a means of revitalising the discipline. In this journal, scholars have argued that ‘[s]torytelling, broadly conceived, is a vital tool for Area Studies, crossing disciplines and centring the voices of people and places that might otherwise go unheard’ (Hodgett and Smith 2021: 5-6). Stories have power. They can reveal how ‘personal experience and expression interweave with the social, structural, or ideological’ (Cameron 2012: 574). They convey the lived reality of situations in ways that traditional academic writing cannot (see Crawford 2018, Lorimer and Parr 2014, Matthey 2024). They can satiate an ‘appetite for rich descriptive detail and creative evocation of the context under examination’ (Rhodes 2021: 227). Attending to stories can help us better recognise that ‘the goal of the detached, impersonal, objective social scientist is illusory… We are living, breathing human beings bringing our beliefs and lived experience to bear in human research settings’ (Rhodes 2021: 245).

Stories can help NAS to re-orient itself around three key issues: ‘who the field is for, whose knowledge it represents, and how successful we are as researchers in gathering evidence, or insight, into what it feels like in “being there“’ (Hodgett and Smith 2020: 2). Storytelling as a tool, it has been suggested in these pages, can help

to inject 'innovative methodological models and interdisciplinary approaches' (Hodgett and Smith 2021: 5) into the discipline. Reflecting these calls to diversify both the discipline's knowledge base and to turn towards a more embedded, and perhaps authentic, form of knowledge generation and communication, recent research in New Area Studies has tended to focus on two, broad, approaches. First, explorations into the ways in which stories, often literary creations in a variety of guises including comics, magazines, and novels work to represent the world (see Duncan and Smith 2021, Hawksford White 2024, Hodgett and Smith 2021, Morton-Wilcox 2024, Salhi 2021, Taylor 2024). Secondly, efforts to harness the affective power of stories as an innovative means of academic knowledge generation and research communication (Rhodes 2021, Tillett 2024, Wilson 2021).

I propose here to expand NAS's store of 'innovative methodological models and interdisciplinary approaches' (Hodgett and Smith 2021) by exploring a third way of considering stories in academic research. This third way seeks to combine both approaches currently employed in NAS: it understands stories as *both* representations of the world and as affective actants in its creation. Expanding on the idea that stories and narratives are inherently temporal things (Wilson 2021: 8), literary geography suggests that stories are also inescapably *spatial*. They are performances, happening in the world (Hones 2014: 31). They are also actants in the co-production of space, possessing their own 'material-affective liveliness' (Anderson 2019: 1120). This conceptualisation of literature as a spatial process has developed in recent years in geography as one of two distinct, yet theoretically related, means of exploring not what stories are or what they represent, but what they can do in the world. The first of these explorations, involving cultural geographers focused on the power of storytelling as a tool for academic research and practice (see Cameron 2012, Lorimer 2005, 2014, McLaughlin 2021, Rose 2016), is similar to the ways in which stories have been used in NAS to evoke the personal, human side of knowledge creation. The second of these, collected into an 'interdiscipline' called literary geography, is concerned with understanding the workings of literary texts and related fictions in the world (see Amey 2021,

Anderson 2015, Hones 2008, 2014, 2024, McLaughlin 2016, 2019, 2024, Thurgill 2018).

In this article I draw on literary-geographical theories and methods to embrace scholarly reading as a process of becoming, rather than an exercise in knowledge-gathering. To attend to the ways in which scholarly reading can be a practice which aims not to decode a story, or to read it 'properly', but which intends to take part in the unfolding of that story and, in so doing, to note and to celebrate the ways stories do more than tell a tale or communicate information: they create spaces in the world. To reflect on the truth that: 'both spaces and texts are treated [by geographers] as cultural productions that work along the same sort of lines. They are both something made. *They could have turned out differently under different circumstances*' (Ogborn 2005: 146, emphasis added). I explore this mutually co-constructive power of texts and spaces through a literary-geographical reading of two recent American classics: Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* and Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies*. Though tonally and thematically different, I argue that both novels actively make space – inside and outside their pages, as well as in ways which cross the ontological boundary between the fictional and actual – in strikingly similar ways.

Literary Space: Emergent, Collaborative, Dynamic

In traditional accounts of narrative, space has long been the poor cousin of time. As Philip Wilson has written in this journal: 'Story is everywhere, because we are temporal beings' (2021: 8; see also Gottschall 2012). This emphasis on time as the main element of narrative often obscures the role that space also plays in stories. Indeed, for many, [t]he conventional term available for the analysis of [spatial] matters in literature is "setting"' (Mosland 2024: 105). This term has 'unfortunate connotations of passivity and stage-like flatness' (105), which renders the geographical, embodied or environmental experiences of characters less-than-relevant. This tendency to geographical flatness is problematic for two reasons. First, it does not reflect the ways in which readers (particularly those *not* engaged in

acts of scholarly criticism) encounter fictional texts. Rather than accept fictional places and the environmental characteristics that comprise them as mere setting, readers are more likely to draw on their own experiences of the actual world to make the literary geographies they encounter seem more real (Hillis Miller 1995, Hones 2014; see also McLaughlin 2024: 19-39). They are likely to give credence to the ways in which the ‘physical’ and ‘social affordances’ of literary environments, geographies or whatever we may call them, ‘shape the action’ of a story in active ways (Mosland 2024: 105-6).

