Mapping American Literature
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MAPPING AMERICAN LITERATURE WITH *THE GREAT GATSBY*

Abstract: Taking The Great Gatsby as its central case study, this article discusses my method of teaching regional American literature in Nordic classrooms through a liberal use of maps. It argues that closely attending to the cities, states, and regions to which literary texts refer helps students better understand and scrutinize their larger claims.

Keywords: pedagogy, American literature, *The Great Gatsby*, place, maps

When I taught in the United States, I offered a regional literature survey course to undergraduates that featured early twentieth-century fiction set in the American South, West, Midwest, and Northeast. Such a course depended on students having visceral associations with these regions and knowledge of their distinctive histories and traits, or at least some awareness of regional stereotypes. I could count on their knowing something about the colonies of New England, the South and slavery, the West and the frontier. But for the programs I've contributed to in Europe, such a course has felt too specialized. When teaching in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, therefore, I adapted it into a course that is equally place-based but framed in a different way: "Place and Movement in American Literature." The readings vary, but among other texts usually include *A Lost Lady* or *O Pioneers!*; *Passing* or *Quicksand*; *Cane*; *A Streetcar Named Desire*; and *The Great Gatsby*. The latter serves as this short essay's central case study.

On the first day of class, as a coda to their self-introductions, I ask students to choose a state to say a few things about—because they have a personal connection to it, find it appealing, or just think it weird or humorous. Often, they choose high-profile states such as New York and California, but many others, like Iowa and Rhode Island, make the cut. When references to one of these states crop up in our reading, we refer to it as that particular student's state—they always remember their choice. This exercise plays into my personal obsession as someone who has lived in fourteen states, spent time in all of them, and recently lived in the least known and least visited state in the country, North Dakota—and that is how I conclude my own introduction. Afterwards I hand out blank outline maps and ask them to write in the states that they know. These blank maps usually remain mostly blank. Minnesota and the Dakotas do, however, make a showing, due to their histories of Scandinavian settlement.

Over the course of the term, whenever one of our texts refers to a state, we write its title in the appropriate place on the map. I ask them to do this at home to prepare for class, and the keener oblige. We start each session by discussing which states are represented in the day's reading. These include not only the states where plot events occur, but also those that serve as future destinations or points of origin or are just referenced in passing. This starting point naturally segues into larger discussions. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, yields Illinois, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and identifying these key locations mandates that we talk about the histories of each, including the surge of European immigrants to industrial Chicago, the racial caste system of Mississippi, and the unique social composition of New Orleans. This context in turn helps us better assess the motives and acts of Blanche, Stanley, and the people they live among in their cramped city apartment, along with the extra-personal significance of the events that unfold there. While undergraduate discussions of literary texts usually begin with characters before leaving them, reluctantly, to assess theme and setting, this exercise causes us to begin with places, dislodging characters from their privileged conversational space and driving home the truth that texts are formed by more than just plot and people.

This reorientation alone makes the map worth it. A secondary, less literary benefit is that the method works well in American studies programs that enroll students who may be less interested in studying literature than politics and history but are required to do so. This practice makes them realize that literature courses can deepen their understanding of US history—including the Civil War, western settlement, immigration, industrialization, urban development, and the Great Migration—and the roots of contemporary social movements and political debates.

As the weeks pass and the map thickens, we look for patterns: which states play lead roles, which recur as bit players, which are invoked but remain offstage. We also look at the portions of the map that remain blank, those areas that are underrepresented in our set of texts, and consider the reasons why. At first, I was worried that filling in the map would make our discussions of literary texts too literal, reducing aesthetic artifacts to records. Sometimes this is indeed the case, as we rack our collective brain to recall an incidental disclosure that somebody's mother's cousin is said to have passed through Arkansas—or was it Missouri? But if anything, our discussion of places is too readily unmoored from actual geographic locations. The very first line of the novel that often launches the course, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady,* confounds the enterprise from the start: "Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer to-day than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere."[1] Are we in Nebraska? In Colorado? Somewhere else? Does it matter?

Ideally, at the end of the term our map would look something like Geoff Sawers's inviting "Literary Map of the USA." Our maps, though, are nowhere near as beautiful, complete, or informative as his. In fact, usually the exercise falls apart. The map becomes too crowded and messy—especially in the oft-referenced and mini-stated Northeast—and over a long semester, I start to forget to set time aside for it. Other conversations become more urgent. But the map remains a useful reference point, reminding us that texts are set in places, usually more than one, and that characters, events, and allusions shift between them. A student once told me that it had never occurred to her that books have to be *somewhere*.

