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COMMENTARY ON:

Text as It Happens: Literary Geography

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I write this commentary in response to Sheila Hones' excellent article. And I must begin with two confessional responses. The first is that I was one of the (anonymous) referees for the article, and recommended its publication. I recall thinking with some satisfaction that as someone who often gets asked by students 'where is there a good clear statement on what literary geography is, that does not revolve around one author?', I now felt I had an answer. Also I was inclined to agree with her commentaries on the limits of dialogue and lopsided flows of studies, to which I shall come later. The second is that at the time I was led to reflect on how it positioned the geographical contribution to studying literature. And that I wish to take through three aspects, first the issue of texts as events, second the spatiality in texts and the geographies of their production, circulation and consumption and finally the disciplinary implications of that.

Hones' paper's focus upon the event of reading as a configuration of places in a mediated, distanced yet emplaced performance seemed important to me. It reminded me of my first encounter with the work of Stanley Fish, one of the pioneers of 'reception theory' or 'reader response' approaches. The approach Fish opened up seemed to me immediately liberating and inviting. However, despite his apparent openness what that tends to eventually mean is that 'interpretative communities' actually create pretty solidly singular readings, playing down the text and senses of inherent indeterminacy. Here I think the situating of reading as eventful, as placed and fractured, perhaps moves us along from that.

Geographers have often been drawn to look to 'reader responses' in not just a philosophical but empirical way. And here there has been a crossover with studies of other media and consumption of other cultural artefacts in studies of consumption. Hones does not push the link but there has been a great deal of work that has looked at the consumption of other kinds of media texts or has treated other cultural artefacts as texts and reading as a model of, and metaphor, for consumption in general. There have been significant challenges to the model of reading as apotheosis of consumption and debates about especially the work Michel de Certeau did in bringing that model forwards (Crang, 2000). That focus upon consumption has been less apparent in studies of literature for sure.

On the other hand geographers of literature have been less ready to develop the work of some of the major strands of more reader-oriented literary criticism – say that of Jauss (1982) or Iser (1989) where the latter's spatial figure of the wandering subjectivity in the text would seem very inviting. It is perhaps also revealing that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin does not figure in the review – revealing since it is probably fair to say his notion of the chronotope as a time-space formation in the text has been more readily adopted than the dialogic notion of speaker/responder set in a specific context. That notion if you will of two parties set in a spatial relationship creating in his terms a context specific, placed and timed 'utterance' might be something to think about as a theoretical way forward.

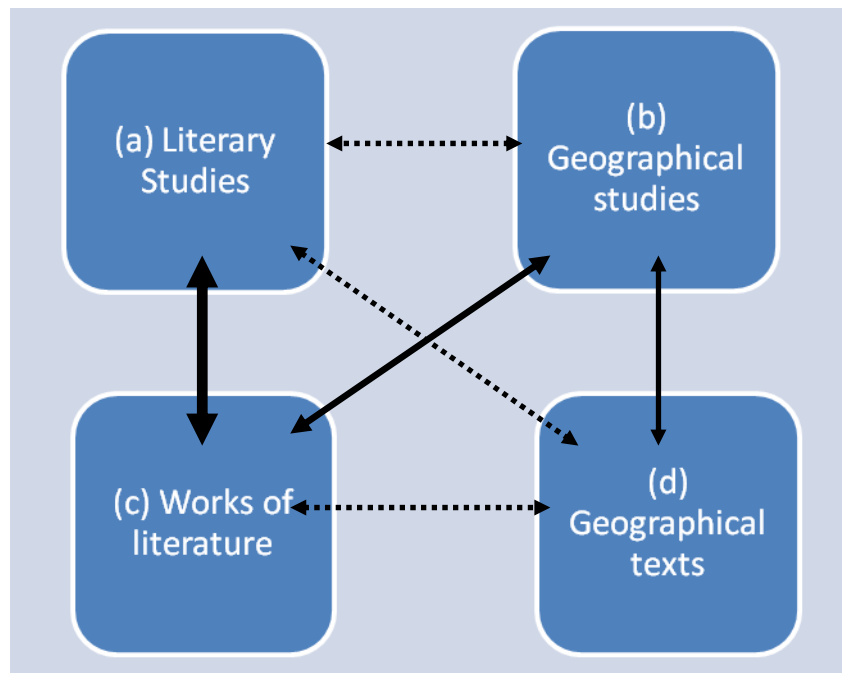
That argument then around place-specific contexts and enactments of texts Hones addresses with an exceptionally lucid dissection of the tendency to separate 'the textuality of space' and 'the spatiality of texts'. I suppose there might be more to be said here, that although the article rings true, inevitably something more remains to be said. Thus there has been work both within and outside of geography on the worldliness of words. Perhaps most famously in literary works the mapping of novels in terms of their production, settings and markets by Franco Moretti (1998) or the delicately sophisticated connection of reading publics and the emergence of civil society in the work of Roger Chartier (1987) or even the study of the coevolution of a site of reading (the commuter train), a type of market (male office workers) and an aesthetic (the commodified fragmented objects of sexualised desire) in Japan (Fujii, 1999). Indeed as someone whose own written work has tended to start from the spatiality in specific authors and works, then to perhaps see where the texts become imbricated in the real world, I sympathise with the annoyance at the separation as well as seeing myself as culpable – though of course very often the writing process for myself at least has moved in the opposite direction, from seeing texts afloat in society and from there to the works themselves.