Secondly, a conceptual flattening of literary space into ‘setting’ results in often quite narrow understandings of the ‘geography’ of a text. Early explorations in literary geography and literary cartography, for example, were often constrained by an assumption that ‘the “geography” of literary geography essentially means “topography“’ (Hones 2024: 32) and so sought answers to questions such as ‘where are the places of Jane Austen’s England?’; or attempted to represent locations from fictions in actual-world maps (see Moretti 1998; Piatti et al. 2008, 2009). These studies demonstrated the importance of location or place to the stories they studied, but in doing so they reduced the dynamism, intensity and interrelations of characters and plots and environments—the very things which, alongside change, drive narratives—to little more than a point on a map.

Recent research in literary geography has taken a different approach: going beyond a simple re-assessment of the importance of place or setting or environment in narratives to focus on the spatial element of creative fictions. For many literary geographers, this turn towards the spatiality of fiction involves a wholesale reconceptualisation of what fictions are, how they are encountered, and what effects this has in the world. Key to this re-orientation is the idea that fictions do no reside solely within texts. Instead, they emerge as the result of an encounter between reader and text (and author) (McLaughlin 2024: 10). Fiction, in this frame is, ‘a geographical event, a dynamic unfolding collaboration happening in time and space’ (Hones 2014: 32), one which is ‘always open to reinterpretation and reproduction’ (McLaughlin 2024: 7).

The provisionality of fictions presented here is based on two related ideas that have gained traction among geographers in recent years: the processuality of space; and the non-representational or more-than-representational 'force' of fiction. Geographers understand space as not a thing (such as a room or any specific place) but instead a concept used to describe the emerging relations between people and all the social and material elements of the environments in which they operate (see Merriman 2024, Santos 2021). Space is, for want of a better term, the result or product of the many interrelations which make up everyday life (see McLaughlin 2024: 8). Among literary geographers, the most popular definition of space has been that produced by Doreen Massey, as part of a poststructuralist and decolonial project to break away from geography's heavily Westernised, colonial past. Her conceptualisation of space, as a 'dimension of multiplicity', as an open system of 'loose ends and missing links' (Masey 2005: 37) is based in a political, decolonial recognition that works against the unidirectional idea of history as 'progress' embedded in neoliberal, neo-colonial views of the world. As she writes: 'for the future to be open, space must be open, too' (Massey 2005: 37).

Secondly, literary geography's conceptualisation of fiction as emergent and unstable is rooted in cultural geography's non-representational turn (see Anderson and Harrison 2010; Ash and Simpson 2016; Bratt 2016; Simpson 2021). This is an attempt to understand how the world is made, not through grand narratives or abstracted systems, but by paying attention to:

> How life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements… affective intensities [and] unexceptional interactions… [to help us] escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation (Lorimer 2005: 84).

Lorimer's writing here echoes well Rhodes's quasi-condemnation of social science research which seeks to claim for itself a monopoly on telling the world about itself. Instead, geographers practicing non-representational theories (NRT) have spent the past 25 years revelling in their new ability not to know it all. To embrace, as Lorimer remarks, that 'so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become' (84). For literary geographers, non-representational theory offers a means of apprehending fictions as being more than a collection of impressions, ideas, facts and imaginings awaiting deciphering by those with special knowledge and instead as being part of the 'ordinary action' action of life for so many people. To 're-orientate [sic] the object of analysis from the representation and the system it expresses, to how a representation operates and makes a difference as one part of a relational configuration' (Anderson 2019: 1122).

Each of these theoretical foundations, the unstable nature of fiction; the processual nature of space; and the attention to embodied experiences and affective intensities of everyday life, reflects a larger post-phenomenological orientation to the ways in which fictions are created. For many literary geographers, fictions, spaces and even reading as an everyday experience are the product of interrelations between different actors (such as authors, texts and readers), none of whom exist a priori to their shared encounter (see Ash and Simpson 2016). 'Once we begin to think of the author and the reader, for example, as relational effects, rather than independent entities,' writes Hones, 'then we can start to think of the event of the text as a contingent achievement' (Hones 2014: 31). This idea of fiction as contingent achievement is important for our understanding, as it is one means by which the dynamism, emergence and processuality of actual-world spaces leaks into fictional spaces (see Anderson and Saunders 2015, McLaughlin 2023, 2024, Saunders 2015). If, like readers and authors, fictions 'come to be through experience' (Ash and Simpson 2016: 49), then it is highly likely, and certainly 'appropriate' to read a processual, lively, dynamic and very real conception of space into fictions themselves. To take seriously the ways in which characters, objects, environments and plot lines interact in creative fiction to collaboratively co-produce the literary

space of the text. My aim here is to demonstrate how literary-geographical approaches to fictions can help re-problematise the role of story as a site of academic attention. I do this by undertaking a specific form of literary-geographical close reading: reading for space.

In the Flesh: Holt and Brooklyn

I demonstrate reading for space here through a comparative study of two tonally quite different American novels: Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* and Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies*. Whereas *Plainsong* celebrates 'visions of a more durable, hand-hewn past, and… the horsey, old-leather scent of an America that may or may not be apocryphal' (Miles 2004: n.p.), *The Brooklyn Follies* presents a picaresque tale of coincidence, an artful and knowingly staged exploration of metropolitan life (Friant-Kessler 2009, Schaub 2011). Still, both novels are concerned with similar themes, of interest to a revitalising New Area Studies and its desire to explore '"growing complex global challenges" via a "deep understanding of people and places"' (Heise quoted in Tillet 2024: 3). They are concerned with changes in American life at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a time when old certainties were suddenly swept away by rising tides. First, globalisation and an intensification of consumer capitalism; secondly, the War on Terror and the community in-cohesion it engendered.

