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Gersdorf, Catrin, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, Spatial Practices: An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History, Geography and Literature 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 355 pp.

In *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, Dana Phillips suggests that "ecocriticism has been lamentably under-informed by science studies, philosophy of science, environmental history, and ecology" and that so far "most of ecocriticism's efforts at being interdisciplinary have been limited to troping on a vocabulary borrowed from ecology."[1] Phillip's polemic often seems overly harsh and slightly diffuse, yet his allegations are certainly not entirely unfounded. Even well before the term ecocriticism was firmly established, many critics in environmental literary and cultural studies have displayed a penchant for ecology and other disciplines whose terminologies, critical controversies and complexities, as well as recent developments and insights, will – due to a lack of academic training, institutional barriers, and a variety of other reasons – most likely remain beyond their ken. At the same time, many of the allegedly amateurish appropriations, for example the ecologically inflected analogies in first-wave ecocritical scholarship, are eminently effective, illuminating rhetorical choices. In his introduction to the massive two-volume edited collection *American Nature Writers*, John Elder deftly uses the words *ecotone* and *edge effect* in order to explain both the diversity and the hybrid character of what was then still called nature writing.[2] In *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography* (2001), Mark Allister likewise maps the overlapping generic borderlands between life writing, literary nonfiction, and environmental literature by employing the term *ecotone*, which designates a usually rather small and clearly delimited but nonetheless vibrant transitional zone between two or more distinct biological communities.[3] Critics such as Phillips may point to these instances of "troping" as indicators of ecocriticism's shortcomings, but these and other appropriations from fields outside the traditional boundaries of the humanities in general and Elder's and Allister's use of the term *ecotone* in particular are most likely here to stay, if only because humans, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest, think metaphorically.[4]

[1] Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), ix.
[2] John Elder, "Introduction," *American Nature Writers*, ed. Elder, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's-Simon and Schuster and Prentice Hall International, 1996), xiii.
[3] Mark Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography*, Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001), 4.
[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).

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It is also possible to conceive of *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, the most recent monograph by German ecocritic and Americanist Catrin Gersdorf, as an ecotone. This book, which was published by Rodopi as the sixth volume of Spatial Practices: An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History, Geography and Literature and which has already received highly favorable reviews, for example by Kerry Fine in *ISLE* and by Dianne Chisholm in *The Goose*, is an ambitious, comprehensive, and nuanced "investigation of the rhetorical participation of the desert, a territory of geographical and symbolic significance, in the construction of America" (22). It also represents an important contribution to the historically and institutionally interrelated fields of American studies and ecocriticism. Gersdorf's in-depth knowledge of both discourses provides a solid grounding for her project in this critical ecotone, and it allows her to develop a variegated theoretical framework that is more than appropriate for her complex topic. Her influences in this respect include, among others, the New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick; environmental historians such as Donald Worster, William Cronon, or Roderick F. Nash; ecofeminist philosopher and historian of science Carolyn Merchant; the essayist Rebecca Solnit; ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell, David Mazel, Stacy Alaimo, or David W. Teague; and the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Perhaps even more impressive than the length and scope of this truly interdisciplinary list is Gersdorf's uncanny ability to combine and apply these different approaches unobtrusively and with exquisite timing to the exemplary texts under consideration. Moreover, the reframing of ecocritical debates from a New Americanist perspective and vice versa—a *modus operandi* that can be observed, for instance, in her convincing contributions to the ongoing heated debate among ecocritics concerning Edward Abbey's polarizing representations of race and gender (181-208) or to the contemporary discourse in American studies on past and present North American Orientalisms (see especially 103)—turns out to be a productive strategy that yields numerous surprising and noteworthy insights.

Gersdorf's dialectic exploration of the American desert "begins in the second half of the 19th century, a moment in time when the first concerted efforts were made to *incorporate* the desert *into the discourse of America, not as a foreign but as a domestic territory*," and "it concludes at the turn of the 21st century when the United States began to occupy the exterritorial deserts of the Arabian world to secure the domestic comfort of its citizens" (15, italics in the original). While the book thus also successfully if somewhat selectively charts the most important aesthetic and ideological developments in literature and the visual arts over the past 150 years or so, the ostensible emphasis in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is clearly on what Gersdorf describes as "*the eco-spatial rhetoric of America*." She suggests that "the integration of the desert into this rhetorical practice, a practice catering to the entire spectrum of ideological and political responses to

