

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Robert T. Tally Jr and Christine M. Battista (eds) (2016) *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Literary Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. xii + 214pp., £58 (hardback), ISBN 981137553676.

Despite longstanding examination of the environment in literary studies, ‘spatiality’ in its broadest sense continues to be an emergent area of enquiry for scholars of literature. Within the arts and humanities, geographers including David Harvey, Doreen Massey and Edward W. Soja, (all of whom influence essays in *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism*), have done much to pioneer the intricate relationship between the social and the spatial, an association best summarised in what Soja terms the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ (Soja 1980: 207). The practice of spatial literary studies concerns not only literary representation of place and environment but pays equal attention to accounts of the psychological experience of space and (dis)placement. While psychogeographers have attempted to bridge the gap between spatial and symbolic experience since the ‘spatial turn’, the collection addresses the timely need for the convergence of critical practices attuned to both environmental and geocritical relations. A recent aspect of the wider discipline of spatial studies has been the focus on postmodern, socially-produced space—including human experience and subjectivity, the poetics of everyday life, and socio-economic manifestations of spatiality—in addition to the notion of a material sense of ‘place’ and ‘placedness’. Robert T. Tally Jr and Christine Battista’s collection attempts to overcome this disjuncture between ecocriticism and geocriticism. While geocriticism is principally orientated towards physical ‘space, place and mapping’ (2), owing much to the intellectual pedigree of cultural geographers and situationist thinkers Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, in addition to those mentioned above, ecocriticism’s principal concern is the environment and its effect on human experience. Emerging as a sub-field of literary criticism around the 1980s, ecocriticism is characterised by a moral commitment toward the ecological value of the environment and questions regarding anthropocentrism. Geocriticism and ecocriticism remain relatively emergent areas of research within wider spatial discourse, and despite their commonalities, their coalescence in drawing attention to the significance of spatial forms of representation in textual accounts of human experience is rarely acknowledged, even less so considered together in a sustained manner.

As such, the collection offers ‘an alternative approach to literary and cultural studies’ (p.x) that forges productive links between ecocriticism and geocriticism. As Tally sets out in the introduction, the ‘geocritical emphasis on space, place and mapping correlates strongly to the conviction among spatially-orientated critics that space is of the utmost importance’ (2), and it is therefore striking that within the field of spatial studies, geocriticism and ecocriticism have yet to be brought into critical conversation with one another. It is here that the collection begins to break new critical ground, as the selected essays deftly walk the line between the two by closely examining the relations between

literature and geography across three distinct parts: Trans-Theoretical Practices, Surveying Territories, and Ecocritical Explorations. Those who are new to the recent development of geocriticism will benefit from Eric Prieto's essay on its emergence. Prieto glosses the four key elements of Bertrand Westphal's theory of géocritique. First, geocriticism, which privileges places over literary texts, authors, or genres: this is in notable opposition to literary studies in which theoretical approaches generally serve to 'unlock' the text and offer multiple interpretive avenues. Second is Westphal's 'multifocalisation': as Prieto writes, 'to escape from the perspective limitations of a single author or interpretive community, the geocentric will consult as many texts, and as many different *kinds* of texts as possible, emphasising especially the juxtaposition or confrontation of texts written from different perspectives, be they cultural or identitarian or disciplinary' (25). The goal here is to develop a polyphonic or dialogical understanding of place, a particularly useful development for urban spatial studies, which is, by its very nature, multifocal and polyphonic. Stratigraphic, the third of Westphal's terms, emphasises the extent to which a given place is composed of an accumulation of past moments, an 'archaeological layering of successive historical phases' (25). Last, the polysensorial dimension of geocriticism aims to address what Prieto identifies as the 'visual bias' (25) of many studies of place through a marked emphasis on sensory experience, foregrounding that literary interpretations must also be open to the auditory, olfactory, and tactile dimensions of place in order to 'detritorialise the stereotypical views of place' (25). Prieto's essay certainly achieves its purpose of examining the zones of overlap between ecocriticism and geocriticism when used as a theoretical approach to literary analysis. Well placed at the start of the collection, he offers a theoretically-informed reading which establishes solid groundwork for the subsequent two parts of the book.

