



The rural geographies of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*



Alistair Fraser

Department of Geography, Rhetoric House, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Kildare, Ireland

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Contested ruralities
Literary geography
Scale
Causality
Barbara Kingsolver

Academics are undoubtedly at the forefront of efforts to understand and communicate the sorts of far-reaching contemporary changes that make rural space so heavily contested. However, numerous other writers are engaged in contemporary debates about rurality and, among them all, Barbara Kingsolver stands out as particularly important. As such, this paper uses her novel *Prodigal Summer* to consider how Kingsolver imagines and portrays contested rural geographies. Analytically, the approach develops current ideas in literary geography by asking about the “scalar” poetics and underlying, unwritten causal geographies of *Prodigal Summer*. Via a careful consideration of these issues in the novel, the paper discusses how the world Kingsolver imagines and depicts overlaps with contemporary debates in rural studies.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The backdrop to this paper is what I understand to be the contemporary global politics of the rural. This is a politics defined by the current global strength of neoliberal capitalism, which produces unprecedented material inequality and makes it conceivable and feasible for those with significant wealth to move into and seek to control rural space. Evidence of such outcomes can be found across the social sciences, ranging from processes of rural gentrification in the ‘global north’, as documented by scholars of rural studies, for example (e.g. Phillips, 1993; Phillips, 2004; Darling, 2005); to the so-called ‘land grabs’ taking place in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, which is increasingly emphasized in the area of agrarian political economy (e.g. see Akram-Lodhi, 2012; McMichael, 2012; Zoomers, 2010; White et al., 2012). Of course, because such far-reaching changes in rural space are always contested, there are vigorous debates about the role of neoliberal capitalism in the making of rurality. For some, no doubt, neoliberal capitalism is a progressive force, one that will rationalize the use of rural space and produce more efficient outcomes regarding food production, say, or the use of natural resources (e.g. World Bank, 2008). In contrast, many others interpret the contemporary global politics of the rural as requiring arguments and action that will either limit its most problematic effects, or bring an end to neoliberal capitalism all together (e.g. see Moyo and Yeros, 2005; Petras, 2006; McMichael, 2008).

So there is a debate and a diverse range of scholars with interests that connect with rural studies are shaping how it unfolds. But to focus solely on scholarly interventions here risks overlooking the role other writers might play in shaping the contemporary global politics of the rural. For example, regarding the importance of food production in the contemporary period, the work of journalists (e.g. Pollan, 2008) or so-called celebrity chefs (e.g. see Piper, 2013) might be considered. Then there are the interventions of politicians, perhaps most notably Al Gore, whose book, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore, 2006a) and subsequent film (Gore, 2006b) have shaped the climate change debate, which overlaps in numerous ways with the sorts of politics at issue here. But for the purposes of this paper, I suggest that novelists deserve our attention and that Barbara Kingsolver is one standout contributor author to consider.

Throughout her work, Kingsolver takes on and weaves together beautiful stories around significant processes that shape rural space, as well as society more generally. For example, in her most recent book, *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Kingsolver challenges readers to dwell upon the cross-border politics of climate change, using the case of the Monarch Butterfly and its extraordinary migratory patterns to connect and write about the parallels of rural change in the US and Mexico. In addition, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), her most popular book, forces readers to consider how life in rural Zaire/Congo changes a missionary family from the US; in so doing, she confronts the complicity of the US government in some of the most horrific changes that occurred in Congo in the 1960s and helped set in motion that country's violent last half-century. *Flight Behaviour* and *The Poisonwood Bible* (as well as some of her non-fiction, in particular *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*) certainly raise

E-mail address: Alistair.Fraser@nuim.ie.

important issues about the making of rural space, but *Prodigal Summer* (2000) is perhaps the most relevant to scholars of rural studies (for commentary on this novel, see Hanson, 2010; Jacobson, 2010; Jones, 2006; Leder, 2009; Wenz, 2003) and is the focus of this paper.

In brief, *Prodigal Summer* is about Lusa Landowski, a lepidopterist who arrives with Cole Widener, her new husband, to live on his farm in fictional Zebulon County in rural Appalachia. Lusa is widowed soon after arriving and the rest of the novel is about her struggles to generate a way of living that suits her ethics, despite social relations with family, community, and actors at other geographical scales that undermine the vision she tries to make real. This is a novel about resistance. But Lusa is not the only character whose resistance and bravery Kingsolver recounts. Rather, *Prodigal Summer* also traces the challenges faced, and in some ways overcome, by two other strong female characters, Deanna Wolfe and Nannie Rawley. These three women – Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie – encounter and find ways of managing problematic processes shaping the rural spaces they help constitute. Among other issues, they confront: numerous forms of environmental change; the power of agribusiness relative to small-scale farmers; the over-use of agri-chemicals and concomitant worries about pollution and contamination; the challenges facing organic production; and intra-household and intra-family tensions regarding normative practices and the adoption of (what rural studies scholars have referred to as) “farm adjustment strategies” (e.g. Ilbery, 1991; Evans, 2009). Given its engagement with these sorts of issues, the novel provokes debate about the way rural space is changing today and challenges readers to consider how alternative geographical configurations might emerge from those same spaces. Clearly, it also speaks to the sorts of debates that matter in contemporary rural studies, as well as other literatures navigating the contemporary global politics of the rural.