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America, occurs within the idiomatic parameters and in reaction to the historical and cultural presence of four eco-spatial metaphors: garden, wilderness, Orient, and heterotopia" (32). To each of these metaphors—the first two will be quite familiar to both ecocritics and Americanists, the other two are welcome and highly productive additions to the ever-expanding list of key concepts in ecocriticism—Gersdorf devotes a logically and meticulously organized chapter. This wise choice with regard to the structure of her analysis allows her to establish a tentative "chronology of the historical appearance of these spatial paradigms in cultural attempts to come to terms with the desert" (39)—from garden to Orient, wilderness, and, finally, heterotopia—and at the same time to dwell on some of the continuities, discontinuities, and revealing contradictions that this uneven process, "*the (Anglo-) Americanization of the desert*" (26) or "translation of the desert from an alien, foreign, unfamiliar territory into a 'canonical landscape'" (31), has entailed.

Even when Gersdorf ostensibly visits familiar territory in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, that is, the two by now firmly established over concepts of wilderness and the garden, her choice of both canonical and non-canonical texts as well as her perceptive close readings provide for a compelling read. For instance, juxtaposing William Ellsworth Smythe's *The Conquest of Arid America* (1899), which "epitomized the tall tale of the nation's aspiration to triumph over the desert" and which "imagined the emergence of America as a continental empire through the desert's transformation into an agri- and horticultural landscape" (67), with the recent work of environmental writer and ethno-botanist Gary Paul Nabhan allows her to compare dominant and dissenting cultural evocations of the garden in response to the arid American Southwest. In contrast to Smythe, "Nabhan engages in uncovering the desert's life sustaining-qualities," thereby recuperating "cultural traditions (Native American, Mexican, organic farming practices) that were and still are backgrounded in narratives of technological and geographical expansion" (34).

This and many other insights contained in the chapters on the garden and wilderness are noteworthy not only because Gersdorf places earlier scholarship in ecocriticism and American studies on these metaphors in a new context—the desert—and thereby greatly expands the work of her predecessors. Her book is equally invaluable for introducing two additional eco-spatial metaphors, the Orient and heterotopia. In the second chapter of *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, she presents a compelling case for several instances of cross-pollination between cultural responses to the deserts in the American West and Orientalist discourses in the U.S. during the second half of the nineteenth century. Gersdorf convincingly demonstrates how the writings of Charles F. Lummis, John C. Van Dyke, Bayard Taylor, or Susan Wallace, as well as the visual art of Elihu Vedder or Sanford Robinson Gifford drew on "pre-existing discursive paradigms and images" of the Orient and transferred them to the American desert in a process that significantly

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and permanently changed their respective "audience's perceptions of a landscape otherwise seen as utterly worthless" (36). The last section of the book, which, as Gersdorf readily admits, slightly diverges from the analytical pattern established "in the first three chapters insofar as 'heterotopia' is not a paradigm consciously applied by the authors and artist under discussion" (39), deals with the work of environmental writers Mary Hunter Austin and Joseph Wood Krutch, the photography and collaborative art projects of Richard Misrach, as well as the novels of Chicano author Alfredo Vèa, Jr. As Gersdorf points out,

> All of them employ the trope of the desert as a site of discursive resistance against the cultural authority of those ideas and concepts that traditionally represent America. Austin challenged the intellectual and aesthetic hegemony of the metropolitan East as the place that defines American literature. Krutch found in the desert a metaphor that allowed him to question the conceptual dominance of progress and abundance in definitions of America's modernity. Misrach's photography shows the desert as a landscape that is marked by the nation's expansionist politics and underscores the wastefulness of an economy of abundance. And finally, Vèa represents the desert as an historically, culturally, and symbolically rich terrain, one that inspires and allows for new forms of social and cultural ordering. (39)

Given the complexity of the heterotopian responses to the desert discussed in this chapter as well the considerable historical and theoretical scope of *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* in general, it is not surprising that Gersdorf cannot fully explore all of the enticing potential angles that her necessarily highly selective but nonetheless nuanced investigation suggests. Some roads and desert trails have not been taken, but these omissions should not, of course, be construed as a weakness of Gersdorf's profound critical and theoretical contribution from the vibrant transitional zone between ecocriticism and American studies. *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* provides exemplary analytical frameworks and opens up exciting new possibilities for future investigations of the various intersections or ecotones between actual and imaginary landscapes, national or transnational imaginaries, as well as different modes and registers of cultural representation. This is its unique edge effect.

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