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Required Reading: The Role of the Literary Scholar in Mapping Difference and Prompting Interest in Distant Destinations

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**Required reading: The role of the literary scholar in
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Abstract:	Taking account of research into the relationship between the reading of narrative fiction and niche tourism, this article speculates on the role of the university lecturer of literature in shaping the touristic desires of students. It is especially interested in the influence of European based lecturers of American fiction as they stimulate the geographic imaginations of their learners. Since cultural capital accrues through the reading of serious works of literature, the influence of lecturers is likely to have some bearing on the eventual travel destinations of university graduates prompted to seek out the material locations that they have read about in books.

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Required reading: The role of the literary scholar in mapping difference and prompting interest in distant destinations

Abstract: Taking account of research into the relationship between the reading of narrative fiction and niche tourism, this article speculates on the role of the university lecturer of literature in shaping the touristic desires of students. It is especially interested in the influence of European based lecturers of American fiction as they stimulate the geographic imaginations of their learners. Since cultural capital accrues through the reading of serious works of literature, the influence of lecturers is likely to have some bearing on the eventual travel destinations of university graduates prompted to seek out the material locations that they have read about in books.

Keywords: literary tourism, university reading lists, literary scholarship, literary studies, fiction, literary travel.

Subject classification codes: tourism, literary tourism, literary studies, American literature, European higher education

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In their introductory chapter 'Reading Between the Lines: Literature and the Creation of Touristic Spaces' published in their 2002 book *Literature and Tourism: Essays in the Reading and Writing of Tourism*, editors Mike Robinson and Hans-Christian Andersen observe that

...not all literature is pregnant with landscape imagery to tempt the tourist to destinations, or possesses strong themes and characters to form the basis for the creation of literary theme parks. Nor does every author offer that richness of personality and lifestyle that might

encourage tourists to explore their preserved literary homes. But considered generally, literature as accumulated ‘cultural capital’ does provide wellsprings of information, points of imaginative departure and inspiration for tourists (p. 4).

Robinson and Andersen, plus their thirteen contributors, proceed to establish and analyse the relationship between literary tourism – ‘a type of tourism with a tradition going back centuries, certainly to the time of the Roman Empire, and which played an important part in that distinctive European tradition of ‘the Grand Tour’ of cultural sites’ (p. xiv) – and the reading-induced behaviour of travellers.

My own purpose in this essay is not further to trace the contours of literary tourism, its history, or its modern day parameters. Illuminated by the work of Robinson and Andersen, as well as other researchers into literary tourism (see, for instance, Watson, 2006), I posit as a given the correlation between what people read and the places they may visit. My intention here is to focus on this gambit of ‘cultural capital’ suggested by Robinson and Andersen as a wellspring and imaginative departure for tourists. If we accept, as do Robinson and Andersen, Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital as the way by which power is transferred in society through educational institutions in particular, we can immediately understand how a literature classroom becomes a kind of incubator for aspirational ideas. Not only is ‘upward mobility’ facilitated through education, but physical mobility too. I wish to suggest that lecturers in literary studies indirectly support niche tourism with its focus on specialisation of concept because they introduce their learners to real world landscapes and cityscapes in the narrative fictions they cover in class. Broadly put, lecturers contribute to the accumulating cultural capital of their students through their choice of taught literature and thus enact a

kind of power to influence students' geographical imaginations, which in turn may lead them to access places in the world. Thus, lecturers of literature indirectly support niche tourism.

My speculation is consistent with the findings of a group of researchers who in their Dutch Research Council funded longitudinal study on literary, film, and music tourism ('Locating Imagination,' 2013) are examining how these three forms of cultural production 'in their own way, stimulate the geographical imagination and literally "move" their audiences' (Reijnders, et al., 2015, p. 334). They propose that 'every person possesses a geographical imagination: a cohesive picture of places, regions, and countries' (Reijnders, et al., 2015, p. 335) and that this 'geographical imagination is increasingly based on spatial images derived from the media' (Reijnders et al., 2015, p. 335), a term they use broadly to refer to books, music, and cinema. They further propose that 'as the influence of the media increases, the desire to find unmediated, material locations to act as a validation of the original experience grows accordingly' (Reijnders, et al., 2015, p. 335).¹

Assigned book lists in Europe, America, and other parts of the world determine some of the fundamental reading experiences of students in higher education, and thereby increase their store of these spatial images. In the United States, nearly all first-year college students are required to take Freshman Composition in which they read a variety of texts. Those who are English majors naturally read many more books in multiple genres over the course of their college careers. In Europe, students tend to specialize upon

¹ The research group's forthcoming book, *Locating Imagination in Popular Culture* (Van Es et al., 2020), extends these arguments.

entry to university, and those interested in the written word may register on programmes in philology, literature, translation and interpreting, or linguistics, among others. In such classroom contexts, whether through English or any other language, critical methodology is introduced to aid the literary interpretation of important works of fiction and nonfiction, both.

