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T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista (Eds.), *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 214 pp.



While the idea of place has been one of the central analytical categories in ecocriticism since its emergence as an academic discipline in the 1990s, it has rarely been conceptualised with respect to existing theories of social production of both place and space. Ecocriticism is commonly concerned with immediate, local relations of place and the environment, but much less with broader spatiotemporal relations of particular places—a seeming paradox given that in the era of globalisation, place is generally understood as constituted by networks of relations and forms of power stretching beyond specific places and occurring within space-time. The collection of scholarly essays entitled *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism* and edited by Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista is designed to bridge this theoretical gap between place studies and theories of social production of space and place by bringing together a range of essays dealing with questions of space, place, mapping, and the environment. In the introduction, the editors note that “[w]hile distinctive in meaningful ways, both ecocriticism and geocriticism share a concern for the manner in which spaces and places are perceived, represented, and ultimately used” (2). Yet in spite of this general similarity, the editors emphasise that while ecocriticism largely omits spatiotemporal considerations, the work of geocritics has been deeply indebted to a number of political thinkers of space and place, ranging from the radical geography of Marxist social geographers (Lefebvre, Harvey, Soja, Jameson) and their analysis of the production of space understood as produced out of matter and of process, poststructuralist critics (Foucault, Deleuze) of “State power in modern societies” (2), postcolonial critics (Fanon, Said, Bhabha, Spivak) who in their investigation of imperialism focus on “space and geography”, to feminist theorists (Anzaldúa, Massey) who have insisted on the necessity of examining categories such as gender, race and class and their configuration into “variously spatialized social organisations” (2). The introduction thus suggests that if ecocriticism is to maintain its political agenda of advocating for the environment and its practice of making sense of “the social, natural, and spatiotemporal world we inhabit” (7), its lack of attention to theories of relational space-time needs to be corrected by an engagement with insights into both place and space such as those provided by geocriticism.

As geocriticism is a relatively new discipline, the collection's first essay by Eric Prieto aims to introduce the term and delineate in detail the ways in which ecocriticism and geocriticism can productively influence and complement each other. Going back to the work of Bertrand Westphal, the founder of geocriticism, Prieto explains that unlike

ecocriticism, geocriticism is not primarily interested in environmental politics and nature writing. Rather, its main interest lies with the representation of space and place and it can therefore be particularly relevant to ecocritics in terms of establishing “the referential relationship between text and the world” (20). In Westphal’s understanding, fictional works not only provide aesthetic value or mere entertainment, but help to discern important aspects of the real world that would otherwise not have become apparent. By staging hypothetical situation in places that we inhabit, fictional representations of places can have a powerful performative function by changing the way we perceive places in which we live or through which we move. Prieto notes that perhaps this especially applies to places we think we know well, and whose characteristics, qualities and ‘meanings,’ which are continuously ascribed to them in everyday life, seem to have been given and settled once and for all (23).

Following this explication of the basic understanding of literary fiction by Westphal, Prieto outlines the four main tenets of geocriticism as follows: first, *geocentrism*, which defines the primary object of the study of geocriticism not as literary texts, authors, or genres, but *places* and their various representations, which it seeks to examine in as large a scope as possible; second, *multifocalisation*, which emphasises the necessity for geocritics to “consult as many texts, and as many different kinds of texts as possible” to develop a “polyphonic or dialogical understanding of the place in question” (24); third, *polysensoriality*, which highlights the need to challenge the visual bias in studies of place by focusing on “the auditory, olfactory, and tactile dimensions of place” (25); and fourth, *stratigraphic perspective*, explained as the need to emphasise the extent to which a particular place is constituted by the “layering of successive historical phases” (25), which helps to both prevent the nostalgic fallacy of affirming one of the previous states of place as its most authentic one, and to counter the potential desire to only focus on its present state. Taken together, the four principles suggest that the main aim of geocriticism is to study a particular place from as many perspectives as possible to get a “dialogical understanding” (25) thereof, which, while not entirely objective, can go beyond the limited perspectives provided by individual authors. This approach is meant to enable us to go beyond illusions of permanence, autonomy, stability and authenticity, and to make place permeable, opening it to flux of shifting boundaries that is commonly associated with space. However, as Prieto points out, despite Westphal’s insistence on the *referential* and *performative* qualities of literature understood as a medium capable of effecting change in the real world, the theory of geocriticism remains essentially intertextual because it is conditioned by what Prieto refers to as “a specifically postmodern sensitivity to the difficulty of gaining any sure sense of what the world ‘out there’ is like” (26). To avoid this fallacy of geocriticism as understood by Westphal, Prieto suggests that the emphasis of ecocriticism on the place of “humans within nature” (27) may correct the overly textual and intertextual assumptions that inform geocritical approaches to literature and the world.

Taken together with the second essay in the volume, written by Derek Gladwin and focusing on conjunctions of ecocriticism and geocriticism, Prieto’s essay prepares the theoretical background for the explorations of particular spatial issues in literary

representations in the following chapters of the collection. One of the aims of the editors in putting together the collection was to indicate “the degree to which the various methods and concepts of ecocriticism and geocriticism prove themselves flexible, adaptable, and transferrable across a vast range of literary texts, cultural artefacts, historical periods, geographical terrain, and conceptual landscapes” (14). Though with the exception of only one, all the essays in the volume focus on literary works from the 20th and 21st centuries and cannot therefore be seen as covering a vast range of “historical periods”, the variety of international literary texts and numerous spatial issues and perspectives addressed by the contributions is quite remarkable.