Plainsong introduces a diverse group of people living in the small, fictional Colorado town of Holt, whose lives overlap in quietly dramatic ways. The novel follows its characters as various calamities and tensions, big and small (an unwanted pregnancy; an unexpected divorce; an altercation with a violent young man) affect their everyday lives. Always, as if heard on the wind or seen from the end of Main Street, Denver, the big city, with its promises and perils of metropolitan urbanism, hovers tantalisingly, perhaps mercifully, just out of reach. *Plainsong* speaks a temporal language which emphasises the role of memory, nostalgia, loss and change, particularly Haruf's own experiences and his convictions around the loss of

mysticism or the sacred in then-modern American life (see Folks 2009; see also Frykholm 2014, Kirch 2012, Miles 2004).

The Brooklyn Follies, by contrast, opens with a two-footed jump straight into the messy, loud, vivacious urbanism of Brooklyn's Park Slope. It concerns Nathan Glass, a recent cancer survivor looking to craft the next stage in his life. Nathan's picaresque adventures in coincidental contacts (with his long-lost nephew Tom, his estranged daughter, his niece and her daughter, and with others living nearby, particularly the Beautiful Perfect Mother and Harry Brightman) and the exuberant joy they often bring, are bookended with the spectre of more death, as the novel ends with the plane crashes into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, the most visible event of the terror attacks now known as '9/11'. *Follies* shares with Auster's wider oeuvre a temporally-inflected concern with what was and what is now. Here, themes of loss and change predominate, whether national (Hironori 2023, Hugonnier 2020) or more personal (Kamel 2017, Shostak 2009).

Plainsong and *Follies* present good examples of the power of reading for space as an addition to NAS's store of 'innovative methodological models and interdisciplinary approaches' (Hodgett and Smith 2021: 5). *Follies,* for example, has been recognised as 'a strangely upbeat 9/11 novel about the *real, lived world*' (Varvogli 2008/2009: 2, emphasis added). Like most of Auster's characters, Nathan lives in a world where space intersects with subjectivity and social connections in thematically important ways (see Alford 1995, Brown 2003, Hansen 2021). Auster's New York is a city of embodied experience (Abecassis 2014). It is also a world that is 'open to multiple contingencies and possibilities' (Bollinger 2014: 490). Equally, *Plainsong*, despite the apparent holism of Holt and the relational and geographical distance from Denver, is inextricably and complexly interrelated with the world around it. As a Midwestern small town, Holt sits in relation, albeit ahistorical and below-the-surface, to the generational, genocidal changes which haunt actual-world counterparts (Pratt 2017), yet reflects an environmental sensibility, particularly through the McPheron brothers, which borders on the more-than-human (Fisher-Wirth 2003). By reading for space, I intend to combine these disparate elements of

historical embeddedness and environmental awareness, of embodied experience and spatially-inflected subjectivity into a broader whole: an interpretation of Holt and Brooklyn which constructs both places as rife with the ‘loose ends and missing links’ (Massey 2005: 37) that make space.

Method: Reading for Space

All stories write space. This is true whether or not authors or readers consciously use the language of geography (see Merriman 2024: 94). As humans, inside and outside stories, we do not simply move through space like fish through water: we inhabit it; we create space with our bodies, our movements, our relations to the world around us (see Merleau-Ponty 2012: 214; Merriman 2024: 95). Reading for space is a particular kind of close reading which ‘can help us to see more richly the interrelations that make literary spaces not only seem plausible but come alive when read’ (McLaughlin 2024: 23). To read for space is to attend to the multiple ways in which characters, objects, environments, times and even plot lines interrelate as a story unfolds. I am presenting reading for space here as a deliberately academic practice, informed both by my own participation in the development of literary-geographical theory and practice, and an awareness that I am participating in ongoing critical conversations around both *Plainsong* and *Follies*. However, all readers will likely read for space at one time or another, enriching a story by folding into it memories and experiences of places visited, people met, experiences had, and so on (see Hones 2014, Hillis Miller 1995). Some readers make this into a game and are deliberate about doing so (see McLaughlin 2024: 23-4).

To read for space is to read for more than setting, or environment. It is not (only) a practice by which one maps a fictional location or makes lists of named places. To read for space is to invest in literary geographers’ definitions of space: as open, as multiple, as the ‘dimension of multiplicity’ and of ‘contemporaneous plurality’ (Massey 2005: 9); as something which ‘cannot simply be represented as a singular setting, location, or thing… [but] as an action performed through practices of

writing… reading and interpreting texts’ (Merriman 2024: 99). Reading for space, then, is a close reading of a text (or any other type of story) which requires the adoption of two mindsets. First, that the fictional space of a story is not only or simply a thematic reflection of the author’s narrative intent, but that it has the potential to be ‘open to multiple contingencies and possibilities’ (Bollinger 2014: 490); that it is, ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey 2005: 9). To read for space is to attend to, even to be alive to, the ways in which the interrelations between characters, environments, objects, time and stories (stories told or heard, the words used to convey them, even the overall narrative or plot) interrelate in ways which not only *reflect* character actions or story themes, but which *influence* them, too. It is to pay attention to the possible affordances of the physical and social environments in which characters find themselves (see Mosland 2024: 104).