Lecturers on programmes of study focused on language and the written word therefore play a de facto part in contributing to the cultural capital that offers these aforementioned imaginative points of departure for eventual tourists who, with college educations, typically have greater disposable income over their lifetimes than their non-graduate counterparts. So-called ‘Ferrante Fever’ is an obvious case in point. Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Tales have prompted untold numbers of visitors to Naples, Italy (McVeigh 2016). Her work has captured the popular imagination around the world but has also found its way squarely into the academy, where it enjoys additional influence by accruing scholarly importance (see, for instance, Bullaro 2016; Bojar 2018; Milkova 2021). Likewise, for Europeans who study in third-level education, their introduction to American writers both shapes their opinions about The United States and fosters future reading and travel interests.

In his empirical research on the power of stories to motivate travel, Cultural Heritage Professor Stijn Reijnders examines how, in their attempts at identify formation, people often require an ‘imaginary other’ frequently involving a ‘spatial counterpart.’ Thus:

certain locations are considered by individuals or groups as their own territory (the home, the office, the place they were born, the homeland, the place where they live), while other locations are considered as the territory of the ‘Other’ (the city of a rival football team, a neighbouring country, another continent) (Reijnders, 2016, p. 675).

Reijnder's work on the increase of niche tourism to destinations known from fictional stories in novels, films, and on television is based on case studies and participant interviews. His findings reveal that the phenomenon of media tourism is "embedded in a longer process of the imagination, which stretches out over time, a process that begins with the consumption of the media narrative and fantasizing about the "fictitious" locations concerned and ends with a look back on the experience" (Reijnders, 2016, p. 673). My own jointly undertaken research into the teaching of American literature in Europe suggests that classroom-based scholars support this consumption of narrative through the American fictions they assign, while also bringing to their learners evidence of cross-Atlantic cultural difference. They establish in their learners' minds a basis of curiosity for 'the other': the other society, the other geography, the other set of cultural mores, the other body politic, the other nationality, its multiple ethnicities, and for the old world within the new.

For instance, in my co-edited collection of essays called *European Perspectives on John Updike*, published in 2018 [REDACTED] twelve European lecturers of American literature revealed their uniquely European approach to the prodigious writings of John Updike. In their pedagogical evocations of otherness, they present Updike to their undergraduate and postgraduate students as a contemporary writer who 'delineated American psyches, temperaments, and morals' [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. They regard him as 'a kind of literary go-to guy, as the 'writer at work' to interpret America,' a kind of 'field guide' to American society (p. 8). Furthermore, because Updike's work was so far reaching during his lifetime in terms of sales and distribution, his representations of American manners and mentalities have undoubtedly shaped some

understanding abroad of the United States. Within their classrooms, our contributors, all of whom are teaching-scholars, examined with their students a number of uniquely American concepts such as American exceptionalism, the national breadth of the Great American novel, identity formation in American urbanity, and, ultimately, the American character as observed from an oceanic distance. Their investigations suggested, as we wrote in our Introduction, ‘a European interest to expose and articulate some slippery yet fabled American essence’ (p. 8).

As we took stock of the insights of our contributors, it became clear to us that, even accounting for the seeming flattening of difference posed by nearly universal Internet accessibility, cultural homogeneity is not a fait accompli. There is still much plurality to be experienced even within the developed world such as between Europe and The United States. Inside their classrooms, our contributing scholars introduced their students to Updike’s Pennsylvania, his Massachusetts, his New Jersey, his Maine, his Arizona, and even his Denmark through his 2000 novel *Gertrude and Claudius*. They explored themes related to religion, to representations of the old and new worlds, to sex and love in an American setting, and to aging within the American working class in particular.

Their classroom practice demonstrates that the higher education lecturer of literary studies is a driver of place-curiosity, or of what the Dutch funded researchers identify as ‘the spatial turn,’ whereby ‘interest in the material-physical aspects of our media culture’ occurs in response to the limitations of virtual travel. Lecturers who specialize in fictional narratives expose their students to the ‘diegetic worlds’ (Reijnders, 2016, p. 673) that prompt their daydreaming and fantasies and may eventually have a bearing on ‘whether or not to take a trip to the related locations’ (p. 673). The diegetic worlds of

John Updike are presented in his narrative fiction through, for instance, current affairs and topical news stories; popular music; iconic travel routes; the deceptive quaintness of New England towns; and the racial tensions of America's inner cities – all of which conjure pictures and stimulate the geographical imaginations of readers in relation to contemporary American landscapes of town and country.

