"Litmap": Networked Narratives

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This paper examines the spatiality of three contemporary literary narratives using a digital humanities approach. By this I mean a few things: firstly, I regard spatiality as a complex and dynamic historical dimension on par with temporality, and not just as a static, passive container in which events independently transpire. Secondly, I am interested in examining not only space and place as represented in texts, but also the spatiality of the texts themselves, i.e., the materiality of language. Thirdly, I have built the *Litmap* digital mapping platform (`http://barbarahui.net/litmap`) for the purpose of visualizing space and place in/of texts, which I use in conjunction with traditional close reading methods in order to carry out my scholarship.

The definition of spatiality I employ follows from arguments made by spatial theorists including Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Edward Said and Edward Soja, who push for an understanding of space and place as socio-historically produced rather than somehow existing *a priori*. I argue further that networked spatiality is a prevalent trope, organizing principle, and way of understanding the world in contemporary texts. I show how this presents itself in the narratives I examine (in quite a different way in all three) and is a particularly useful, even crucial inroad into understanding them. My assertion is that the three texts at hand can be characterized as displaying three kinds of topographical networks:

- In W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1997), geographical places are connected to each other via a historical network of events, and the nodes of the network are primarily man-made architectural structures.

- In Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (2008), geographical places are connected to one another via the transnational migrations of people, and the nodes of the network are these moving embodied subjects themselves.

- In Steven Hall's *Raw Shark Texts* (2007), language, thought, and memory are material and have spatial dimensions. Places are connected to each other via these material traces, and the nodes of the network, which are constituted by human subjects and their linguistic traces, are ephemeral and unstable, with "un-space" figuring as an otherworldly yet very real dimension in the narrative's spatial imaginary. In addition, the text of Raw Shark Texts itself is figured as a material body of language and textual image, with patterned connections running throughout the book.

Both the core observations listed above and the sub-arguments presented in the thesis were arrived at via a combination of *Litmap*-based and traditional print-based research methodologies. The current *Litmap* interface displays a map image of the Earth, with place names and corresponding information from each text keyed to that location's coordinates on the map. In the case of *Rings of Saturn*, this allows for a fairly complex mapping since the nodes of the network in that narrative correspond to unambiguous geographical place names and locations. In the case of Özdamar's and Hall's texts, however, this becomes increasingly challenging as space and place become more subjective and fluid, requiring new and creative ways of visualizing data. The use of digital media to map literature is thus useful both for revealing what it can and can't do, and I argue it is important to recognize both the strengths and constraints of the medium as we continue exploring this new area of research.

Moving forward, I plan to develop and extend the *Litmap* platform both in order to better address the crucial issues of how to visualize ambiguous data, and also to improve upon the existing functionality for searching, filtering, and browsing. The database underlying the current system is flexible and extensible enough to accommodate information from far more narratives, and I intend to enable users to upload other books for teaching and research. Once a large corpora of texts is uploaded, this will open up the ability to search across time and space and do other macro analyses of literature. Perhaps most of all, however, I look forward to

making *Litmap* a truly collaborative project. My hope is to assemble a team of colleagues who will be invested in working together on creative technical and design solutions for the platform.

References

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