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Travelling partners: using literary studies to support creative writing about real spaces

Abstract:

This paper investigates the ways in which literary studies and critical theory can be used to provide writers with productive creative models for representing ‘real spaces’: that is, the incorporation of real locations within a creative work. Many new creative writing students begin with the premise ‘write what you know’, but often overlook the implications of including the names of real places in their work—whether it be Paris, Paddington Station or Prahran. The paper argues that the examination of existing creative work allows writers to understand the practical and the political ramifications of this activity.

The paper will outline the literary research I undertook as I prepared to write creative work based on my experiences of travelling in international cities. My research uncovered two models used by writers to use real spaces in texts. First, writers may use identifiably real locations to confirm the validity of a fictional world: when a writer places a fictional plot in a ‘real’ place, it becomes instantly more plausible. Such writers draw upon Barthes’ notion of ‘the reality effect’: the use of actual—but seemingly inconspicuous—places and objects that declare to a reader that the fictional world and our own reality are identical (Barthes 1986, 148). I will explore this strategy through a close reading of Agatha Christie’s *4.50 from Paddington*. Second, and more complex, writers may use real spaces to expose or challenge representational power structures: a writer might make a correlation between a real space and a discursive position and, in doing so, allow readers to engage with both a plausible world and an ideological agenda. Such writing builds on de Certeau’s conception of mapping as ‘strategic’ control over meaning, as well as space (de Certeau 1984, 30). I will examine the ways Toni Morrison negotiates the power structures of New York in her text *Jazz*.

Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate the beneficial interaction that can take place between literary studies and creative writing. Writing students who engage in an exploration of both the practical and the theoretical impulses of existing texts may be able to recognise such impulses in their own writing, and thus reflect more productively on the cultural and social implications of Creative Writing in general.

Biographical note:

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as an Alternative Creative Practice'(AAWP, 2009); 'But if the author is dead what are we doing here?': Teaching Critical Theory in a Creative Writing Program (AAWP, 2008) and (with Dr Malcolm Ryan) '*The Tale of Peter Rabbit: A Case Study in Story-Sense Reasoning*'(AAAI, 2007) . He is the writer of the plays *Wilde Tales* and *Still at Aulis*, and the short story 'I forgot my programme so I went to get it back' (Bridport Prize runner-up 2009).

Keywords:

Creative Writing—Theory—Pedagogy

Introduction: real places in fiction

In 2009, I took a significant amount of overseas trips—to London, Cape Town, Calgary, Los Angeles and Hamilton—and wanted to write about my experiences in these places. When it came to writing about them, though, I found that the inclusion of real city names affected the work in a surprising way. These names had an aura about them: echoes of other histories, or values that I did not necessarily intend. As Mieke Bal notes: a real-place name contains an ‘atmosphere’ that encourages a reader ‘to visualise much more’ than just the story at hand (1985 95). As a way of countering the implications of these ‘signifiers of real places’, I began to explore the ways in which other writers had engaged with this issue. I discovered that many writers have in fact taken advantage of the connotations of real-place names, harnessing them to serve their creative project.

This paper is an account of some of my research. I uncovered two main models used by writers to use real spaces in texts. First, writers may use identifiably real locations to confirm the validity of a fictional world. I will explore this strategy through a close reading of Agatha Christie’s highly implausible novel *4.50 from Paddington*. Second, and more complex, writers may utilise the connotations of place-names to enhance their creative project: to draw on the symbolic value of the location in order to unveil—and challenge—its inherent ideological meaning. I will use as an example Toni Morrison’s representation of New York in her novel *Jazz*. By engaging in an exploration of both the practical and the theoretical impulses of existing texts I have been able to recognise such impulses in my own writing, and thus reflect more productively on the cultural and social implications of Creative Writing in general. I propose that such a crossover between Literature Studies and Creative Writing should be part of Creative Writing programs: many new writers begin with the premise ‘write what you know’, but often overlook the implications—or value—of including their own places in their work.

