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**James Kneale**  
**(University College London)**

**COMMENTARY ON:**

**Text as It Happens: Literary Geography**

Sheila Hones  
University of Tokyo

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This is clearly an important paper. It makes a very important contribution to the field it describes – as well as demonstrating that this field is something we must assemble ourselves. It is certainly the most extensive survey of ‘literary geography’ we have seen for some time, as well as being the most thoughtful and critical piece on this problem I have read. It is also a very generous intervention. When Sheila Hones talks of a “unified and comprehensive field of literary geography” (3) she does not seek to impose unity upon it, recognizing it rather as a mess of disparate topics, disciplines, audiences, practices and values. The paper explains why the dialogue between literary studies, geography, and other disciplines has been so piecemeal, so full of missed opportunities and one-sided conversations. Thinking about our own work in the light of the things we take seriously about both texts and geography – questions of authorship and audience, contexts of production, displacement and reception, networks of connections and absences – provides a novel and elegant solution to the problem of “what, exactly, is geographical about text” and the possibility, at least, for a shared conversation about the different ways in which we might think about this.

Of course this answer also involves confronting the reasons for all these differences. All fields of study are produced, held together, and transformed by constant *work* – the work of authors and readers, teachers and students, printers and publishers, editors and referees, researchers and funding bodies, and many others. All must be able to at least agree to some idea of what the field is and how it should be studied – even critical debate requires an agreed set of standards for disagreement, ways of establishing which kinds of

evidence are adequate, and so on. But sometimes these fields cohere; in others they can only be put together by a commentator who steps back, as has been done here, to establish what these messy incomplete networks share and what they lack. This field needs more work than most.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hones' paper, as I see it, is her invitation to consider some of the ways in which these networks get put together (congealing around things like authors, places, themes, or genres) as well as the reasons why some links are harder to produce or maintain, why some extra-disciplinary audiences are harder to persuade, and why values and working practices differ. In the case of geography, for example, Hones is right to point out that 'literary' has most often been taken to refer to what is studied, rather than the way that this is done. It is perhaps not surprising that many geographers have adopted a strongly historicist approach to cultural works, seeking to ground the text's meaning in its context, sometimes 'uncovering' meanings from the text that are at odds with the commonsense interpretations of ordinary readers. It seems likely that these geographers have not been warned about the 'intentional fallacy' – the idea that it is dangerous to presume that an author meant something to be read the way we understand it. And as Marc Brousseau and others remind us, literary works are a particular kind of writing, and their poetics deserve as much attention as their politics. Strangely, though, literary theory was most visible in studies of geography's *own* poetics (see Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Duncan and Ley, 1993) rather than fiction or poetry. Thinking in this way, then, allows us to identify those elements where there is most disagreement as to what is geographical about text, and to consider the reasons for those disagreements. This would, I think, be a very productive exercise.

However my reading of Hones' paper suggests a number of potential problems. The first is that the establishment of these disagreements could then be used as an excuse for *not* engaging with other kinds of work – a self-fulfilling prophecy that reproduces and legitimates difference. The second is a version of the first because it turns on the question of how we might establish common ground between disciplines. I have no problem giving up on "the obligation to strive toward definitive interpretation" when it comes to textual meaning (13), because I have always assumed that interpretations are suggestions, or sometimes arguments, about how we *might* read a text. I am less keen on abandoning my sense of what space is, however. Take the notion of 'setting', for example. This is perhaps the most obvious and pervasive way that literature and geography can be put together, particularly outside the academy, but as Hones herself has pointed out it depends on an idea of space that many geographers find unconvincing. Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998) is extraordinarily popular, but David Harvey dismisses

“Moretti’s cartographic banalities” because they reduce spatiality to a cipher, a concrete, absolute dimension on which to locate textual phenomena (2001: 86, fn10).

Andrew Thacker’s strategy - “reading and interpreting literary texts by reference to geographical concepts” (cited 7) can only become a general methodology if we agree on those geographical concepts, and this is often one of the key problems. It is not just the meaning of literary texts that is at stake here, then, and a scholar of the Moretti school would probably not agree with Honess’ own reading of geography, or with the idea of the text-event as a spatial phenomenon. Does Honess’ account have a normative dimension – in other words, what do we do when we find out where we disagree? And how do we square this need to ‘confront’ these problems with the modest and generous ‘anything goes’ air of the rest of the paper?

My final concern, which I will outline very quickly, is the gap Honess mentions; the gap between studies of texts (and textual spaces) and studies of the production, dissemination and reception of texts. Honess is right to point out that these studies are all engagements with the text-event, just engagements of different kinds. However I think there is more to it than this. Firstly it is significant beyond ‘reader response’ research, proving to be a problem for ‘audience studies’ researchers like David Morley and Janice Radway as they struggled to theorise and research the ways in which audiences make meanings from texts. Secondly this gap marks a more intractable disagreement than the others outlined above, because for some researchers interested in the history of the book, for example, the meaning of the text is of secondary or no importance compared to the status of a book as a material object. The illiterate engage with books and make them meaningful – they might use them as paperweights or doorstops - but they do not approach them as ‘texts’ and their material affordances are more likely to be fixed where texts are polysemic. The ideas gathered under the banner of non-representational theory cause further problems for this way of thinking of text.

Ultimately, though, this paper is very welcome and my criticisms may only demonstrate my own lack of generosity. I hope it inspires debate and the search for common ground as well as disagreements, and that future research - in all kinds of disciplines – might use this paper as a touchstone in considering the different ways in which text might be geographical.

## References

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