Contrary to what this map exercise may suggest, as nodes of intellectual exploration I am not particularly invested in students learning about states. Even as we inventory those we encounter, really what I care about are regions—the symbolic and emotional resonances of West, Northeast, Midwest, and South—in line with the course's origins as a survey of regional literary traditions. While states are geographical, political, and legal entities, bounded and defined, regions are cultural ones that cross borders and confound categorization. Starting out with states leads us to investigate more subjective regional identities and the ways they get formed and imagined.

Students in the course also become more alert to what happens outside the continental United States, in locations such as Alaska, Mexico, Brazil, or France—to which male characters, at least, are regularly dispatched. (So many of the men in early twentieth-century American fiction venture to South America to become an engineer or manage a mine, returning some chapters later with gold and new skills.) Diligent mapping can also attune students to political, historical, and literary allusions entirely outside the realm of plot. This practice is of course useful for non-fiction, too. At first glance, *Walden* and its tiny cabin in the woods can appear so narrowly local, yet the text produces a dense transnational geography: invoking, to use Thoreau's nomenclature, Indians and Irish at home, Laplanders across the sea, and the ancient "Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek" philosophers who helped form his cabin philosophy.[2]

The course title, "Place and Movement," refers to this expanding, unbounded multiplicity of places and the way not only the characters but also we as readers are repeatedly and often dizzily shifted between them. *A Streetcar Named Desire* begins with Blanche's new arrival from Laurel, Mississippi, ferried to the New Orleans street of "Elysian Fields" by "a streetcar named Desire"

and then another named "Cemeteries," as she, with astonishment, recounts.[3] The protagonist of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* seeks a meaningful life in rural Alabama, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and then Alabama again. Cather's books are suffused with histories of how her "pioneers" came to inhabit the places they do. The characters in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, especially the women, are embedded in their small Georgia town, visited by male outsiders—including the narrator—who arrive from remote cities by train. The midsection of *Cane* sees a northern urban exodus, but the migrants' home ties remain unsevered. Of a southern transplant observed at a city theater, Toomer declares, "[h]er strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south. Her roots shoot down."[4]

The Great Gatsby is likewise a deeply geographic text. Its originating events, which occur prior to its main ones, are all tied to place. The narrator, Nick Caraway, introduces himself as hailing from an unidentified "Middle Western city," a gesture that replicates the vagueness of the setting in *A Lost Lady*, "one of those grey towns" in the Great Plains. (Indeed, Fitzgerald was so influenced by *A Lost Lady* in writing this book that he wrote to Cather "to explain an instance of apparent plagiarism."[5]) Nick studied at Yale, coyly denoted by "New Haven," fought in the First World War, and then relocated, momentously, to New York. Jay Gatsby grew up in North Dakota, and as a youth he was taken in by a man described as "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five."[6] Gatsby, too, served in Europe and eventually made his way to New York. The main women characters, Daisy and Jordan, are from Louisville, Kentucky, on whose racialized character the latter insists in stating, "our white girlhood was passed together there."[7] The unfathomably wealthy Tom and Daisy Buchanan honeymoon in Hawaii, settle briefly in Santa Barbara, and live large in the suburbs outside Chicago before moving to Long Island, where they pass their days across the bay from Nick and Gatsby.

The contemporary events of *The Great Gatsby* are structured by small journeys. The characters move back and forth by automobile or train between West Egg and East Egg and between Long Island and Manhattan, sometimes stopping off at the ghostly no-place, the Valley of the Ashes. Erasing actual physical journeys, the distant cities where Gatsby's nefarious business deals play out are brought right into the living rooms of Long Island mansions by the new technology that so fascinates this text, the telephone. The book ends with Nick's disillusioned return to the Midwest.

In discussing *The Great Gatsby*, we move from thinking about states to thinking about the meanings of East, West, South, and Midwest and those of the country, the suburb, and the city. Again, mapping the novel thus coaxes students away from their attachment to character development and plot events. I don't want them to write about whether Daisy loves Gatsby, or even about the SparkNotes binary of old money/new money as signified by East Egg and West Egg. Rather, I would like them to write about a topic such as the novel's representation of the city and its haunting effects. This encourages attending to passages like this one: "I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye."[8] The city is shown to be a place where men and women make intense, fleeting connections with a host of strangers, even as they remain resolutely solitary.