Secondly, that reading itself is not a passive act of consumption, but an active practice in which reader and text (and author, and other experiences and knowledges and texts) meet and interrelate with, and impact, each other. In other words, that reading is ‘essentially an experimental process in which the categorical distinction between the frames of “fact” and “fiction” become blurred’ (Ridanpää 2018: 141). Literary geographers have written about the ways in which fact and fiction blur to change the actual world (see McLaughlin 2016, 2019; Thurgill 2018; Thurgill and Lovell 2019). Here I am interested in how reading for space can read actual-worldly expectations of complexity and coexistence into fictional spaces. Part of this, of course, involves an almost-radical potential for reading against the grain of plot development. While reading for space, I might linger over a small detail: the changes that erupt when two characters encounter each other; the network of relations which emerge from a seemingly casual encounter; whilst the plot aches to move forward. I have chosen to read *Plainsong* and *Follies* to show the power of lingering over sensory details; to embrace the life-changing potential of character interactions. As two novels concerned with ways in which places and people change over time, they put a great deal of effort into making space and in enlisting their readers in that project, too.

Living in a Material World

Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* makes spaces through a detailed focus on the interactions between characters and environments. 'Just as time unfolds through change', writes Doreen Massey, 'so space unfolds through interaction' (Massey 2005: 61). The people of Holt, Colorado, the fictionalised town where this story plays out, spend much of their time, interacting with their environment and the things within it. Tom Guthrie, for example, opens the book by standing 'smoking cigarettes looking out over the back lot where the sun was just coming up' (Haruf 2000: 3), before getting 'into the pickup and crank[ing] it and [driving] out of the drive onto Railroad Street and head[ing] the five or six blocks toward Main' (Haruf 2000: 7). Instances of activity are rendered in deliberate detail. Take, for example, Victoria Roubideaux at her part-time job at the Holt Café:

> When she arrived at the Holt Café on the corner of Second and Main she stepped into the long fair-sized rectangular room… [She] went back to the kitchen and removed her jacket and hung it on a peg in the closet and draped the purse over it and then pulled on a long apron over her shirt and short skirt (Haruf 2000: 25-6).

We can read this embodied intimacy in spatial terms through the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that 'we must not say that our body is in space, nor for that matter in time. It inhabits space and time' (2012: 214), and that 'humans inhabit spaces and construct spatialities through their moving bodies' (Merriman 2024: 95). Our first encounter with the McPheron brothers, cattle farmers, shows this embodied construction of space:

> They had the cattle in the corral already, the mother cows and the two-year-old heifers waiting in the bright cold late-fall afternoon. The cows were moiling and bawling and the dust rose in the cold air and hung above the corrals and chutes like brown clouds of gnats swimming in schools above the cold ground. The two McPheron brothers stood at the far end of the corral

> surveying the cattle… At the tip of Harold's nose a watery drip quivered, then dropped off (Haruf 2000: 58).

Here, the McPherons are but two of a number of bodies whose movements and interactions make space here: the cows, old and young, with calf and without, 'moiling and bawling' in the corral (Haruf 2000: 58); the dust rising in the cold air; the metaphorical gnats; and even, perhaps the watery drip on Harold's nose, acting in ways he surely would not have wanted it to. The equality of all actants in the co-construction of space here is emphasised by the description of where the brothers are standing 'at the far end of the corral' (Haruf 2000: 58). This construction decentres the brothers and allows us to see the scene from the perspective of other participants. The detail here enriches our readerly experience, helping us sympathetically to invest these material interactions with a sense of liveliness and complexity.

Small details construct the world of Holt as alive with activity, life, and interaction. The windmill that Tom Guthrie watches from his kitchen, for example, reddens in the rising sun and later blows in the strengthening wind (4-6); in the Holt Café's sink where Victoria Roubideaux stands washing up, we are told that '[s]team began to rise from the swirling suds'(26); the 'cow dust and the cold' make Raymond McPheron's eyes 'bleary and red'(58). These active interrelations between characters and their material environment, which gradually unfold in the telling, create the fictional spaces of Holt as material 'dimension[s] of coexistence' (McLaughlin 2024: 24) and interrelations.

The town of Holt is as much an actant in the story's unfolding as any of the people who live there. Like any actual-world place, it is complex; its physical and social affordances help make the story happen. More than locations on a map, places are highly connected: 'localised knots in wider webs of social practice' (Massey quoted in Hones 2022: 160). They are manifestations of the embodied entanglement of human and nonhuman, including material elements (Mosland 2024: 104). We can see this embodied, practiced entanglement at work in the ways in which characters navigate the town: their movements, tracing and retracing their steps over the same

ground, carve out a place for the town from the very earth and shake up the dust as they go. Take, for example, Tom Guthrie's sons, Bobby and Ike, who spend a substantial part of their early appearance in the story on the move. The detail with which their movement is described bears repeating here:

> They mounted their bikes and rode out of the drive onto the loose gravel on Railroad Street and east towards town. The air was still cool, with the smells of horse manure and trees and dry weeds and dirt in the atmosphere and something else they couldn't name. Above them a pair of magpies swung on a cottonwood branch screaming… [They] turned onto the pavement at Main Street and then bounced over the railroad tracks onto the cobblestone platform at the depot (Haruf 2000: 12).

This passage is rich with sensory detail, including smells ('horse manure and trees and dry weeds and dirt'), sounds (magpies screaming) and particularly the feel of different road surfaces under their bikes and the boys scrabble on gravel, glide over tarmac and bounce to a halt on cobblestones (Haruf 2000: 12). It asks us to pause and notice the importance of embodied materiality to the processual, entangled co-creation of Holt as a town.