Advancing a similar discussion of geocriticism, Tom Geir's essay 'Noncommittal Commitment: Alien Spaces of Ecocosmopolitics in Recent World Literature' offers one of the most sustained critical engagements with literature in the collection. Geir assesses the shift towards coexistence—such as interspecies—in twentieth and twenty-first century literature. This has been achieved, Geir argues, through 'localised yet disorientating ecologies of tradition, language, and immanent place-experience contending with global capital politics' (55). Through the examples of Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), Geir suggests that the works show a political form of 'ecocosmopolitical interspecies poetics' that defamiliarizes literary experience. Ultimately, he posits that texts employ political strategies to parody and affirm global scales through experimental modes of narrative form. Geir's essay is particularly notable for demonstrating the links between Lefebvrian socially-produced space and the postmodern narrative form; he suggests that literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has complicated the stability of narrative perspective, structure, form and the reliability of life outside the fictional world (58). This is a distinct departure from the Marxist model of spatial studies – a trend borne out throughout the rest of the collection – that interprets spaces as multimodal and fluid, somewhat invoking Foucault's heterotopia. Tom Bristow's contribution to the collection, for example, examines the space of British edgelands, which he discusses as the 'interfacial zone' between urban and rural space, a non-space of intersubjectivity. Focussing on Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts' *Edgelands* (2011), Bristow reads the study as a multifocal form of geocriticism paying attention to a complex and fragmentary literary space at the intersection of urban and rural studies. Similarly, Stanka Radovic's essay seeks to

disrupt the dominance of metropolitanism in accounts of spatial literary studies with the central example of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). As Radovic suggests, metropolitan cities have dominated the broader discourse of urban spatial theory, contributing towards the formulation of a distinctively metropolitan spatial framework. Radovic decentres what she refers to as the 'urbocentrism' of spatial literary studies, offering a devolved, multifocal approach to literary representations of space which provides clear links to Prieto's essay. The chapter illuminates an innovative postcolonial strand throughout the collection that is further developed in Silvia Schutermundl's ecocritical analysis of the oppressed female body in Korean fiction. Schutermundl analyses the connectedness of colonisation and the natural world in the work of Nora Okja Kelle, reconnecting women to the environment in a way that writes back to the colonial myth of the feminine. In other words, Kelle's critique presents the domination of the non-human biosphere as a challenge to regulated femininity, both within postcolonial and patriarchal discourse. Schutermundl's examination here carefully ties together allusions to postcolonialism and spatial studies (particularly ecocriticism) that emerge in the earlier parts of the collection. Part three of the study offers a thorough engagement with ecocritical perspectives that address the aims of the collection more directly than is the case in the previous two sections. Ecocriticism and geocriticism converge most successfully in Judith Rauscher's analysis of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) and Agha Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991). Rauscher brings together the collection's two spatial strands through a focus on 'place', a concept in which ecocriticism and geocriticism theoretically merge; this synthesis helps to destabilize notions of place as monolithic, stable sites extrinsic to human engagement and usefully acknowledges the interaction between ecocritical and geocritical spatial theory.

In terms of advancing scholarship in this area, the increasing contemporary relevance of spatial literary studies is hard to ignore given the reassertion of space – and its respective boundaries – within the current socio-political milieu. As Tally and Battista suggest, 'what once seemed fixed, stable, or at least reliable spatial or environmental markers such as national boundaries, regional borders, or public or private properties [...] are now threatened by the increasing volatility of both the social and natural worlds' (2). Indeed, the collection highlights that critical considerations of the literary environment which overlook the influence of human subjectivity are limited in their failure to recognise the dialectic between social and spatial experience. *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism* demonstrates how literature has been one of the primary ways in which simultaneously social and material places are culturally coded and mapped. Yet, while a number of theorists have worked to bring to the fore the convergence of literature and spatial theory, perhaps this book's most notable achievement is its interdisciplinary synthesis of the disciplines of literature and geography more broadly. The wide-ranging scope of the literature considered is certainly a strength of work, ranging from North Atlantic environmental multimedia and practice-based poetry to gothic writing and world literature. Through careful handling, the collection moves critically between postcolonialism and ecology, psychoanalysis, ecofeminism and postnaturalism, acknowledging the literary significance of spatiality and the environment. The interconnectedness of nature and human subjectivity can be read in the spirit of Soja's reminder that 'relations of power and discipline are inscribed in the apparently innocent spatiality of social life' (Soja 1989: 6), inscribing human geographies with politics and ideology. Geographers and literary critics alike will note how *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism* succeeds in postulating a new relationship between eco-

and geocriticism that goes beyond the confines of a single discipline, offering new ways of understanding literature and spatiality that forms a dialogic discourse of value for those working across the environmental humanities.

Works Cited

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