By the time our class reaches the extended geographical argument of the final chapter, with its invocation of "that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night," they are more attuned to

spatial claims and more ready to interrogate them. I reserve ample time to discuss this long, resonant passage:

> One of my most vivid memories is of coming back West from prep school and later from college at Christmas time. Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the old dim Union Station at six o'clock of a December evening. . . .
>
> When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, *our* snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again.
>
> That's my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. . . .
>
> I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all. Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.[9]

Of course, this is powerful writing, which makes Nick's place-based explanation, justification, rationale all the easier to accept. Yet really, it should blindside us. *The Great Gatsby* is "a story of the West, after all"? How so? And they are "all Westerners"? Jordan and Daisy are from Kentucky!

Perhaps the logic is that their many restless moves—from Louisville to Chicago to Santa Barbara to New York—make them "Westerners." This rather generous reading might be supported by the way in which place becomes process here. The West is not "the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns," not land or settlements, but rather trains, bells, lights, and shadows, as experienced by highly mobile, upper-class young people. But regardless, the sudden assertion that the novel's disastrous climax—manslaughter, homicide, and suicide—is the outcome of a regional "deficiency" seems to come from nowhere (to echo, perhaps not incidentally, Tom's accusation of Gatsby). The text has made very clear that the problem is ethical. This collection of people are all "careless," the charge that Nick makes against the Buchanans and that Jordan makes against him, importing their moral flaws to New York.

The book does in fact prepare us for this geographic sleight of hand, but it is easy to miss. At its midpoint, Gatsby informs Nick:

> "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition."
>
> He looked at me sideways—and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying.

Nick tries to catch him out:

> "What part of the Middle West?" I inquired casually.
>
> "San Francisco."
>
> "I see."[10]

Identifying the coastal city of San Francisco as his "Middle West" home, Gatsby renders regional categories nonsensical. This detail, while eclipsed by the far more fabulous stories he tells, matters. Gatsby's geographical flexibility is a symptom of not only this particular character's dishonesty but also the text's own tendency to play wildly with regional categories. The Midwest becomes the West and the West becomes the Midwest. Southerners are declared to be Westerners, and, most important, the narrative is declared to be "a story of the West." That Gatsby lies about geography encourages us to see the text—or at least Nick, its famously unreliable narrator—as lying about it, too. *The Great Gatsby*'s seductive yet vexed place logic both mirrors and exposes its seductive yet vexed emotional logic, the irrationality of its main premise, as well as that of its enduring reputation. Nick reads Gatsby as the fantastic embodiment of American essence, despite his being a gangster and conman. *The Great Gatsby* is popularly received as the ultimate "American Dream" narrative, despite it being a tale of failure and fraud.

I do not know if my students follow all that. Perhaps only a few do. I taught *The Great Gatsby* in Sweden quite recently, in September 2024, as part of a "Place and Movement" course. Throughout the term we used the mapping method I've described and kept a steady focus on American regions and how they signify in the texts we read. Yet to my dismay, when asked to do some in-class writing about *The Great Gatsby* and place, most chose the overworked West Egg-new money, East Egg-old money dichotomy. (I suggested some examples—it was not among them.) Hopefully, though, some seeds have been planted to germinate as they continue to think about place and literature.

In the meantime, this attention to geography prompts different kinds of classroom conversations that range outside the strictly literary. In our last *Gatsby* seminar, a student remarked that she had recently driven from Stockholm to Gothenburg, and that it had been a most long, exhausting trip. Why, she asked, do Americans make all these epic journeys and endure so many cross-regional moves? I had thought it self-evident that different places in the United States have such different identities, opportunities, and symbolic resonances—and therefore prompt such relentless journeys—but it was a mystery to her. Attending in very material ways to places in the United States helps me as a teacher as much as it helps my students, in giving me greater insight into how they map America.

Notes

1. Cather, *A Lost Lady*, 5.
2. Thoreau, *Walden*, 15.
3. Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 3.
4. Toomer, *Cane*, 119.
5. Bruccoli, "An Instance," 171.
6. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 106.
7. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* 26.
8. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* 63.
9. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 182–83.
10. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 71.

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