There is only one passage in *Plainsong* in which Holt breaks free of these micro-lensed, embodied impressions and appears instead in a quasi-Apollonian viewpoint, mapped out for the reader. This emerges in a description of Bobby and Ike's newspaper delivery route:

> Bobby took the older, more established part of Holt… where the wide flat streets were lined with elm trees and locust and hackberry and evergreen, where the comfortable two-story [sic] houses were set back in their own space of lawn… while Ike, for his part, took… the north side of town across the railroad tracks, where the houses were smaller… painted blue or yellow or pale green and might have chickens in the back lots (Haruf 2000: 14).

Whether seen as if from above, or through a character's eyes on the ground, Holt's shape emerges gradually, traced by the cycling and walking, seeing and smelling of a range of different characters. Repetitive actions, such as daily cycling through the town, or reading a common newspaper, inscribe human life and practice in the world and form a means by which Holt comes into being (see Lorimer 2005: 85; Mosland 2024: 104). Indeed, as bodies entangled in and unfolding this place, characters do not just receive impressions of a town that already exists; they actively shape its materiality in different ways. When driving out to work, Tom's truck 'lift[s] powdery plume from the road and the suspended dust shone like bright flecks of gold in the sun' (Haruf 2000: 7). While walking to school, Victoria's reflection briefly enlivens the dark and empty 'display windows of the stores' on Main Street (11). From all these character movements, Holt emerges not as setting or background, but as a 'stage of intensity' (Thrift 1994: 212–13), a 'constellation of processes' (Massey 2005: 141) made from the repetitive motion of characters, their bodies interacting with a richly material textual world.

The intensity of Holt as a place is seen in characters' awareness that being-in-place can powerfully shape who they are. Victoria Roubideaux provides a good example of this, as her story arguably unfolds as a path from exile to belonging; from identity crisis into subjecthood. From her first appearance she is referred to only as 'the girl' (Haruf 2000: 9, 24, 31). The first character to call her by her name is her teacher, Maggie Jones, to whom Victoria turns in desperation, after being kicked out of her mother's home for being pregnant (33). It is Jones who takes Victoria in; who hears her story; and who challenges her visceral need to leave Holt by reminding her that, 'This is where you are' (Haruf 2000: 50). Maggie's words ground Victoria in place: being pregnant; being in Holt:

> But Mrs. Jones, the girl said. Isn't there a woman doctor I could go to?
> Not here. Not in Holt.
> Maybe I could go to another town.
> Honey, Maggie Jones said. Victoria. Listen to me. You're here now. This is where you are (Haruf 2000: 50).

Victoria struggles with staying in Holt. She calls the father of her unborn child from 'a pay phone on the highway out at the town limits of Holt' (Haruf 2000: 92), its location suggestive of her desire to get away; yet she eventually finds a home with the McPherons. In Victoria, we can see the reciprocal, affective relationship between place and selfhood at work (see Malpas 1999).

Throughout *Plainsong*, stories and dialogue appear as a material and lively part of this embodied world. Speech can hurt (Haruf 2000: 10); it can be stifled by oppressive environments (40); it can be stolen, if only figuratively (110). Most tellingly, utterances and dialogue are not couched in speech marks but live as themselves right on the page, embedded in the action and not removed through typography. Victoria Roubideaux's walk after being thrown out of her mother's house, before being taken in by Maggie Jones, is a good example of this:

> It was dark now and it had turned off cold. The streets were almost empty. Once a dog came barking out at her from behind a house and she held out her hand to him. The dog stood back and barked, his mouth shutting and opening as though operated by a spring hinge. Here, she said. He came forward suspiciously and sniffed her hand, but as soon as she moved he began to bark again. A man appeared in the door and yelled Goddamn it, you get in here! And the dog turned and trotted toward the house and stopped and barked again and went inside (Haruf 2000: 32).

The lack of speech marks renders the dialogue as wholly embedded in the world. Victoria's 'Here'; the dog owner's cry of 'Goddamn it'; and even the dog's barking, appear in the text with the same immediacy as the cold weather, the darkness, the empty streets and even the house itself. The materiality of this dialogue reflects the power of 'speech acts', as performances signalling social power, to construct space (see Ogborn 2020). The lack of quotation marks around speech in *Plainsong* renders it as much an actant in the creation of space, an inanimate carrier of agency, as any other material object in this story. A conversation with Harold McPheron later in Victoria's story, shows the extent to which *Plainsong* invests in the materiality of speech:

> I was just wondering, he said. If you was warm enough in here.
>
> Yes, she said. It's fine.
>
> They're saying how it's suppose to get kind of cold tonight.
>
> Is it?
>
> And this old house ain't very warm.
>
> I'm fine, she said again. She watched him. He was standing just inside the door, his hands poked into his pockets, his weather-blasted red face shining in the lamplight…
>
> In the dining room Raymond sat at the table waiting, curious, the newspaper held up captured in his hands. She all right? he said (Haruf 2000: 132-33)

In this conversation, words, thoughts, and small actions all get mixed together. Like Raymond's newspaper, which is 'captured in his hands' (133), the speech uttered by Victoria and Harold manifests materially in the world, sitting thickly between them, its embeddedness in the text drawing what is not said, as well as what is done, directly into the conversation and into relation with each other. Here, speech itself takes up the 'material-affective liveliness', the 'force' which geographers have identified belonging to texts as objects-in-the-world (Anderson 2019: 1121). The commingling of speech and thought with actions, objects and other materiality indicates their importance as actants in the co-construction of space in this novel. If, for literary geographers, space is 'an action performed through practices of writing… reading, and interpreting texts' (Merriman 2024: 99), then space in *Plainsong* is an action performed or made through practices of speaking words into the world, listening to words spoken, perhaps listening for what is not said, and interpreting other characters' words, actions and emotions.

