

Hsuan L. Hsu, *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ISBN: 978-0-521-19706-9.

Geography and the Production of Space starts with a timely question about one of the historical challenges facing the United States ever since its inception as a nation, i.e. spatial overflow and expansion: How did 19th century American literature initiate a conversation with unprecedented makeovers in space and place, on intermittently constitutive, yet contested, spatial scales—ranging from home and region to nation and the globe?

In trying to provide an answer to this question, Hsu does not follow chronology; rather, in an effort to read history through the multiple and contested lenses of literature, he espouses Marxist spatial theories—developed by cultural geographers Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Neil Smith—to literary products of, mainly, non-canonical American authors, ranging from 1798 gothic novel *Wieland* by Charles Brockden Brown to *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* by Sui Sin published in 1912. Such espousal takes place on several different sites throughout the book, starting with an elaborate conceptual take on “scales of identification” as the introduction, and the backdrop against which the book develops.

‘Scales of identification’ opens the discussion on spatial scales not by, say, a quote from Thoreau about nature, but by what Hsu terms ‘a spatial allegory’, inspired by *The Course of Empire*, a series of paintings by Thomas Cole (1834 to 1836), in order to first visualise what he aims to further conceptualise (p.1). Nineteenth century subnational, national, as well as transnational terrains of shaping U.S. identity as a nation, he argues, were in conversation with American literary products on multiple levels; such conversation ‘reflected—and helped produce—readers’ identifications with domestic, urban, regional, national, and global spaces’ (p.3).

Against such a backdrop, Chapter one takes gothic fiction and political pamphlets of Charles Brockden Brown to examine how the destabilised democratic nature of the new nation could be saved and re-established by its extension beyond the national scale, ultimately justifying an act of expansion like the Louisiana Purchase which raised and addressed geographical anxieties in its turn. Chapter two turns its focus to urban-household detective stories in order to further complicate the inter-scalar anxieties of the century as imagined, filtered and narrated by American writers Poe and James. Chapter three offers a reading of post-Civil War missionary activities, especially in China, with two ends: missionary work as exportation of slavery with a Christian—and hence global—yet domestic—and hence local—tone; and, further, missionary work as extension of the US capitalist arms into the Chinese market: a spatial fix to both the domestic issue of slavery and that of production surplus on a global scale. Leaving the celebratory works of the previous chapter aside, chapter four examines paradoxical scalar tensions in the works of canonical authors Whitman and Melville: the globe understood as a unifying as well as an isolating fabric. Looking at works by Sarah Orne Jewett, Frank Norris, and Booker T Washington, chapter 5 examines how regions—such as the once powerful and self-sufficient South—as producers of globally needed commodity, attempted to make sense of their regional identity as global, or at least as connected to global capital markets. A short epilogue, entitled ‘Scales of Resistance’, extends the scalar tensions into the 20th century. Being a consolidated overseas empire, the US global influence offers 20th century writers further scalar alternatives, including the colonial territory—on the transnational level, wherein colonising as well as colonised selves appear as trans-scalar actors, moving between the subnational and the transnational levels.

The result, as far as a book on American literature is concerned, was the not-always-straightforward literary translation of ‘spatial fix’ as a series of historical attempts within the US, and between the US and the outer world to outsource internal crises and tensions by extending

capitalist arms to external markets. Surfacing on in a wide range of literary genres, such attempts ultimately resulted in a complication of the scene on newly added transnational, yet local and regional, yet global scales (pp. 11-12).

The result, as far as a book on American history is concerned, was the bearing-contradictions-and-anxieties coming to terms of the American literate public of the century with a frequently renewed, multi-scalar, cartography of their world as re-imagined by, among others, American slave-holders, politicians, ideologists, railroad engineers, land-owners, missionaries, and capitalists.

To summarise, *Geography and the Production of Space* is not a history book within the once-not-so-penetrable disciplinary boundaries of historical research; neither is it a book on literary criticism per se. Rather, to borrow from Linda Orr, it is a twenty-first century ‘revenge of literature’—and by extension, of cultural geography—on the disciplinary inviolability of history as practiced in the nineteenth century. It is, in other words, a singular result of interdisciplinarity as thought and practice, which asks its theory-minded readers to be equipped with historical, cultural geographical, as well as literary patience to find it an abundant read.

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