

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Rebecca Walsh (2015) *The Geopoetics of Modernism*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 201pp., \$74.95 (hardcover), ISBN 13: 9780813060514.

With the recent “spatial turn” in the New Modernist Studies, geographically-inflected approaches to literary modernism have become increasingly common. In particular, monographs such as Andrew Thacker’s *Moving Through Modernity* (2003) and Jon Hegglund’s *World Views* (2012), and edited collections such as *Geographies of Modernism* (eds. Thacker and Brooker, 2005), *Geomodernisms* (eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, 2005), and *Regional Modernisms* (eds. Alexander and Moran, 2013), have opened up a productive discourse on the convergence of geography and literary modernism. While Thacker has usefully examined the literary geography of modernism with the help of French poststructuralist theorists of “new geography” such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, Rebecca Walsh’s *The Geopoetics of Modernism* seeks to contextualize and historicize modernism’s engagement with the dominant geographic epistemologies of its emergence. In this way, Walsh proposes to “reconstruct the conditions of reading, influence, and intervention in which literary modernism and geographical knowledge co-evolved” (3).

The Geopoetics of Modernism brings the critical conversation on modernism and geography, which has thus far focused mainly on Anglo-European modernist literature and geographers, to the field of American literary studies, in which spatial approaches have not been uncommon but have generally been limited to the late nineteenth century, owing largely to the extraordinary prominence of American literary regionalism and local-color fiction during this era. For instance, Hsuan Hsu’s *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2010) examines the spatial anxieties of nineteenth-century American literature, but, like Thacker, Hsu builds his argument upon a theoretical foundation drawn mostly from the postmodern “new geography” of the 1980s. Walsh’s book, in contrast, draws connections between early-twentieth-century American academic geographers, the popular “middlebrow” geographic periodical, *National Geographic Magazine*, and the experimental poetic modernism of American poets Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, and H.D.

According to Walsh, connections between the modernist literary avant-garde and academic and popular geography “were more commonplace, more varied, and more transnational than we might typically assume” (2-3), and American poetry in particular provides “a powerful case study that attests to the breadth of cultural materials that participated in broader negotiations during the modernist period about the relationship between the physical environment and the human” (3). American modernist poetic encounters with geographical epistemologies, Walsh posits, rather than leading to the reification of the territorial nation-state as a normative political unit, actually enabled “poetic production of global geography and the adoption of transnational perspectives” (3).

Modernist poets used contemporary geographic thinking, especially the prominent notion of environmental determinism, not only to think globally and comparatively but also to undermine the very “fixative, binaristic discourses of nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and racism” (5) encoded by environmental determinist thought itself. Through Walt Whitman’s vision of a globally connected landscape, Langston Hughes’s geography of the African diaspora, Gertrude Stein’s elevated and comparative view of America, and H.D.’s hybrid landscapes of London and Egypt, Walsh tracks attitudes of “geopoetic anachorism” (“in which place is ‘out of place’” [4], the analog of temporal anachronism) and formal strategies of parataxis deployed toward the geopolitical work of disrupting conventional geography and the racial, cultural, and national divisions and hierarchies that attach to it. Walsh also tracks the ways three of her authors use movement in diverse transportation systems to rework geographical notions: for Whitman, the train’s-eye view and the ship’s-eye view both serve to connect various sites; in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes uses a river’s eye view; and Stein’s reflections on national difference use the airplane’s-eye view. While acknowledging modernist writers’ indebtedness to the early-twentieth-century geographical discourse of environmental determinism, Walsh does not claim that these writers were themselves environmental determinists; rather, she says, “we can locate in environmental determinist texts a structural analog for what modernist writers thought they could do with geography” (14).