In considering *Prodigal Summer*, the approach taken here draws inspiration from some recent contributions in the area of literary geography (e.g. Hones, 2008; Kearns, 2005–2006; Saunders, 2010). From the idea that understanding the spatial event of the text can open up opportunities to consider how spatial poetics operate, I suggest that a scalar poetic can be explored in *Prodigal Summer*. As will be discussed, Kingsolver deploys a particular scalar imaginary but one that also allows readers to better understand the complexity of causality in rural space, especially as it applies to Lusa, the story's main character. What matters in the end for Lusa is that the rural place she finds herself in is stretched out, absolutely “transrural” (Askins, 2009), and hence inevitably the product of what Doreen Massey (1999) has famously referred to as “happencence juxtapositions”. The possibility of Lusa transforming her life hinges on the way she flexibly navigates this specific geographical configuration. In doing so, she confronts the contemporary global politics of the rural and via her success she demonstrates that others can do likewise. Thus, in *Prodigal Summer*, scholars of rural studies can find a writer communicating through fiction the significance of many of the same processes and patterns that academic literature has explored, which makes an analysis of this part of Kingsolver's work all the more important. But *Prodigal Summer* is also a rich text for scholars of literary geography. With regards to its scalar poetic and the unwritten causality shaping how the text can be read, the text opens up new issues for consideration among literary geographers, as I now begin to discuss in more detail.

2. Scale, causality and literary geography

Critical attention to texts – ranging from the imaginative to the scientific – continues to present opportunities to ‘map words’ in ways that contribute to contemporary geographical debates

(Saunders, 2010), and expand “understanding of the spatiality of social life” (Brosseau, 2009 p.217). In a recent review of literary geography which celebrates its continued relevance, Saunders (2010) nevertheless calls for a renewed effort to analyse and reveal the full breadth of geographies underpinning and constituting the “textual encounter” (Livingstone, 2005 p.95) between author and reader. Literary geography focuses on what literature knows, the practices used to make and consume it, and the spatial poetics of a text. It follows that literary geographers can ask how author and reader meet up with and negotiate each other; how a wide range of practices used to produce and consume literature shape the experience of that encounter; and how the spatial poetics within, and cutting their way through, a text affect its content and significance.

For Hones (2008), these possible lines of inquiry can come together through her idea of the ‘spatial event of a text’. In her view, a text is first of all what we see on the page (or on the screen) but this encountering event also has to be seen as existing alongside a wide range of other geographies – other relations and movements, many of them accidental, unintentional – lurking behind and emerging from it. There is, for example, the context in which the author writes and in which readers read. Then there are the networks mobilized to produce, print, distribute, sell, promote, and discuss texts. In other words, from the spatial event of the text an inherently open constellation of relations takes shape. There is this sense that a text generates an “inherent indeterminacy” (Crang, 2009 p.1), a diverse, infinitely large number of possible interpretations of its meanings, as well as a wide open expanse of possible presuppositions for its production in the first place. What we might refer to as the ‘first opening of the text’ means that lurking behind and emerging from the spatial event of the text – from its impact – is a shattering of fragments: a vast openness and opening that creates room for an unknowable range of criticism, discussion and debate.

For literary geography, one among many other ways to engage with the first opening of the text is to explore its spatial poetics. The point of thinking about spatial poetics is to demonstrate “the significance of space to the production of meaning” (Saunders, 2010 p.447); that is, it entails a type of analysis that can reveal hidden or less audible geographies that shape readerly engagement. For example, in Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1999), Edquist (2009) detects and sheds light on imprecise geographies of wandering, centre and periphery, and death and horror (p.347) that locate Sydney relative to Australia more generally in the early twentieth century, but also in a world of “travel, shipping and the oceans” (p.348). Stead's characters “not only walk the streets of Sydney but also remember, dream, hallucinate and recount other places and spaces as well, all of which form a part of their lived experience and the geography of the novel” (p.348). Bringing such spatialities to light then presents opportunities to say something about the broader geographies that underpin the literary encounter, which Kearns (2005–2006) demonstrates in his study of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Drawing attention to spatial metaphors of circulation, labyrinth and palimpsest within the text's background, Kearns discusses how these relate to Joyce's concerns about nationalism, religion, and colonialism in early twentieth century Ireland. The spatial poetics of *Ulysses* hint at the imagination of an alternative Dublin to the city Joyce presented; an alternative that Kearns urges readers to consider, however difficult a task that might be. In so doing, he demonstrates that imagining and understanding ‘the significance of space to the production of meaning’ within a text presents opportunities for the analyst – geographer or not – to look beyond the text and relate it to the challenges and dilemmas facing the sorts of societies and social processes that authors depict.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92493>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92493>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)