‘I’ve just seen a *murder!*’: using signifiers of real places to confirm the validity of a fictional world

Theorizing in general about the use of spaces—real or fictional—in narrative, Bal speaks of the ‘determining function’ of place: ‘a more or less detailed presentation [of space]’, she argues, ‘will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that place’ (1985 95). When the description refers to a location that also exists outside the text, such an affect is magnified. Umberto Eco explains: ‘fictional worlds are parasites of the actual one’: they eat up real locations in order to survive (1994 85). When a writer places a fictional plot in a real location, the narrative instantly becomes more credible: Susan Dick posits that ‘readers may follow [the characters’] route...on a map of the city’ (2000 52). A spy story is more plausible when it is set in Gorky Park, a horror story is more convincing when it takes place in the Paris Opera House, a melodramatic climax is more believable when tumbling over the Reichenbach Falls. As Dick declares, including a real location in a narrative ‘turns a fictional fact into a real one...the verisimilitude of the setting adds solidity to the [story]’ (52).

Such a strategy draws upon Barthes' notion of the 'reality effect': the use of recognisable objects in a narrative that attest that the fictional world and our own reality are identical. By including these 'signifiers of the real' in the text, Barthes proposes, a writer may 'give the novel the glow of reality' (1974 102): they declare: '*we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real'... which is then signified'(1986 148). The use of these signifiers is of course the basis of literary Realism, the process by which a writer presents a fictional world which, as Diengott puts it, 'consist[s] of representations *not essentially different* from those a reader might make himself of the 'real' world in any major respect other than his being able to characterise them as fictional' (1987 530). A writer who overloads his/her text with multiple 'real' signifiers, then, can be seen to present the most convincingly mimetic world. Auerbach, for instance, praises the way that Balzac 'impregnates [his novels] with real landscape, dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities' (1953 417). In his critical writing, Eco builds on Barthes' hypothesis, arguing that signifiers of real *places* consolidate the 'reality effect': or, as Eco puts it, 'structured and analytically organised content', like place names, allows us to 'lie' convincingly (1984 179). Commenting on Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, Eco speculates that by incorporating the signifier 'Paris' into his text, Dumas attempts to convince us that 'we find ourselves in an entirely real Paris, identical to the Paris [in the world]' (1994 104).

A surprisingly salient example of this location-specific 'reality effect' is in Agatha Christie's novel *4.50 from Paddington*. Indeed, the title itself seems to declaim the truth of the narrative. Christie supports this by including a liberal amount of other 'signifiers of the real' in her depiction of the station. Christie describes 'a milling crowd [which] was rushing in several directions at once, to and from undergrounds, left-luggage offices, tea-rooms, inquiry offices, indicator boards, and two outlets, Arrival and Departure, [which led] to the outside world'(2006,5). Christie also demonstrates that this must be the 'real' Paddington Station by linking it to its equally-real rail connections: she provides a loud speaker 'announcing the arrival at Platform 9 of the 4:35 from Birmingham and Wolverhampton'(6). Into this real location, however, walks the improbably-named 'Mrs. McGillicuddy', who embarks on a train heading for another location:

At that moment, a Voice, raucous yet refined, burst into speech above her head.

'The train standing at Platform 3,' the Voice told her, 'is the 4.50 for Brackhampton, Milchester, Waverton, Carvil Junction, Roxeter and all Stations to Chadmouth.'(5)

Although plausibly-sounding English names, some of these are in fact fictional locations: Milchester is the market town nearest to the fictional St Mary Mead, Miss Marple's home and Mrs. McGillicuddy's destination. In this sequence then, we are presented with a real space (Paddington Station) which is a gateway to fictional space (Milchester, etc.). But Christie of course takes this blurring of reality and fiction even further, by placing next to the 'real' actions of left-luggage and indicator boards a preposterous murder plot. As Mrs McGillicuddy's train pulls out of Paddington, we read:

At that moment, another train, also on a down-line, swerved inwards towards them, for a moment with almost alarming effect. For a time the two trains ran parallel, now one gaining a little, now the other. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked from her window through the windows of the parallel carriages.

