

## LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela, eds. (2015) *Literature and the Peripheral City*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 244 pp. £55, ISBN 978-1-137-49287-6.

As literary studies and studies in cultural geography have merged their disciplinary boundaries in an increasing trend towards spatiality studies, the city has become a crucial point of interest for both literary scholars and cultural geographers alike. Drawing from the 2013 Helsinki conference organized by the Association of Urban Literary Studies, *Literature and the Peripheral City* edited by Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela makes an important contribution to the recent scholarship in the field of spatial studies concerning the literary imagination of urban landscapes. In a marked departure from the existing scholarship on literary representation of the city that have primarily focused on the 'canonical' urban centres, the collection primarily aims to expand literary urban studies, as the editors note in the introduction, beyond 'the radar of Western metropolises and their canonized literature' that has traditionally focused on 'imposing capitals of modernity and postmodernity'. It thus challenges the notion of the self-contained centralizing power that the canonized classical literary capitals like London, Paris and New York have come to assume in literary urbanity studies and brings in a literary discourse on less discussed cities like Copenhagen, Helsinki, Stockholm, Johannesburg and Santiago de Chile. However, to merely add to the list of cities already canonized is not the sole aim of this book. What is refreshing about this volume is that it aims to dismantle the pre-determined concepts of 'centrality' and 'marginality' of urban spaces by opening up the terms to variegated interpretations. Apart from decanonizing the focus on certain literary cities, the volume thus also challenges the notion of urban peripherality (or rather centrality) as a given, factual condition. The introduction provides a cogent literature review of previous works in the field and successfully argues out the debatability of the absolutisms associated with the concept of the peripheral. Invoking a variety of paradigms—from a comparative analysis to individual studies of national and regional literatures—the editors reject peripherality as a self-justifying spatial presence, asserting that notions of both peripherality and centrality are constructed around relativity of perspectives. This is a bold departure from the Marxist model of urban studies that reads spaces as crystallized nodes of power—riding primarily on the shoulders of the likes of Lefevre—and aligns more with a postmodern approach that interprets spaces as more fluid, invoking polysemic connotations for a single site modelled along Foucault's notion of *heterotopias*.

With 'peripherality' left open for multiple interpretations, the 12 essays in this volume explore a wide variety of issues as to what might constitute the 'periphery' in terms of understanding urban space. This includes investigations into peripherality as marginality affected by modes of exclusion within a canonized literary city like Paris, as Jeremy Tambling's essay attempts to do, that locates the

'politics of exclusion' as embedded in the discourse of visibility. Tambling's essay offers a rich historical overview of literary works on Paris across several periods, tracing how the literary imagination of the city has been shaped by the changing perspective of the writers: while eighteenth and nineteenth century views of the city construct a geography of centrality that was however not hierarchized by class, the post-war city is etched as more gentrified, the writers being keenly aware of the phenomenon of the 'forgetting' of certain people and places within the city by the centre's administered practice of putting out of sight. Next, locating peripherality in the underbelly of megapolises like New York and London, the next three essays by Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela focus on the construction of the slums as ideological spaces loaded with social and moral meanings. Ameel explores the literary beginnings of several texts, with a detailed reading of *Bright Lights, Big City*, as they map the peripheral places in the city with moral and social implications beyond their spatial location. Subsequently, the literary texts often offer a subversion of the established moral map about the peripheries with the protagonist renegotiating his understanding of those spaces in the totality of his urban experience. In a similar strain, both Jason Finch and Markku Salmela focus on how writers like Gissing, Baron, Fitzgerald and Pynchon question the simplistic hierarchization between respectable places and 'urban squalor' in the slums, and instead project overlapping spaces, cross-over zones and heterotopic sites amidst the fringed shantytowns.

Aleksej's Taube's study of London's East End in Ackroyd's fiction, Bieke Willem's reading of Alenjandro Zambra's novel, and Lydia Wissen's essay on Swedish Young Adult fiction interpret the meaning of space as essentially phenomenological, discussing how certain literary texts negotiate the perception of marginal places through intimate, personal experiences subjective to the protagonists' construction of reality. Taube explores subjectivity through intimate bodily experiences, adding to the growing scholarship on cultural geography's foray into body studies, while Willem focuses on the significant relationship between subjective memories and personal histories in the meaning making process for a place. Lydia Wistisen's essay is particularly worth mentioning since it invokes peripherality through the trope of female perceptions of space: an important topic otherwise missing in the volume. Essays like Marita Wenzel's and Nettah Yoeli-Rimmer's engage with the reading of postcolonial cities through the postmodern lens. As the essays show, while the artistic rendering of the postcolonial urban space through postmodernism exposes the power structures and colonial hierarchization of the urban space, the literary imagination also problematizes such binary oppositions between the centre and periphery, making space for a more hybridized, fluid notion of urbanity. An interesting part of the volume is the section on the analyses of Northern European literature—a literary tradition often neglected in mainstream English studies. Topi Lappalainen applies a geocritical approach to his reading of the symbolic contact zones between the forest and the city in Ringbom's novel, while Talivee and Finch's essay explores urban borders to trace the literary metamorphosis of images of urban modernity. Tone Soelboe's essay stands out in its focus on the self-reflexive character of the act of literary writing. In his study of Strindberg and Hamsun, Soelboe studies the authorial intervention into the meaning making of the cities and the consequent interrogation of the categories of centre and periphery.

While the volume attempts to broach peripherality from multiple paradigms, the variability of the themes also contributes to the volume's occasional lack of focus. The division of the sections

under two separate heads---‘city peripheries’ and ‘peripheral cities’—seems unnecessary since the constituent essays invoke overlapping concerns and do not strictly follow a central sectional focus. Again, the exclusion of black, indigenous, queer, immigrant and even female urban perspectives in a volume that promises to engage with perspectival peripherality is noticeable. Moreover, though adopting a post-modern approach of fluid meanings of spaces, the essays engage with ‘peripheral cities’ mostly through interpretive paradigms of actually existing, topographical spaces, albeit with varying connotations. It would have been interesting to see an engagement with the notion of peripherality in ‘fantastical’ cities as well—for example, like the underground city beneath Leiber’s Lankhmark, and H.P Lovecraft’s K’n-yan—denoting fictional cities that are essentially etched in fantasy but whose representations are enmeshed in the literary urban imaginary. However, these deficiencies are visible because of the high expectations that the book raises, and do not necessarily denote any incompetence in the volume by itself. Irrespective of these minor glitches, the volume makes an important contribution to the field of literary urban studies on the whole. While other contemporary works on literary urbanity like Lanigan’s *James Joyce, Urban Planning and Irish Modernism*, Laura Columbino’s *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature*, and even Rashmi Varma’s take on postcolonial cities in *Postcolonial Cities and Its Subjects* are still confined in their focus on the canonized cities like Dublin, London, New York, *Literature and the Peripheral City* offers a wider scope both spatially and temporally by invoking a longer history of literary imagination of the city across different literary cultures of the globe.

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