'We Were Neighbours'

The Brooklyn Follies, which centres on protagonist/narrator Nathan Glass's picaresque wanderings through Brooklyn, underscores the importance of *meaningful*

interpersonal interactions and interrelations to the creation and unfolding of literary space. It is an unfolding process that transforms this district from setting into space; from urban division to cosy community. In the first chapter, for example, Nathan spends large portions of his day walking the streets of a city which seems curiously stage-like and inert:

> Brooklyn… my unconscious return to the place where my story began. It was early spring when I moved in, and for the first few weeks I filled my time by exploring the neighbourhood, taking long walks in the park… I had my newly resurgent hair cut at the Park Slope Barbershop on Seventh Avenue, rented videos from a place called Movie Heaven, and stopped in often at Brightman's Attic, a cluttered, badly organised used-book store… I tended to eat lunch and dinner in restaurants… After sampling a number of options in the vicinity, I settled on the Cosmic Diner as my regular spot for lunch (Auster 2005: 4).

Whereas we might read this truncated list of stopping points on Nathan's walks – the Park Slope Barbershop, Movie Heaven, Brightman's Attic and the Cosmic Diner – as synecdoches of a larger life, the use of phrases such as 'stopped often' and 'regular spot' suggest instead that Nathan, in the opening chapter at least, is walking and living in circles. There is an 'emptiness and purposelessness' (Kolb 2014: 595) to Nathan's perambulations, manifest as spatial recursiveness that renders interaction inert, or at least introspective more than interrelative. A good example can be found in Nathan's assessment of Brooklyners, when he remarks that:

> Brooklynites are less reluctant to talk to strangers than any tribe I had previously encountered. They butt into one another's business at will… they argue like deranged four-year-olds over parking spaces; they zip out dazzling one-liners as a matter of course' (Auster 2005: 4-5).

Read as background or setting, perhaps, Nathan's Brooklyn seems lively and peopled and noisy. Yet, read for space, for 'complexity and coexistence' (McLaughlin 2024: 24), Nathan's descriptions of Park Slope feel somewhat flat; devoid of any

significant interactions or interrelations. Nathan's early Brooklyn experiences are a reminder that, space, as geographers understand it, is not a concept which measures whether things (people, environments, objects, places) exist but how much and in what ways they interact. Space, 'as a dimension of multiplicity and plurality, as always unfinished and under construction' (Hones 2014: 8) does not exist, *a priori* in the world; it 'unfolds through interaction' (Massey 2005: 61). At this point in *Follies*, we can be sure that Nathan and Brooklyn both exist – but are they meaningfully interacting?

Nathan's meeting with his nephew Tom Wood, in a chapter titled 'An Unexpected Encounter', is the first interaction in this novel which can really be said to make space. This encounter represents a real form of interaction and interrelation for Nathan; he emerges from it changed, in both identity and outlook, and from it a series of new and always-becoming encounters and spaces emerge. The spatial importance of this encounter being what it is, it is worth noting it here (almost) in full:

> Imagine my surprise, then, when I walked into Brightman's Attic that Tuesday morning in May and saw my nephew sitting behind the front counter, doling out change to a customer. Luckily I saw Tom before he saw me… After the customer finished paying for her book, I sidled up to the spot she had just vacated, put my hand on the counter and leaned forward… I cleared my throat and said, "Hey there, Tom. Long time no see" (Auster 2005: 19).

No longer a semi-spectral figure floating through Brooklyn, recording the overheard words of others, here Nathan is wholly present in this shop as an embodied being: leaning on the counter, clearing his throat, throwing words into the world. He is an actor, with an ability to influence events and be influenced in turn. The novelty of this appearance as a whole person is seen in Tom's response to Nathan's words: 'he rushed out from behind the counter and threw his arms around me. Much to my amazement, my eyes began to water up with tears' (Auster 2005: 20).

The power of Nathan and Tom's 'unexpected encounter' to make space emerges from the way in which it reorients their existing relationship. In so doing, it opens Brooklyn as a new kind of space for Nathan. From 'a place to die' (Auster 2005: 1), Brooklyn becomes a neighbourhood. This is not just my own readerly impression of events; Nathan says as much himself. 'I hadn't realised how much I had missed my old Dr. Thumb, and now it turned out that we were neighbors – living, by pure happenstance, just two blocks from each other' (Auster 2005: 21). Being neighbours here means more than living nearby; for both Nathan and Tom it leads to a reinvention of their relationship. As Tom describes it: 'We've entered a new era, Nathan. The post-family, post-student, post-past age of Glass and Wood… The now and also the later. But no more dwelling on the then (Auster 2005: 21). Tom's 'post-past' world is one oriented to the future, built on fluid relations between people living in neighbourly proximity. It anticipates their world becoming 'a dimension of multiplicity and plurality, as always unfinished and under construction' (Hones 2014: 8): that is, becoming more spatial, and so more exuberant.

