Applying the Geohumanities

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, geography has taken up a renewed engagement with humanities approaches to place, space, and environment. These approaches offer new possibilities for relevant, publicly engaged research and teaching; applying the geohumanities expands the techniques that geographers can employ to do engaged work in the face of great social and environmental challenges. This article describes two examples of applied geohumanities projects: a community course on climate change and poetry and a creative approach to a citizen science bioblitz. Building on these examples, four questions for future work in applied geohumanities are posed.

KEYWORDS

Applied Geography, Applied Geohumanities, Boundary Objects, Climate Change and Poetry, Literary Field Guide, Poetic Inventory, Public Geohumanities

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I propose that a publicly engaged geohumanities practice can offer new skills and practices for applied geography. Pacione (2011) has argued that applied geography is best understood as an approach rather than as a sub-field, and in what follows I outline some of the possibilities that are opened up when an applied approach is taken through a geohumanities practice.

While GIS&T approaches are most often associated with applied geography, I argue that the geohumanities offer unique and important contributions to relevant and publicly engaged research and teaching. To do so, I will use two examples from my own work in the public geohumanities: a community course on climate change and poetry that I designed and taught, and a creative approach to a citizen science bioblitz that led to multiple outputs including the innovative book The Sonoran Desert: A Literary Field Guide (Magrane & Cokinos, 2016).

The first section of the article includes a brief review of the geohumanities, focusing on some of its recent trends that may dovetail with an applied approach. The following two sections describe the climate change and poetry class and the literary field guide as examples of applied approaches to the geohumanities. Building on these examples, I pose four questions for future work in applying the geohumanities, and in doing so address some of the possibilities that arise when applied geography and the geohumanities meet. Ultimately, I argue that the integration of geohumanities approaches to applied geography departments can expand the varieties of techniques that geographers employ to do meaningful and engaged work in the face of the great social and environmental challenges of our day.

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PUBLIC GEOHUMANITIES/DOING THE GEOHUMANITIES

In recent years the discipline of geography has taken up a renewed engagement with humanities approaches, such as studies and/or practices of literature, art, and environmental history, to the core concerns of place, space, and environment at the heart of geographic inquiry. From edited collections (Daniels, DeLyser, Entikin, & Richardson, 2011; Dear, Ketchum, Luria, & Richardson, 2011), to AAG’s new flagship GeoHumanities journal (Cresswell & Dixon, 2015), to the “spatial turn” in cognate interdisciplinary endeavors such as the “environmental humanities” (Rose, van Dooren, Chrulew, Cooke, Kearnes, & O’Gorman, 2012) and “digital humanities” (Crang, 2015; Bauch, 2017), some have argued that the geohumanities open up opportunities for engaging new practices and reaching new publics (Kitchin, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2015; Magrane, 2015).

In an article that gathers together seven geohumanities scholars and practitioners, Hawkins (2015) asks “What, then, might GeoHumanities do, and what might it mean to do the GeoHumanities?” (p. 216). One of the themes that Hawkins draws together in introducing the seven contributors in the piece is the ability for geohumanities practices to engage multiple publics. Indeed, geographers have noted the possibilities afforded to the discipline when its practitioners produce writing that reaches audiences outside the academy (Kitchin, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Magrane, 2015). This ability to reach new or different audiences is one way in which geohumanities approaches—that may produce work in “art-science” literary or artistic forms as well as in academic forms (Magrane & Johnson, 2017)—can be an applied approach.

There is, of course, a long history of humanities approaches to geography, which can be traced through Humboldt’s bridging of aesthetic and scientific practice (Bunkse, 1981), Sauer’s (1925) cultural landscapes, Tuan’s (1975) work on place and experience, and Buttimer’s (1976) “lifeworld,” to point to just a few signposts. Blankenship (2018) claims J.B. Jackson’s mid-20th century magazine Landscape: Magazine of Human Geography as a forerunner of AAG’s new GeoHumanities journal, in that it reached a wider audience in part because it “discouraged academic-style writing, rejecting footnotes and jargon-laced language. Because of this intelligent yet nondogmatic approach, contributors came from a wide variety of disciplines, inside and outside of geography, as well as outside of the academy” (p. 27). Suffice it to say that the discipline of geography has long engaged a boundary region between the physical and social sciences, as well as the humanities, and looked toward the production of work that reached audiences outside of the academy.

The current (re)turn to the geohumanities can be distinguished by the growing number of practicing artists and writers entering the field of geography. These artists and writers bring with them a varied toolkit of techniques and skills, from creative writing to studio or environmental art practices. These practices, and the resulting outputs that include works of literature, gallery exhibits, websites, and community-based arts practices, are being welcomed into the field in many quarters. Dobson’s (2006) question of “why can’t geographers write their own story” (p. 480) and Meinig’s (1983) call that “we shall not have a humanistic geography worthy of the claim until we have some of our most talented and sensitive scholars deeply engaged in the creation of the literature of the humanities” (p. 325) seem to be on their way to being answered.

From an applied geography approach, the question of what the geohumanities do (Hawkins et al., 2015) shifts slightly to a teleological question of use: How can the geohumanities be used? Or, perhaps better: How can the geohumanities be useful? Applied geography has been defined as “the application of geographical knowledge and skills to the resolution of real-world social, economic and environmental problems” (Pacione, 1999, p. 1). Thinking of the work of artists and writers in the geohumanities, and the outputs, connections, and practices that they produce as applications of geographic knowledge and skills expands the methods and practices of applied geography.

In fact, one of the key arguments made for the geohumanities is that they are a response to—and should address—the key environmental problems of our time, namely climate change and the Anthropocene (Castree, 2014; Castree et al., 2014), and that the social and cultural realms are at
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