

Analyzing Literary Maps to Bridge Geography, History, and English Language Arts

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In the fall of 1955, the Texas and Local History Department of the Dallas Public Library published the Literary Map of Texas featured in this article (www.loc.gov/item/map56000650/). From “Mother Goose on the Rio Grande” in the south, to “The Great Roundup” in the north, from “Saddle in the Sky” in the west to “Bluebonnets for Lucinda” in the east, the map highlighted a variety of works about Texas. Scattered within the confines of the boundaries of the state were approximately 200 authors’ names and publications, providing a mid-twentieth century view of the literary state of Texas.

Literary maps such as this one can be useful tools in humanities courses, celebrating the regional contributions of local authors and/or geographically specific works. They can be used to examine literature from a specific time period or they can be used to examine the bias and perspective of the makers. And they can inspire students to develop their own, based on their own criteria, to bridge multiple subject areas.

Literary maps acknowledge the contributions of authors to a specific state or region as well as those that depict the geographical locations in works of fiction. They can feature real places connected with an individual author, literary character or book, or they may show fictional landscapes such as Oz, Middle Earth, or Never-Neverland.

Although they may depict actual places, literary maps generally focus on imagination rather than geographic accuracy and usually contain a specific message. Literary maps illustrate ideas as much as places and present a

world in which authors and books are the dominant features. For readers, the geographic knowledge can serve as a framework on which to fit the life of an author or the adventures of a book.

Since the 1940s and 1950s, the period when many literary maps were produced, selection criteria for choosing notable literary works have changed dramatically. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars started recognizing the diversity of American culture and called for the publishing of more obscure or suppressed literary works. In the 1970s, race, gender and class came more into focus in understanding and appreciating literature. Consequently, in the 1980s, the whole concept of a literary canon was increasingly attacked, especially on the grounds that women and minority writers were underrepresented in the traditional framework.

In the past 20 years, the teaching of literature has undergone a fundamental shift to encourage the study of diverse cultures, not a narrow group of indi-

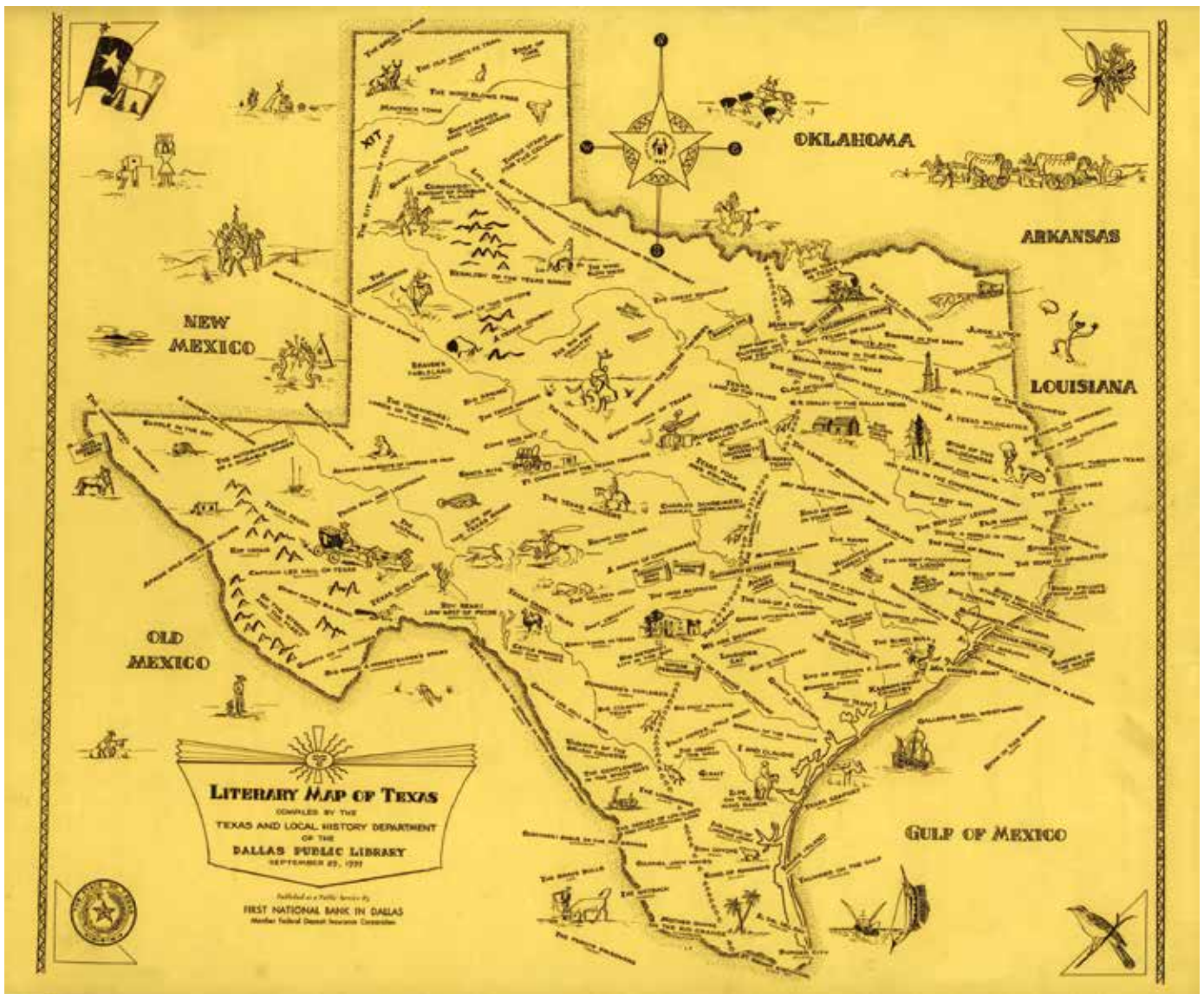
vidual authors. Curricula have been expanded to include more diversity—more female, African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American voices in order to represent and reflect the nation’s varied cultures.