In Chapter 1, Walsh charts a genealogy of geographic epistemologies from the cosmological natural geography of the nineteenth-century European geographers Alexander von Humboldt and Mary Somerville to the rise of environmental determinism in the work of early-twentieth-century geographers like Friedrich Ratzel and Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman, and, most notably, Ellen Church Semple. After tracing the continuing influence in early-twentieth-century American geographic thought of von Humboldt and Somerville, who first introduced Americans to “ideas of global unity and to an international, rather than national, outlook” (16), Walsh finds a similar “global sensibility” in Semple, an American geographer who worked to integrate geography across disciplinary boundaries and locate the principles of environmental determinism at its center. In this chapter Walsh also considers the *National Geographic Magazine* which served to disseminate in popularized, “middlebrow” form the developing environmental determinist geographical thought of the American academy and which thereby developed an aesthetic “environmental style.”

Walsh examines Whitman’s “Passage to India” in chapter 2, mapping his pursuit of global cosmic oneness in terms of the teleological, cosmological geography of von Humboldt and Somerville, two of the most popular geographers in nineteenth-century America. Somerville’s work in particular, more overtly spiritual than that of von Humboldt, was understood to arrange the global unity of cosmological geography against nationalist and imperialist projects. Like Whitman’s cosmographical oneness, Langston Hughes’s African diaspora geography offers an alternative to the political primacy of the territorial nation-state, according to Walsh. She reads Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in chapter 3 to uncover the ways the poem revises and critiques environmental determinism and reconstructs an African diaspora geography through landscape homologies.

Chapter 4 looks at Stein’s multigenre *Geographical History of America*, which deals directly with Semple’s geographical history and its American exceptionalist notions. Invoking American exceptionalism, on one hand, and an internationally comparative approach on the other, Stein

deconstructs the very categories of place and attachment she invokes, manufacturing what Walsh calls “an (anti)comparative nationalism” that seeks to renovate a more “American” version of America itself. In chapter 5, Walsh reads H.D.’s World War II epic *Trilogy*, which uses environmental determinist geography to undermine empire by blending attachments to British and Egyptian environments to produce an “empire vertigo.” Finally, in her book’s conclusion, Walsh considers the broader implications for modernist studies of the kinds of global structures of connection and comparison in poetry and geography sketched throughout the book, as she closes with brief readings of Eliot, Pound, and Williams in order to gesture toward the kinds of work this geopoetic approach might do for modernism’s spatial, geographical, and geopolitical orientations.

While the *Geopoetics of Modernism* should certainly be praised for Walsh’s ability to bring together such a diverse and wide-ranging set of authors and texts, one of the text’s weaknesses might be, in consequence, its failure at times to draw these authors together in a more meaningful way. In the same vein, though the book does well theorizing the attitudes, strategies, and formal characteristics of “geopoetic modernism,” relatively little time is spent theorizing the concept of modernism itself—yet Walsh’s brief readings of canonical modernists Eliot, Pound, and Williams in the conclusion are striking enough to deserve to be expanded in their own full-fledged chapters. On a more generalized level, even as Walsh opens up some interesting new paths for modernist studies, her book might appear to take part in a larger pattern of the field’s “transnational turn” by idealizing the *trans-* without fully considering the *national*. As Hegg Lund has argued, modernism does not simply transcend this national attachment in the twentieth century, rather it continually mediates the scale of the national. Instead of continually putting forward another spatial scale that simply outflanks the nation-state, then, what might be gained by turning to modernist writing that negotiates national attachment through the localized or *sub-national* scales? American modernist poets of a more regionalist bent, such as Edgar Lee Masters, for instance, might fit usefully into a geopoetic approach that gives more attention to localized (rather than globalized) resistance to the nation-state.

Well-argued and crisply expounded, Walsh’s excellent book contributes generously not only to the “spatial turn” in modernist studies but also to the burgeoning study of American modernism, which has thus far centered mostly on early-twentieth-century responses to linguistic standardization or on turn-of-the-century conceptualizations of “culture.” *The Geopoetics of Modernism* brings the recent convergence of literary modernism and geography to bear productively on American literature in particular and is a valuable contribution to the fundamental—but relatively unexplored—topic of geography and the production of space in American literary modernism.

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