Perhaps most significantly, some of the essays introduced in the volume bring together ecocriticism, geocriticism, and postcolonialism. In his analysis of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Luca Raimondi shows that geocritical examination invested with a postcolonial perspective inevitably puts emphasis on heterogeneity and displacement. Examining the complexities of Ghosh’s representation of the Sundarbans region, Raimondi notes that the geocritical approach to place is particularly useful for an examination of postcolonial environments as it enables an apprehension of place that is both diachronic, “tracing the history of the gaze it has been subjected to”, and synchronic, “looking at how history condenses in coeval but unsynchronized pockets in time” (119). Combining geocritical strategies of literary analysis with Pablo Mukherjee’s ecomaterialist aesthetics, Raimondi suggests “postcolonial green geocriticism” (118) as a form of integrated methodology that enables him to throw light on the Sundarbans as a region constituted by and constitutive of “plural geographies” and “interrelated histories of people, nature and patterns of colonial domination and capitalist control” (130). Focusing on the poetry of Derek Walcott and Agha Shahid Ali, Judith Rauscher’s essay on contemporary transnational American poetry can be seen as complementing Raimondi’s perspective by its focus on displacement. She suggests that contrary to conventional understandings of displacement and movement, they do not foreclose “a meaningful sense of place” (201). The postcolonial geocritical perspective of these two essays is supplemented by an eco-feminist perspective in Silvia Schultersmandl’s examination of Korean American writer Nora Okja Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman*.

Transcultural in its selection of literature, Ted Geier’s essay on ecocosmopolitics discusses *Potiki*, a novel by the Maori author Patricia Grace, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* by the Japanese-American writer Karen Tei Yamashita, and a couple of stories by the Italian writer Italo Calvino. Besides providing a posthumanist perspective on the human and non-human, he also delivers a cogent critique of Ursula Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism, calling for a more nuanced form of understanding of the relations between the global and the local, and the tension inherent in “the fraught borderlands and citizenship of contemporary global life” (60). Drawing especially on spatial theories by Doreen Massey, Geier’s essay proposes an understanding of space and place as interrelational and process-based.

A number of essays in the collection bring into focus European, specifically British, literary works. Discussing one of the foundational works of the new nature writing, *Edgeland*s by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, Tom Bristow

considers the significance of the remains of England's canal networks, used as highways of industrial and commercial expansion for centuries, and now serving as spaces for retail parks, outlet villages, container parks, and malls. Bristow examines this space as collapsing the boundaries between the rural and the urban, and while pointing to the problematic sense of nostalgia it evokes, he also draws critical attention to the specific territory within which this space was produced, namely that of the markets and "late capitalist hyper-reality" (89). Louise Chamberlain's contribution examines the poetry of Philip Gross and Robert Minhinnick. Chamberlain's focus is on "multifaceted and shifting types of borders" (96) and the representation of tides, coastal detritus and mud. Stanka Radović turns to another British text, Daphne Du Maurie's novel *Rebecca*. Radović discusses Du Maurie's use of space in the text which, as she shows, is important for the narrative's understanding of "the production of space and its relationship to the natural environment" (141). Following the work of social geographers such as David Harvey, the essay highlights Du Maurier's use of natural environments and their excess of growth as a way of challenging oppressive aspects of social privilege and class by destroying the seemingly "orderly interior of the bourgeois/aristocratic space" (151).

Whereas the essays outlined above focus on works from the 20th century or contemporary literary production, Dan Mills' examination of Bishop Joseph Hall's 17th-century dystopian satire *Mundus Alter Et Idem* was certainly meant to add historical depth to the collection as a whole. Mills' analysis of both the depiction of travels to fictional lands and satirical world maps is informed by theorists of space such as Gaston Bachelard and traces classical and early modern theories of climate while providing a reading of both the environmental and psychological states depicted in the work. While the essay adds yet another dimension to the spatial and analytical strategies employed by the already vast range of essays, its examination of a work from a relatively distant past contrasts sharply with the overall more contemporary focus of the other contributions, and makes its place within the collection seem somewhat precarious. Another, more salient point of critique is the absence of any engagement with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory or some of the New Materialist theories, which arguably might have furnished a set of potent instruments for analysing space, place, environment, and literature, by bringing the agency of the non-human in spatial and environmental studies into clearer focus.

While to a large extent, geocriticism builds on long-established theories of relational space-time, place, and representation, bringing them together under a single umbrella term, its significance becomes especially apparent when it is combined with other forms of critical enquiry, as is the case with environmental literary and cultural studies in this collection. In many ways, the essays in the volume speak to the need, articulated by Ursula Heise in her seminal study *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), to get over a largely outdated idea of place in literary environmentalism closely related to what she broadly refers to as "the ethic of proximity." While Heise endorses planetary thinking, this collection shows that place, understood as constituted by both local and global, social and ecological relations, is still a much needed category for environmental thinking. Moreover, while many of the chapters introduce a postcolonial

dimension to the discussion of space and place, the collection significantly contributes to the dialogue between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, and provides much needed alternatives to what Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence* (2011), criticizes as the “spatial amnesia” of ecocriticism, resulting in its lack of engagement with postcolonial perspectives. By bringing together both place studies and theories of social production of space and place, as well as postcolonialism and ecocriticism, this collection points towards fruitful directions of space and place studies in the environmental humanities.

Works Cited

Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.