At the moment with the two trains gave the illusion of being stationary, a blind in one of the carriages flew up with a snap. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked into the lighted first-class carriage that was only a few feet away.

Then she drew her breath with a gasp and half-rose to her feet.

Standing with his back to the window was a man. His hands were round the throat of a woman who faced him, and he was slowly, remorselessly, strangling her. Her eyes were starting from their sockets, her face was purple and congested. As Mrs. McGillicuddy watched, fascinated, the end came; the body went limp and crumpled in the man's hands (7-8).

Even the characters within the novel doubt the veracity of this event: when she informs the ticket-collector, he 'looked as though he thought he thought Mrs. McGillicuddy was quite capable of seeing anything anywhere as the fancy took her' (10); though more willing to oblige, the local constable is similarly sceptical (18). Even Miss Marple concedes that 'it sounded—and indeed was—a most unlikely story' (14). However, she is convinced enough to pursue the case because of Mrs. McGillicuddy's 'vivid and intimate' account of it (14). I argue that we are similarly more likely to believe (or at least suspend out disbelief) because Christie is so careful to connect her plot to a real place: if she hadn't set up the specific location of the first scene, the ludicrous murder wouldn't seem so plausible. In other words, Christie uses signifiers of real places in order to render her action 'real': or, as Franco Moretti puts it, 'you make a map [in] the book, and everything changes' for the reader (2004 79). In fact, sometimes our fictionalised accounts can come to override the real location: Bloom's Dublin is traced over the real map; Holmes' residence is inserted into the real Baker St; there are even readers who claim to have pinpointed the location of the murder Mrs. McGillicuddy witnessed (Ieki 1998).

There is, nevertheless, a danger in this strategy: try as we might, as writers we can never represent the real location with perfect accuracy. Eco writes of his attempts to recreate Paris in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum*: not only to depict the real place, but also a real date. he states that 'in order to write this chapter I walked the same route on several different nights, carrying a tape recorder, taking notes on what I could see and the impressions I had' (1994 76). After publication of the novel, though:

I received a letter from a man who had evidently gone to the Bibliothèque Nationale to read all the newspapers from June 24, 1984. He had discovered that on the corner of the rue Réaumur (which I hadn't actually named but which does cross the rue Saint-Martin at a certain point), after midnight, more or less at the time Casaubon passed by, there had been a fire—and a big fire at that...The reader asked me how Casaubon had managed not to see it (76).

Eco concedes that 'every fictional text contains a basic contradiction just because it's trying so hard to make the fictional world to coincide with the real one' (113); or, as

Barthes puts it: ‘when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all they do...is *signify* it’ (1986 148). It may be more productive, then, to focus more on what these locations’ significance, rather than on attempting to represent them totally. As Bruner declares,

Narratives do not exist, as it were, in the real world, waiting there patiently and eternally to be...mirrored in a text. The act of constructing narrative...is considerably more than ‘selecting’ events from real life...and placing them in appropriate order. The events themselves need to be *constituted* in the light of the overall narrative—...to be made ‘functions’ of the story (1991 8)

I will examine a ‘constituting’ approach in my next section.

‘There is no air in [this] city, but there is breath’: drawing out the connotative value of signifiers of real places

Bal proposes that the depiction of locations in a text is ‘a predominant means of highlighting the significance of a [story]’ (1985 93). A writer may broaden description in order to express thematic concerns: if approached in this way, Bal reasons, ‘space becomes an ‘acting place’, rather than the place of action’ (95). In the same vein, Moretti’s analysis of fictional spaces exposes the political implications of represented space: ‘this is why village stories organize themselves in circular patterns’, he deduces, ‘a circle is a simple, ‘natural’ form, which maximises the proximity of each point to the centre of the ‘little world’, while simultaneously sealing it off from the vast universe that lies outside its perimeter’. The space—and therefore the story—is ‘sufficient unto itself’ (2004 88). Space in fiction, in this context, becomes ‘a map of ideology’ (85). For instance, a writer might choose to describe a space by using what Michel de Certeau calls the ‘map’(‘the girls’ room is next to the kitchen’): this is static and therefore authoritative, calling on what de Certeau refers to as ‘the knowledge of the order of places’ (1984 118). On the other hand, a writer might favour the ‘tour’ (‘you turn right and come into the living room’), which is mobile and transitory, and therefore devoid of a unifying vision (118). Writers can use these approaches to amplify their creative project: to refer to a space not just to confirm their story but also to extend their assessment of that place.

