

***Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Links between Place and Culture* edited by Bill Richardson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)**

A growing number of studies acknowledge the interpretative potential of spatial models for the understanding of diverse cultural phenomena. Published as part of *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*, a book series edited by Robert T. Tally Jr., the volume reflects the increasing global interest in spatiality and the immense expanse of spatial approach within the humanities. According to its editor, Bill Richardson, the volume examines ‘how spatial realities inform symbolic expression and how a variety of forms of symbolic expression and cultural production rely on those spatial realities to achieve their ends’ (2). The essays seek to extend recent developments in the field of spatio-cultural studies and apply new conceptual approaches to a variety of cultural forms. This theoretically dense collection works at ‘the intersection of two conceptual “axes”, the abstract/concrete axis and the individual/collective axis’ (3). Richardson connects the multiple lines of interrelationship between the studies into a conceptual schema with four zones of human spatial experience: 1. Abstract-Individual, which is ‘philosophical in its orientation’ (8) (chapters 2, 3); 2. Concrete-Individual, ‘focused on the *psychological* dimension of spatial expression’ (8, emphasis in original) (chapters 4, 5); 3. Abstract-Collective, based on the key notion of *plasticity*, understood as ‘the *plastic qualities of the imagined world* and the *plastic qualities of the work itself*’ (11, emphasis in original); and 4. Concrete-Collective, focused on the notion of *power* (14, emphasis in original) (chapters 8, 9).

The eight specific studies assembled around the idea of four zones of human spatiality are framed by two more general essays: Felix Ó Murchadha’s study and Miles Kennedy’s study (chapter 1 and chapter 10, respectively). Ó Murchadha’s opening essay offers an overview of the multifaceted relationship between space and place. He reads Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, among others, in an attempt to illustrate a ‘shift from the understanding of space as a transcendental and geometric structure of experience to an existential and political account of place’ (38). The last part of his essay, ‘Exiles in Space,’ in which he focuses on the works of two contemporary philosophers, Giorgio Agamben and Étienne Balibar, may be of particular interest to postcolonial literary scholars. In it, Ó Murchadha argues that the communal space that binds us together, ‘appears fractured in late (or post) modernity’ and that the experience of ‘the refugee in exile’ is essential for the understanding of this phenomenon (34).

In Chapter 2, Bill Richardson draws upon the idea of ‘the novel as a space imagined by the reader’ (49) and suggests that the exercise of ‘imaginative appropriation of an invented space’ in the process of exploring that space is ‘always an individual and an abstract one’ (42). He reflects on the interaction between the literary text and our own sense of the spatial world in some key works by the Juan Rulfo and Jorge Luis Borges and unravels the multiple meanings generated in the course of this interaction. In their contribution to the collection, Christiane Schönfeld and Ulf Strohmayer explore the ‘deployment of “bridges”’ in different cultural contexts (61). They examine the effects of ‘spatialized language’ and argue for a ‘process-oriented mode of thinking’ (61). Finally, they use the bridge metaphor to propose ‘an openly spatialized, progressive pedagogy’ in transcultural contexts (77).

Book reviews: *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Links between Place and Culture* edited by Bill Richardson. Svetlana Stefanova.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Lillis Ó Laoire claims that the enactment of music and dance turns space into place, ‘renews bonds of kinship and affection,’ and minimises conflict in small communities (88). To illustrate his argument, he examines two Gaelic songs, ‘It’s a pity I’m not in Ireland’ and ‘The Three-Sailed Boats,’ that deal with concepts such as belonging, emplacement, and displacement, and evidence the importance of native place. For Paul Carter, the question of translatability is central to the identification of the mechanisms that converge on the emergence of symbolic representation in the context of Dawson’s *Australian Aborigines* (1881). He views the book as a symbolic representation ‘not of a people or a place but of the discursive situation itself’ (110).

Paolo Bartoloni discusses authors such as Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, and Édouard Glissant and focuses on ‘the movements and the spaces of language, and its ability to morph, change, and adapt’ (130). He points out the need to think of language and the place we inhabit within it as mobile and dynamic. Taking as a starting point Heidegger’s ‘language is the house of being,’ Bartoloni modulates the reference concept into the concept of ‘the house of language’ to give form to this idea of mobility. The key question that Karen Le Rossignol’s essay poses is whether a virtual village operating as a spatial entity ‘can provide strategies, through narratives, for a community to problem-solve with the aim of increasing its well-being’ (155). She analyses a research project design of a virtual village and in particular the relation between the spatial narratives and the actual place. For her, it is the ‘plasticity’ of the digital storytelling that allows for its integration into the ‘actual narrative and cultural life of the community’ (155).

Conn Holohan’s essay begins with a quote by Elizabeth Bronfen, in which she uses the term ‘symbolic fiction’, interpreting ‘home’ as a fictive rather than a real place. Holohan argues that in many cinematic narratives home is represented as a space under threat from external forces and that by exploring the qualities ascribed to it we may understand the anxieties generated by ‘our desire for spatial belonging’ (178). In his analysis of Ursula Meier’s film *Home* (2008), he addresses ‘the tension between our emotional commitment to the home-space and the necessary repressions that such commitment entails’ (178). Catherine Emerson further develops the idea of culture as a socially produced space. In her analysis of places such as the street corner in Brussels where the Manneken Pis statue is located or the inside of a moving coach, she makes a similar argument to Holohan’s ‘imaginative investment in home’ (182). Emerson investigates how the way in which we discover real places ‘creates abstract places’ and then invests them with meaning (191).

As mentioned above, the eight studies, inscribed in four spatio-cultural zones, are framed by two more general contributions, following the direction of mapping from abstract to concrete. Miles Kennedy’s closing essay focuses on Heidegger and his conception of ‘poetical dwelling’. He reads Tom Paulin’s poetry collection, *The Invasion Handbook* (2002), as ‘a counter-point to the deeply problematic Heideggerian tropes’ (210).

The collection attempts to put into perspective a wider reflection on the productive capacity of spatio-cultural research and the expanding interest in conceptual experimentation. Richardson’s four-zone oriented theoretical schema indicates his awareness of ‘the fact that spatial concerns are as varied as human concerns in general’ (235) and allows for a more nuanced response to these concerns. The volume is a rich resource of fresh understandings of spatiality and the aesthetic dimensions of its symbolic expression in culture. Its great strength

2

Book reviews: *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Links between Place and Culture* edited by Bill Richardson. Svetlana Stefanova.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

is that it emerges as a dynamic site that stimulates the inclusion of multiple connections between space and human experience and generates interdisciplinary dialogues between scholars in the humanities. This book will hold interest not only for scholars concerned with spatial studies, but also to all those interested in the cultural forms discussed in the essays.

**Svetlana Stefanova**

International University of la Rioja

Book reviews: *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Links between Place and Culture* edited by Bill Richardson. Svetlana Stefanova.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>