One might add to Hones's genealogy of literary geography perhaps the first usage of the term – by Virginia Woolf in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1905, suggesting anyone seeking correspondence in bricks and mortar for any book would be disappointed. A statement which has not stopped many trying to find, or indeed make, just such a correspondence. To take one example that has bothered me, the hyper-realism of James Joyce remains an interesting entanglement. Here is an author presenting, and in some ways I deliberately say presenting, not representing, a world that he struggles to be so full and complete that it is hyperrealistic. Thus he can make absurd claims to his agent that were Dublin destroyed they could reconstruct it from the text of *Ulysses*. While the claim is widely cited, so too is the comment from most responders that, if you were seeking a blueprint for a city, this would be, to say the least, a rather odd one. More interesting for me here is the sense of how that realist depiction of the city becomes embedded in the city – with *Ulysses*/Joyce trails, marketing, museums etc. The different forms of representing the city interact – where Joyce used a colonial city map to plan his story, now the tourist office sells reproduction maps with locations upon them (see for instance: Crang, 2008 ; Johnson, 2000 ; Keohane, 2002). The sense of literary texts shaping the world, or at least how we apprehend the world was perhaps weaker here.

Of course Hones's article is not engaged in the minutiae of debate over Dublin and Joyce – and she rightly points how much 'literary geography' is tied to one author/subject/text/landscape and thus is limited in reach. I was though struck by the careful way she diagrams the interdisciplinary relations – and I think in ways that resonate – and which I have sketched out in Figure 1. Thus I have so far pointed out the rather weak study of the travel between works of literature and geographical issues, and, maybe, then texts. Much could be argued over here about risks of reducing works of literature to indicators, or trying to connect them too easily to 'real worlds' but equally the room to give them real power in geographical analysis. Hones highlights the difficulties this diagramming reveals in the interface between two disciplines [a+ b in my version of her argument], they nonetheless construct the field of overlap not by bringing together scholarly work in geography and literary criticism, but by comparing academic texts produced by geographers (the map, the regional monograph) with literary texts produced by authors (the novel, the poem) [c+ d in this schema] (Hones page 1303). I have a paranoid and more negative view than this review does of the links (a) to (b). Hones points out that literary studies have been wont to use some major statements from geographers, and points out how recently geographers have engaged with the tools of literary analysis, but it is notable that even in special issues and books she cites there is depressingly little truck and commerce between

geographical literary studies and literary studies. A few literary theories engage seriously with geographical texts, principally maps. Oddly perhaps it remains a small part of the discipline that subjects geographical texts of all sorts (and it happens mostly historical) to critical textual analysis. Perhaps as many geographical works focus on literary works for what they tell us about different spatialities.

Figure 1



My point then is to flag up what I would like to call uneasy interdisciplinary position the article reveals. I have to say my more pessimistic side says it is less uneasy than just imbalanced. My more optimistic side says that as literary studies have engaged with spatialities in the text more strongly this opens up room for different sorts of connections to be fostered. But fostered they must be, they will not just happen. Thus I look at the work of someone like Lisa Lau – with training in literary analysis, developing interests in postcolonial issues and finding a ‘home’ (not always comfortably) in the discipline of geography (Lau, 2004 ; Lau, 2005 ; Lau & Pasquini, 2004). Her reflections on that journey and translation are illuminating.

To conclude, this review covers a great deal. I am not sure I fully buy its ending call on how commonalities will be built. But the problematic it identifies ring true. Much literary geography focuses upon one text/author or at most genre and does manage to generalise in the way various ‘case studies’ in other sub-fields do. The definition of approach to spaces within or through the text is a major fault line in practice (though one practitioners often seek, if fail, to overcome). The position of these studies in relation to the (higher

status) literary critical studies remains an issue where sociologists of knowledge could mine whole studies. That they do not only further reinforces the marginal status of literary geography.

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