Keeping that in mind, lead an analysis of the 1955 Literary Map of Texas with students. Begin by sharing the map with students and asking them such questions as:

- Who made the map?
- What was, or may have been, the motive of the maker(s) of the map? How do you know?
- Who is the audience for this map?
- What criteria do you think the mapmaker used in selecting these literary works?
- How many works are you familiar with? How many of the works listed require more investigation?

(The Primary Source Analysis Tool available from the Library of Congress Teachers’ Page may be useful. See: <http://loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/> and the Teachers’ Guide at http://loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Maps.pdf.)

Invite students to conduct original research to characterize the literary works included on the map, or to locate



other examples of Texas literary maps and make comparisons, or to identify maps from your region or state for similar investigations.

Accessing literary maps from your region or state may require a little digging. Beyond conducting an online search on “literary maps,” some places to explore include:

- The Library of Congress Online Exhibition, Language of the Land (for more about this, see sidebar on page 126) www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/
- The National Council of Teachers of English Literary Map Project www.ncte.org/affiliates/literarymaps
- University of Michigan Clark Library Literary Maps www.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/litmaps/us/uslit

Once students have gained a regional sense of literature, con-

sider taking a look at a national literary map. Further engage student analysis by examining any of the maps in the introduction section of the Language of the Land exhibition at www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/landintr.html. (See sidebar article.) Encourage students to zoom into the map for details and explore questions such as:

- Who are the authors pictured along the top of the map?
- Why do you think the mapmaker selected them?
- What three large cities have insets featuring authors?
- Locate authors and books representing *your* state. Have you read any of these titles? Are they in your school or public library collection?
- Why do you think this map was published?
- What twentieth century authors would you to add for *your* state?

Language of the Land Exhibition



In 1993, the concept of literary maps as a distinct genre became front and center in a Library of Congress exhibition titled, “Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America.” The exhibition traveled throughout the country until 1996 and a book under the same name was published in 1999. You and your students can explore the online exhibition at www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/.

The exhibit’s four regional sections—Northeast; the South; the Midwest; and the West—feature the voices of writers deeply rooted in a particular place. These local writers create an enduring sense of place and of the vast differences among America’s regions. Throughout the exhibition, the colorful and varied literary maps reflect the contributions of authors to specific states or regions and locate their imagined people and places. Through these maps, authors’ words, images, and characters, present a tapestry of the impressions that endure in our collective imagination of the American land and its culture.

