

Barbara Pezzotti (2012) *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey*. Madison, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 222pp., £52.95 (hardback), ISBN 9781611475524.

Roger Caillois observes in ‘The Detective Novel as Game’ (1983) that: ‘A detective in a novel uses his ingenuity to answer the same traditional questions that an actual investigator puts to himself: Who? When? Where? How? Why? These questions do not invoke equal interest, however: one of them – how? – usually constitutes the central problem’ (3). Barbara Pezzotti’s *A Bloody Journey: The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (2012) focuses on ‘Where’ by attempting to broaden crime scenes to entire cities, regions, and ultimately a whole country. *A Bloody Journey* reads like a grisly Lonely Planet guide, highlighting sites of corruption, organized crime, recent ethnic tensions and violent historical feuds in the cities, urban sprawls and islands of Italy. ‘See Naples and die’ used to be a popular saying among tourists reacting to its beauty; after reading *A Bloody Journey* it seems surprising that anyone gets out of Italy alive. Through the medium of fiction by authors including Piero Colaprico, Bruno Ventavoli and Andrea Camilleri, Pezzotti takes the reader through the ‘crime scene par excellence’ of Milan (1), the ‘overpopulation, unemployment and organised crime’ (57) of Naples, the Mafia-dominated town of Palermo, and Camilleri’s imaginary town of Vigàta in Sicily, among other locations of violence, and toxic politics. Aiming to foreground cultural and imagined geography in recent Italian crime fiction, Pezzotti combines two recent critical perspectives: geocriticism, or focus on spatiality, and the study of crime fiction not just as popular or genre fiction but as literature that reflects and represents some aspects of the real world, particularly socio-cultural issues. (See, for example, Gill Plain’s *Twentieth-century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001) and David Geherin’s *Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Mystery Fiction* (2008)).

First published between Bertrand Westphal’s *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011), and Robert T. Tally’s *Spatiality* (2013), *A Bloody Journey* is firmly a product of the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities. Pezzotti draws on the usual suspects of human geography and postmodernism – Yi-Fu Tuan, Marc Augé, Edward Soja and Fredric Jameson, among others – to make the case for her thesis and to contextualise the worlds of the fictional detectives. Although *A Bloody Journey* lacks the clarifying methodological perspective that access to Westphal’s and Tally’s work might have provided, Pezzotti’s engagement with theories of space and urbanity emphasises the importance of geography not only in Italian crime fiction, or *giallo*, but the genre as a whole. In addition, she highlights the cardinal themes of alienation, fragmented and fractious communities and erosion of individual, civic and cultural identity. Of the Milan in Sandrone Dazieri’s (1999) ‘Gorilla’ series, for example, Pezzotti writes:

Finally, and more importantly, it can be associated with the ‘fractal city,’ that is, the city of multiple and divided sociality theorized by Edward Soja (2000). In fact, Dazieri’s Milan is a simplified version of Soja’s Los Angeles: if Los Angeles is described as a mosaic of social classes and ethnicities that live separately, constituting at the same time a kaleidoscopic urban space, Milan is divided into two distinct and noncommunicating parts: the space of the bourgeois and the space of the misfits. (31)

Pezzotti goes on to describe the detective's attitude towards this split and tense state: 'Not only is Milan an evil-smelling and gray place, but it is also the kingdom of artifice, with many so-called traditional taverns restored in the 1980s and various McDonalds and supermarkets replacing old shops (*Gorilla Blues*, 55)' (31). The emphasis here, as in many of the novels Pezzotti discusses, is on 'grayness', on the homogenising effects of globalisation, and the idea of the seedy underbelly prevalent in detective fiction: although Naples, Turin and the other cities under discussion may seem bland during the day, the façade of historic architecture and tourist-driven performance hides anxiety at best and casually murderous impulses at worst.

The magnifying glass of postmodern theory also sharpens Pezzotti's intelligent perception of the division between 'cities' and 'urban sprawl'. While cities are linked to the hard-boiled detective tradition, and have a sense of centre or identity even if it is corrupt and grey, the 'periferia diffusa [exploded or diffuse outskirts]' creates what Pezzotti calls a mysterious and 'elusive' (98) space. She links this sense to Augé's (1995) 'non-place', arguing for instance that it enables Carlo Lucarelli's serial killers: 'The space of alienation, isolation and placelessness is the ideal environment for them, as they can take advantage of its anonymity to commit their crimes' (99). This grey non-place contrasts with the troubled identities and heritage of the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, to which the third section of the book is devoted. There are specific problems here that feed into the crime genre, not least the presence of the Mafia on Sicily and the uneasy positioning of the islands between Italy and North Africa. The investigation of the urban worlds is so thorough, however, that the insular authors seem rather side-lined, despite Andrea Camilleri perhaps being the most famous among non-Italians.

Pezzotti is adept at describing background: cultural history, social conflicts, political struggle and corruption. She is similarly adept at locating where these issues unfold within the texts: in the suburbs of Turin, for instance; or within the wider geographical context of Italian North/South tensions. Yet the formative role of place within the action, deductions, and plot of the novels seems curiously elusive. This is perhaps a result of the fact that Pezzotti simply covers so many authors. Atmosphere is strongly and convincingly captured, and regional personality characteristics are evoked, but the evidence for why these are important is sometimes incomplete. Pezzotti lists the kinds of criminals an author prefers – Mafiosi, the wealthy elite, punks or even cannibals – but there is so much material on display that it is often hard to map the active shaping effect of place that seems to be suggested in the introduction. More focus on a particular text and showing specifically how place figures into the detective's calculations – or the criminal's motivations and schemes – would perhaps have strengthened her case.

Some background knowledge of Italian culture and politics, as well as geography, is assumed: Silvio Berlusconi, for example, looms large as a symbol of a certain faction but his position and his impact remain vague. Nevertheless, *A Bloody Journey* is frequently fascinating to even the non-expert. The Italian writers that Pezzotti discusses – and interviews at the back of the book – tend to view themselves as affiliated with the American hard-boiled tradition. Yet, ultimately, a distinctly Italian voice emerges through Pezzotti's critical work. Or, to be more accurate, multiple distinctively Italian voices are celebrated as Pezzotti capably charts linguistic as well as cultural geography: her analysis

of the regional accents and dialects different authors use and why reinforces the specificity of their localities. Despite the fact that so many of the novels deal with the erasure of tradition and identity, Pezzotti succeeds in charting not only an Italian crime writing identity, but many regional ones too.

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Eric Prieto (2013) *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 248pp., £61.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781137031112.

In his recent book, *Explore Everything, Place-Hacking the City* (2013), Bradley Garrett provides a manifesto for the tech-savvy millennials of 'these militarised, Orwellian cities we reside in'. For Garrett, and urban explorers like him, the city is represented as a locus of systematised power and control, the most important node within an all-embracing network of capital. This sense of resistance is never far away in Eric Prieto's latest book. Although Prieto uses the term 'place' to refer to any socially-constructed site, his real focus remains what he calls 'emergent forms of place' (2). By this he means in-between places, edgelands lying off the official map of any town or city. Prieto describes the proliferation of these non-places, of being in a state of *entre-deux*, as a key condition of postmodernity. It is to these borderlands that Prieto applies his gaze, treating such *terra incognita* as social laboratories, offering dynamic insights into how all of us can embrace adaptation and resistance in the face of the postmodern behemoth.