By bringing de Certeau into the discussion, we can also reflect on how we might use this in our depiction of real locations in fiction. de Certeau’s essay ‘Walking in the City’ explores in part the connotative meanings inherent in the signifier ‘New York’: de Certeau exposes the ways in which the place-name produces not just an image but a set of ideological assumptions. He cites the World Trade Center as ‘only the most monumental figure of Western urban development’ because it allows New Yorkers to see their city not as a place for living, but for a place for seeing: we begin to see the place from above, ‘looking down on’ Manhattan and thus ‘totalizing the most immoderate of human texts’ (1984 92). ‘The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow form Manhattan’, he proffers, ‘continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable’ (93, 92). As such, it has transformed the inhabitants of that city from ‘a human multiplicity into a ‘disciplinary’ society’...managing, differentiating, classifying, and hierarchizing all

deviances' (96); elsewhere he states that 'the development of a cellular grid...transforms space itself into an instrument that can be used to discipline, to program, and to keep under observation any social group (1986 186). Manhattan, as Moretti puts it, has been 'abstracted': 'construct[ed into] a new, *artificial* object' (2004,94). In response, de Certeau offers an alternative way New York could be represented: 'one can try another path', he tenders, 'one can follow the swarming activity of...procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves into a proliferating illegitimacy'; 'the ordinary practitioners' of Manhattan, he argues, 'live 'down below'' (1984 96, 93). As Moretti explains the 'map' of the existing connotative meaning of the city could be supplanted by a '*diagram*: a set of relations', not a cluster of individual locations' (Moretti 2004 96). A writer wanting to represent Manhattan productively, then, might make a correlation between the real space and the discursive positions analysed by de Certeau and, in doing so, allow readers to engage with both a plausible world and an ideological agenda.

One such author, I propose, is Toni Morrison in her novel, *Jazz*. Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris claims that Morrison's primary agenda is to represent—even recreate—the Harlem of 1926: 'the capital of black America' (2001 219). In interviews, Morrison confirms this, citing the particular research she undertook to present Harlem accurately (1998). Although the narrator chooses to refer to the location as 'the City' ('New York' is only used once in the novel (Morrison 1993 42)), the opening confirms that the events take place in Harlem: the narrator immediately places her protagonist Violet on Lenox Avenue (3). Such signifiers are used throughout the text: even a casual survey reveals references to 130th, 134th, 143rd Streets (5, 41, 208) and Wyndham Road, Edgecombe Avenue and Clifton Place in Harlem (43, 56), as well as the broader surrounds of Manhattan: Central Park and 5th Avenue (43, 53); Staten Island and Brooklyn (130, 131).

However, I argue that Morrison does not include these signifiers of the real merely to validate her plot: Paquet-Deyris agrees, stating: '[the details] only indirectly function...as historical background. [They] seem...to be doing much more' (2001 219). I submit that Morrison's depiction also utilises the connotative meanings of Manhattan in order to amplify her thematic project. I proffer that Morrison uses the 'totalizing' meaning offered by the vision of New-York-from-above to establish the exclusion of the black inhabitants of Harlem from the rest of Manhattan. Paquet-Deyris asserts that both the literal and the symbolic meaning of Manhattan 'frame' and 'overpower' the inhabitants of *Jazz* (2001 220). The characters are not only limited by the real historical circumstances of New York in 1926—like being excluded from Tiffany's or ignored by ambulance drivers (Morrison 1993 202, 210)—they are also limited by connotative meanings inherent in the signifier 'Manhattan'. Morrison draws explicit connections between the experience of being in the city and de Certeau's notion of Manhattan as a 'cellular grid':

That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're free...You can't get off the track a City lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age, you always end up back where you started (120).