Neighbourhoods, once defined as bounded entities are, in fact, 'torsion[s] of continuity and change' (Drozdzewski and Webster 2021: 351), defined by possibilities for accidental proximity and coexistence (Bissell 2013: 351). Bissell draws on Heidegger's etymology of the word neighbour as 'he who dwells nearby' (Heidegger 1971, quoted in Bissell 2013: 352) and notes that 'dwelling is an active process of accomplishment' (352). We can take this further and see that, just as Merleau-Ponty argues that bodies are not simply in space, but they create space by inhabiting it (2012: 214), so one does not become a neighbour through proximity alone: becoming a neighbour is an active process of relational and identity change. Further, by recognising Nathan and Tom, and later other characters, as neighbours, *Follies* is arguably investing them with the kind of liveliness, agency, affective potential and even motility that is displayed by actual-world neighbourhood dwellers.

The power of neighbourhood to turn proximity into interrelations is evident at many points in *Follies*. Take, for example, the ways in which Nancy Mazzucchelli moves from being a stranger, to a neighbour, to a relation as the novel unfolds. Nancy's connection to Tom, for example, is at first purely proximate: 'She lived in a brownstone on a block midway between his apartment and [Brightman's Attic] (Auster 2005: 81). Tom and Nancy's (lack of) relationship at this point in the story illustrates an everyday facet of neighbourhood life: a passive, rather than active proximity (Bissell 2013: 351): 'not only had [Tom] never spoken a word to her, he didn't even know her name' (Auster 2005: 81). Their proximity is a coincidence, an accident of geography.

Nancy's place in the narrative starts as an object of Tom's unrequited love, fostered by coincidental proximity; it unfolds into something more through an intentional act of encounter. Nathan vows to 'destroy the spell [Tom] was living under' (Auster 2005: 84) through 'a full-fledged conversation that would go on long enough for me to wave Tom over and force him to join in' (85). He uses conversation, a tool of neighbourly relations (Redshaw and Ingham 2018) to 'demystify the object of his longing and turn her into what she really was': a neighbour (Auster 2005: 82).

Nathan's intervention changes his relationship with Nancy, from stranger to neighbour, much like his relationship with Tom changed after their unexpected encounter:

> Until that Sunday morning [bumping into Nancy unexpectedly] I had never once caught a glimpse of her in public… Now, following our impromptu meeting outside her house on Friday, the pattern abruptly changed… Nancy Mazzucchelli was suddenly everywhere I turned… scarcely a day went by when I didn't run into her at the bank or the post office or on some street in the neighbourhood (Auster 2005: 112).

This developing connection between Nancy and Nathan, which deepens into a more formal familial relation as *Follies* unfolds (see Auster 2005: 278, 290) is reflective of the active process of relational and identity change that becoming neighbourly

entails. It also helps to drive the ways in which space unfolds through interpersonal interrelations in this story. Nathan's passage above, combined with his description of their neighbourly talking, '[s]mall town chit-chat in the heart of the big city' (112), stands in marked contrast to the more distant noise of one-liners and overheard complaints that Nathan attributes to Brooklyn in the first chapter. Through Nathan's neighbourliness with Nancy, the very texture Brooklyn's spatiality is changed: the multivocal cacophony of city life fades away as a smaller, yet more intimate neighbourhood, alive with connection and purpose emerges.

Meaningful relations in *Follies* do not end at the East River; they spread out beyond the novel's pages into the world. They do so because Auster and his narrator Nathan actively work to make us into readers, and so draw us into the story's orbit and the story into our own worlds. To any reader with even a little knowledge of American literature, *The Brooklyn Follies* presents a tissue of intertextual references (Friant-Kessler 2009). Nathan's neighbourhood, for example, is made of stories: Nancy Mazzucchell's house on Carroll Street (named, perhaps, for Lewis Carroll); Joyce, her mother, and James Joyce, her husband; Aurora's house on 'Hawthorn Street. Or maybe it was Hawthorne Street' (Auster 2005: 244), referencing in name the author Nathaniel Hawthorne and, perhaps, in its closed façade, benighted interior, and eventual downfall, Poe's *House of Usher*. These intertextual references do not pass the characters by. In conversation with Nancy, for example, Nathan remarks:

> "Joyce?" I paused for a moment in *a kind of addled wonder*. "Are you telling me you are married to a man named James Joyce?"
> "Uh-huh. Just like the writer." (Auster 2005: 91-2).

These intertextual references go further, to encompass the very book we are holding, as when Nathan describes Tom as, 'the long-suffering hero of these Brooklyn Follies' (Auster 2005: 157), the capitalisation of 'Follies' not-so-subtly hinting at the novel's own title. Elsewhere, Nathan insists on his role as storyteller, not protagonist: 'I am not the central character of [this] story' (Auster 2005: 12); and even muses on his storytelling practice: 'Why do I linger over these trivial

details? Because the truth of the story lies in the details, and I have no choice but to tell the story exactly as it happened' (157). This repeated insistence on his authorship, combined with knowing intertextual references, seem to set *Follies* at an ontological distance from the actual world (see Blanchot 1982: 10). Indeed, as Tom remarks: 'when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear. For as long as the story goes on, reality no longer exists' (Auster 2005: 155).

However, Nathan's self-aware authorship has a contradictory, spatial and worldly effect. It makes us into *his* readers. In so doing, it harnesses the power of reading to blur ontological boundaries (see Ridanpää 2018). This is nowhere as clear as in the chapter titled 'A Night of Eating and Drinking', in which Harry, Tom and Nathan meet to discuss a plan to save, or perhaps to escape from, the world. Or, as Nathan puts it: 'So that's what we're talking about. Politics' (Auster 2005: 99). Uniquely, this chapter is written as a play, fronted by stage directions which emphasise the role that Nathan plays in crafting the story's narrative, and playfully hint at the complexity and coexistence of life in Nathan's neighbourhood that has been (thus far) left off the page:

> Once the conversation begins, further stage direction will be kept to a minimum. It is the author's opinion that only the words spoken by the above-mentioned characters are of any importance to the narrative. For that reason, there will be no descriptions of the clothes they are wearing… no pauses when one of them stands up to visit the men's room… and not one word about the glass of red wine that Nathan spills on his pants (Auster 2005: 98).