Northeast www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/landnort.html

Although it is the smallest region featured in *Language of the Land*, the Northeast has deep literary roots, reaching back to New England’s seventeenth-century Puritan writers. Many of America’s best-known authors have come from the region and have celebrated its immense geographic and cultural variety and great natural beauty. Within a short distance of each other lie Vermont and New Hampshire’s mountains, Pennsylvania’s rolling hills, New York’s lakes, ponds and forests, Massachusetts’s salt marshes and sand dunes, and Maine’s rocky coastlines, as well as the important urban centers of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. All have produced major literary voices.

Also connected with the region are unforgettable characters: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Iroquois warrior Hiawatha, based on a legendary Native American hero; Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab, relentlessly pursuing vengeance on the Great White Whale who injured him; and E.B. White’s spider Charlotte and pig Wilbur, whose adventures in rural Vermont have delighted several generations of children.

The South www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/landsout.html

The South’s diverse topography—from Virginia’s rolling mountains and valleys to Louisiana’s mysterious swamps, and Florida’s sultry subtropics—has provided rich inspiration for the imaginations of some of America’s most distinguished authors. Southern writers have emphasized their connection with the land, and many of their descriptions of their region are featured in this exhibit. Photographs of the places they have etched into the American consciousness are coupled with their words: the Mississippi River, forever associated with Mark Twain; Ellen Glasgow’s Virginia; a Mississippi farm photographed by Eudora Welty; and Thomas Wolfe’s Asheville. Also depicted are some of the most striking characters from the pens of Southern writers: Margaret Mitchell’s Scarlett O’Hara, determining to survive at all

costs; Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, escaping “civilizing” by a trip downriver; Marjorie Kennan Rawlings’s Jody Baxter, growing up through affection for his fawn Flag.

The Midwest www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/landmidw.html

Given the country’s history as a nation of immigrants, it is not surprising that a major theme of American literature is exploration, the need to see what is over the horizon. In addition to Jack Kerouac, a number of writers have gone “on the road” and left memorable records of their travels around the United States.

Midwestern literature spans a varied landscape: the plains of the Dakotas, the frontiers of Nebraska, the Appalachian towns of Southern Ohio, industrialized Detroit, or the crossroads of Chicago. The Midwest is the birthplace of iconic American authors such as Ernest Hemingway (Oak Park, Ill.), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Saint Paul, Minn.), Toni Morrison (Lorain, Ohio), and Kurt Vonnegut (Indianapolis, Ind.).

The West www.loc.gov/exhibits/land/landwest.html

Western literature captures the spirit of the half of the continent beyond the Mississippi River, a landscape that consists of many regions—the High Plains, the Southwest, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Basin, the Pacific Northwest, and California. Gifted writers have flourished in each.

Like the land, the literature of the West is open and expansive. In *Language of the Land*, Western writers convey the wonder that the spectacle of such a vast land elicits: John Steinbeck describes a lush spring in the Salinas Valley, William Stafford the stillness of Wyoming, and an anonymous Native American writer the beauty of a Southwestern dawn and sunset. These and other writers have created characters that have become legends: Owen Wister’s Virginian, first of a long line of tough and self-reliant cowboy heroes; and Jack London’s Buck, the rugged Alaskan sled dog.

During the third week of June 2018, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers/ will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to share your ideas for and experiences using literary maps with your students.

As a culminating activity, assign students to prepare their own present-day literary map (state or national) using online mapping platforms like Esri's

geographical information system (GIS) or Google Maps. Finding datasets for the mapping activity can become part of the research process. Encourage students to contact their State Center for the Book to determine if there is a working list of authors provided online. For a list of state centers, see www.read.gov/cfb/state-affiliates.php.

More and more literary maps are being born in electronic form, with users able to click on an icon representing a region, author, or book and call up a detailed map, photographs, biographical information, bibliographies and other information. Over the summer of 2018, The Library of Congress is embarking on a

pilot project to visualize the fictional records of the Library of Congress catalog. A small sample of state Centers for the Book will test the process. Whatever form literary maps may take in the future, they will still have the power that literature has on us—to entertain, inform, and gain a sense of the world around us. 🌐

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