More importantly, I suggest that Morrison draws upon as the alternative representation offered by de Certeau to overcome the connotative meanings. As Massood states: ‘Morrison...go[es] back to the particular historical situation of the Renaissance in order to reevaluate the historical and cultural legacy of the city myth’ (1996 86). In an interview, Morrison remarks that in the novel ‘I wanted to explode the idea of an all-knowing, omnipotent, totalitarian, authorial voice’ (1998). Her Manhattan is not ‘totalizing’, viewed from above; rather it represents a city that is defined by movement and ‘boundary-crossing’ (Paquet-Deyris 2001 222). As the narrator states, Morrison’s city does not seek to ‘manage all deviances’; instead, it ‘urges contradiction...Really there is no contradiction—rather it’s a condition’(Morrison 1993 117). One of the first images in *Jazz* is a depiction of Harlem which simultaneously draws on the city’s ‘totalizing’ connotations and offers a different reading of the place:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people and which is the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women (7).

In this image, the conventional understanding of the place—a site where individuals are dominated by architecture—is replaced with new images that hover in the shadows: unplanned, undefined. Out of these shadows, new possible meanings of New York can emerge. The narrator offers a new story:

A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone, and below him, in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat. He touches her lip to remove a bit of something there. Suddenly she is quiet. He tilts her chin up. They stand there...The sun sneaks into the alley behind them. It makes a pretty picture on its way down (8).

This process—replacing the existing connotation of ‘totalized’ New York with other possible significations—continues throughout the novel. Later, the narrator presents another unified vision of Manhattan, declaring that ‘there is nothing to beat what the city can make of the night sky...on the tops of the buildings...this night sky booming over glittering city’ (35). However, this is superseded by an image of people living ‘down there’, who possess their own ‘night sky’: ‘stars cut from the lamé gowns of chorus girls, or mirrored in the eyes of sweethearts’ (35-6). Elsewhere, the narrator substitutes the idea of ‘how men accommodate themselves to tall buildings’ with ‘what a woman looks like moving through a crowd’ (34). And the narrator’s account of the denouement of the novel—a couple dancing under the ‘unbelievable sky’ of Harlem—moves from a position ‘on the rooftops’ to ‘under the streetlamps’ (35, 214). The narrator even replaces a ‘map’ of Harlem with ‘tour’. She takes us ‘from Lenox to St. Nicholas and across 135th Street, Lexington, from Convent to Eighth’ pointing out the specifics of particular houses: ‘254 where there is no protective railing...131, the one with the apple-green water tank...133, where lard cans of tomato plants are kept’ (196). Thus, by the end of the novel, Morrison can declare that a new understanding of New York, beyond its conventional connotations. Her narrator asks of the city’s inhabitants: ‘do they know they are the sound of snapping fingers under

the sycamores lining the streets?...Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks downtown and acres of neighborhoods in Sag Harbor cannot see them, the clicking is there' (1993 226). Paquet-Deyris declares that 'this new cartography...turn[s Manhattan] into the place of all possibilities'(2001,229).

Conclusion: real places in creative writing

The kind of analysis I have pursued here, I argue, provides writers with another way of scrutinising the process of writing fiction, particularly fiction that attempts to bear some relation to the 'real' world. The first strategy I identify here may seem obvious, but I believe it is worth examining even the most prosaic writing impulses—especially for new writers who may not have considered why or how 'signifiers of the real' function in their texts. The second provides writers with the opportunity to enhance their symbolic concerns. Writing students may not be aware of what Bal calls the 'thematizing' of space in fiction (1985 95); more insistently, they may not be aware that their own real spaces have already been 'thematized'. By harnessing the connotative meanings inherent in real place-names—by supporting or uncutting these meanings—writers may be able to present new stories: new versions of their own places.

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