By framing this interaction as a stage play, directions and all, Nathan (as narrator and self-described author) is emphasising the readers role in making story and space happen (see also Hones 2008: 1302-3; 2014: 31; McLaughlin 2024: 12-13). As David Hare has argued, 'a play is what happens in between the stage and the audience' (Hare quoted in Richardson 2015: 13). If the stage is set here as a 'French restaurant on Smith Street, Brooklyn' (Auster 2005: 98), then we, as readers, are asked to step up as the audience and so to 'make it happen'.

Follies makes us readers to better insist on the lively materiality of stories, particularly its own story, as actants in the world. We can see this at work in Nathan's nascent 'Bios Unlimited', a 'biography insurance' company, 'that would publish books about the forgotten ones… the narrative of a life' (Auster 2005: 301). As Nathan describes his mission:

> I would resurrect that person in words, and once the pages had been printed and the story had been bound between covers, they would have something to hold on to for the rest of their lives. Not only that, but something that would outlive them, would outlive them all (302).

Nathan's biographies are more than books: they have a 'material-affective liveliness' (Anderson 2019: 1121). They allow the deceased to live on in the world, their afterlives made from the relational, spatial effect of encounters between the book, its stories, and its readers. Through recognising that power of reading as a process in which word and world are rendered ontologically indistinct (Ridanpää 2018), Bios Unlimited actively co-creates spaces in its readers' everyday lives where their loved ones can live again. The power of Nathan's project gains even more piquancy just two pages later, when 'the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center', the most visible event of the national disaster known as '9/11' (Auster 2005: 303-4). At this juncture in the story, even more so than before, we are asked to reflect on the promise that textual proximity and the spatially co-creative power of stories, even *The Brooklyn Follies* itself, can overcome temporal distance. So long as I, in the role of reader, keep reading the 'beforemath' (Bollinger 2014: 490) of 9/11 in Brooklyn, the pain of this event will never intrude on the lives of Nathan and his neighbours. Like Nathan's biography insurance customers, my reading works to ensure that textual and spatial proximity overcome temporal distance. Through my reading, the spaces of Nathan's Brooklyn become one of the many 'stories-so-far' and 'loose ends and missing links' (Massey 2005: 37) of which space, actual and fictional, is made.

Conclusion

In the weeks I spent writing this article, I spent a good deal of time looking out of my kitchen window, especially in the mornings. I watched as the meadow grass on the common which runs up to my house grew taller and more wild. At its highest extent, it took on the appearance of the shaggy prairie grass which grows up the fence posts on the cover of my old, battered, second-hand copy of *Plainsong*. It is clear that the coincidence of these phenomena: the used Picador edition of *Plainsong* that I bought online, sight-unseen; (the wear-and-tear of the book speaking of past readers; the book’s pages a little dusty, a living memorial of its 25-year journey to my desk); my view of the seemingly wild prairie grass in a Norfolk meadow; the time of day and the texture of the light, shaped my highly material reading of Haruf’s novel presented here. In these moments of quiet reflection, looking out on an ersatz prairie, I came closer to being like, if not being, Tom Guthrie, watching the sunrise reflect off the windmill. There are also points of connection between my rural hamlet and Auster’s Park Slope. Coincidental encounter is a large driver of the relationships I have forged here. For example, I know only half of the 50 people on ‘The Row’ by name: those I have bumped into on my daily dog walks. Each of these relationships forms a link in my daily experience of my neighbourhood; and has inflected, in turn, my reading of *The Brooklyn Follies*.

The innovativeness of literary-geographical theories about stories is not simply that they describe these kinds of reader-text relations; it is that they attend to the *spatiality* of these relations, as one part of the ever-ongoing processes by which stories are made and re-made. This spatiality comes in many forms, some of which I have discussed here. It is a recognition that the worlds made in stories can be, and often are, every bit as real and lively, as open and complex, as the actual-world in which we live our everyday lives. It is a recognition that the role of ‘reader’ is not an identity but a ‘relational effect’ (Hones 2014: 31), that those who read do more than read in their lives, and that these other experiences, memories, activities and identities inflect what they read and how they read it. It is a recognition that the

space of a story is not limited to the pages of the text, or the imagination of the reader: it leaks out into the world, just as the actual world leaks in. In many ways, the space of any story can be mapped at the confluence between textual interrelations and readerly experiences, neither existing without the other.

These points of recognition are where, I would argue, literary geography can be seen to fit best into New Area Studies’s storehouse of ‘innovative methodological models and interdisciplinary approaches’ (Hodgett and Smith 2021: 1). The recognition that the space of literature is more than the geography of a text, that the interrelations between characters, objects, environments and plotlines create lively, open and multiple spaces which overspill the text through affective relations with readers, can help us to see our work here differently. The affective point at which reader and text, scholar and study, meet is the place at which space and the world are made anew. It is in this encounter that we can tear down the wall between scholar and world just as, through reading, we can blur the boundaries between fictional and actual. To see again that we are all just readers-in-the-making; just actors in the ongoing, collaborative and dynamic co-production of the world.

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