The contribution of Europe-based teaching scholars to the heightening of interest in foreign destinations is further illuminated by a more wide ranging book project in which I am currently involved. This second collection, to be published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2022, considers the teaching in Europe of contemporary American literature more generally. Sixteen contributors from across the continent and Great Britain and Ireland are elaborating on their pedagogical practice in relation to no fewer than twenty post-World War II American writers. In so doing, they are delineating their own research driven investments in the cultural capital accrued by their learners.

The essays included in this work in progress, *Contemporary American Literature in the European Classroom: Texts and Teaching* (██████████, in press), promise to provide an understanding of how post-World War II American writers are presented in European university classrooms. Contributing scholars located in Western and Eastern European countries will consider the work of a wide array of important authors through case studies of their own classroom practices and text selections. They will address key questions about syllabus formation, taking account of the conflict of ideologies between East and West arising from the Cold War; the meanings of freedom and idealism in a racially and sexually polarized democracy as viewed from a cross-Atlantic distance; and the forces of globalization that continue to shape our world. Collectively, their sixteen

essays will make known the classroom critiques of novels and stories that influence perceptions of America formed by contemporary European students—many of them future leaders and stake holders in business, government, sciences, and the arts.

The cultural capital accrued in the minds of these undergraduate and postgraduate students of literature is inestimable. What *can* be gauged, however, is the sheer breadth of book-based tourism occurring through the narrative fictions read in European classrooms. Our contributors teach the works of major American writers of diverse, multicultural backgrounds themselves including David Foster Wallace, Philip Roth, Donald Barthelme, Octavia Butler, Colson Whitehead, Gloria Anzaldua, John Okada, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Danzy Senna, and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, to name just some. As teaching-scholars, our contributors are based in a wide array of countries including Serbia, Denmark, Estonia, Great Britain, Ireland, Poland, Romania, France, Hungary, Portugal, Sweden, Scotland, Denmark, Germany, and Finland. Some of the texts and themes they cover that are most likely to inspire the geographic imagination of their students include:

- U.S. Race Relations and Masculinity
- North and South American border tensions
- upward mobility and the ‘American-African’ in Princeton, New Jersey
- the growth of capitalism in post-communist Poland
- the religious mystery of everyday life in Iowa
- Japanese post-war internment in Seattle
- environmental catastrophe in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

- terrorism and the Scandinavian psyche
- Philadelphian cosmopolitanism in rural Pennsylvania.

These categories represent only a sample of the geographically provocative settings that are likely to prompt in undergraduate and postgraduate students ‘the desire to find unmediated, material locations to act as a validation of the original experience’ (Reijnders, et al., 2015, p. 335), as suggested above.

While it is a safe assumption that most lecturers of language and literature do not set out to prompt travel, many of them probably do so without intending to. Aside from Erasmus Mobility and Junior Year Abroad coordinators (in Europe and the United States respectively), it does not ordinarily fall within the job descriptions of lecturers of literature to promote or organize travel. Therefore, as drivers of tourism, they exert cultural power that is largely unintentional. However, these lecturers of literature are inevitably dabblers in place: they are imaginative visitors with their learners to the settings presented in the literary works that they cover in class. They prompt interest in otherness and in the geographies of ‘other places.’ They introduce their students to the societal and cultural frisson that occurs in those places. Thus, the role of the literary scholar in mapping difference and prompting interest in distant destinations is an unacknowledged one, but certainly a real one.² It is a role that warrants further investigation in both literary studies and the study of tourism.

² For an interesting comparison to a similar phenomenon in Business Entrepreneurship Studies, see Denise Fletcher’s 2007 article in *Journal of Business Venturing* called “‘Toy Story’: The narrative world of entrepreneurship and the creation of interpretive communities,” in which Fletcher extensively outlines how “in terms of entrepreneurship and its representation in research reports, education processes and in the media, narrative is the basic figuration process through which understandings and meanings about entrepreneurial activities are produced, reproduced and disseminated (Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997).” She further discovers that because “newspaper reports, biographies and television documentary programs are well-stocked with narrative accounts, tutors “‘liven up’ their class sessions by incorporating stories about entrepreneurial practices into their curricula” (653) and concludes that those

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who study entrepreneurship make use of the stories they hear and read to “shape further action” in their working lives (655).

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