



GEOCRITICISM AND SPATIAL LITERARY STUDIES

# Rethinking Place through Literary Form

Edited by  
Rupsa Banerjee  
Nathaniel Cadle

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# Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies

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Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies is a new book series focusing on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship in recent years, and geocriticism, broadly conceived, has been among the more promising developments in spatially oriented literary studies. Whether focused on literary geography, cartography, geopoetics, or the spatial humanities more generally, geocritical approaches enable readers to reflect upon the representation of space and place, both in imaginary universes and in those zones where fiction meets reality. Titles in the series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory, and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies series disclose, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and in the world.

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Editors

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## FOREWORD: THEORIZING PLACE AS WORLD POLIS AND MULTIPLE FORM

In an era of globalization when the forces and forms of geospatial creation and cross-border linkage are all but dominated by the terms and values of capitalist spatiality in all its techno-speed and disruptive fluidity, *Rethinking Place through Literary Form*, co-edited by Rupsa Banerjee and Nathaniel Cadle, exists to remind readers, in multi-sited and thickly descriptive ways, in twelve chapters, that we dwell, abide, and come into depths of ontological belonging through ties to place and place-based forces and forms in all their multiplicity and complexity. Place and place-based dwelling is what the mighty postwar American poet of “projective form” Charles Olson (1910–1970) meant by his recalcitrant embrace of embodied location in the coastal fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts along the US Atlantic as some maximal oceanic center of cosmos, cosmopolis, and cosmopolitical being moving outward to the world and planet across space and time. As the coeditors affirm in their Introduction to this collection while elaborating on a place-based poem complicating the very notion of “here” by Forest Gander, “Place no longer remains a singular occurrence but becomes a series of concentric identifications that position the individual in an expanding series of displacements: “here / (here (here)).” Worlding of place as such begins in the here and now of place-making as this can be embodied and expressed as discrepant practices of dwelling diversely across globe and planet, from Europe and Africa to Asia, Oceania, and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For more on these ties of “worlding” to place and place-making tactics as theorized in diversely situated ways within and against the Anthropocene, see Chou, Kim, and Wilson.

Place persists and insists; place at once historicizes and entangles being and identity in a lived totality of action, care, and form. Place thus is not a deficient, bounded, or backward-looking category or affect, but instead reflects and refracts the very ground, field, and foundation of deepened being, embodied poetics, and even geopolitics in all its entangled, moving, and enacted contemporary creativity. “Polis is this,” Olson affirmed and expressed in poem after poem, book by book, as well as influential manifestos from works like *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) to his essay on projective verse in 1950, looking out from lyric presences as so-called *I Maximus* or *Archaeologist of Morning*.<sup>2</sup> Independent filmmaker Henry Ferrini’s influential documentary by that suggestive name, *Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place* (2007), makes this place-making entanglement palpable in small and large ways, verbally and kinetically, as the place of Gloucester gets embodied and manifested in Olson’s palpably sublime energy of form as well as ongoing struggle to preserve this town as valorized landscape/oceanscape: meaning Gloucester as a place constellated and valued in ways kindred to where you live and what came before your community inhabiting anywhere on planet earth with its frontier “borderlands,” or as we might better say nowadays planet-ocean with its archipelagic “borderwaters.”<sup>3</sup>

This collection helps to enable a coming back to the geography and history of place as prismatic threshold and *mappamundi* to the world, as embodied *worlding* in action, change, and being, beginning directly in and as that body-in-place moving forward yet rooting back. “Forever the geography leans in on me...polis is this,” as Olson expresses and proposes this embodied worlding ethos of immersive locality as rooted and routed senses living in Gloucester as (earlier) teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Place also means an open existence more intimately living with death, like those fishermen of Olson’s Gloucester, “setting out now in a box upon the sea.” For SPACE, as Olson expressed this ego-shattering expansiveness in vividly American terms of the sublime he grasped from Melville and Emerson, comes “large and without mercy” (Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* 11). Place means living as center and circumference of both a world and the planet, living in the time of now embodied and expressed in particularity, everywhere threatened by the dominating

<sup>2</sup> See Olson, *The Maximus Poems*; Olson, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*; and Olson, *Collected Prose*.

<sup>3</sup> See Roberts, *Borderwaters*; and Wilson, *Pacific Beneath the Pavements*.



forces megalopolis and atomic bomb, ruination, mediocrity, loss. These are the death-forces, blockages, and devils of military-financial manipulation we nowadays know so well under the cold-warring US and PRC Presidencies of Donald Trump and Xi Jinping across the toxic and spatialized era of global pandemic in a so-called perilous Indo-Pacific world.

These days, as Olson had mandated to the contrary of this hegemonic spatiality, whatever you create, you need to “leave the roots on,” so you see the dirt of where it came from as the documentary film portrays so well in image and language. Polis lived in history and place is exactly what Norman O. Brown called and troped as (after Ovid, Jesus, and Nietzsche) “metamorphosis” or what Olson memorably called the lived “automorphosis” of place, self, world, and planet (Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* 8–5, 150–153).<sup>4</sup> As the coeditors rightly point to the writing of place occurring variously across the world republic of letters, there are multiple ties and comparative entanglements that open place into world and world into place: “Writing in or about places—characterized by the tangible borders of the home and the neighborhood and the discursive boundaries of the region and the nation—requires a simultaneous tracing of the discourse against plural narratives from around the world making comparativist criticism a necessity, regardless of the chronological time-lines to which the texts belong.”

This suggests the timely and innovative ways of writing about and theorizing places that this collection would richly circulate, affirm, and enact. The twelve chapters in this timely collection in effect aim to actively participate in foregrounding places as read and written as both personal and social occurrences; places variously shaped by the temporal dictates of narrative and the shifty figurative tactics of literary imagination as reworlding practices that can alter the taken-for-granted terms or stories of place and go beyond economic or materialist over determinations of place, people, border, nation, and region. Transnational forces in this multiple dialectical grasp of place and form can be read ambivalently as both reflecting the forces and forms of capitalist globalization or, more affirmatively, as activating other forces and forms of translocal, translational, and

<sup>4</sup> Brown calls and tropes “automorphosis” as an “auto sacramental” process: meaning sacramentalizing the empirical world via transfiguring tropes of beatitude (“utopian or beatific vision”) and expressive energies of the redemptive poetic imagination he calls “Ovid Christianized” (p. 151). For Brown as cultural theorist of world literature, as for Olson the poet, “redemption is vision” of place, text, and as world (p. 155). See also Brown’s transfiguring vision of poetic imagination as articulated most fully in *Love’s Body* (pp. 162–266).



transcultural linkages and certain ties that bind. Places can refigure form, and forms can refigure place; such is the range and risk of this collection in its tracking of various deterritorializing and reterritorializing energies in and beyond place.

In *Rethinking Place through Literary Form*, neighborhoods and homes are variously lost, found again, and fleetingly touched upon as that cherished ground of spirit-being Charles Olson found materialized in oceanic Gloucester even as he warned against its irrevocable loss. This collection thus offers strong literary evidence, across multiple genres and sites central and peripheral, that these works across the discrepant world republic of letters can activate, as the coeditors affirm in their Introduction, “formal changes in language both transforming the significations of locales and removing places from the representative confinements of cartography.”<sup>5</sup> Such are the pleasures and challenges this collection embodies.

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<sup>5</sup> On Pascale Casanova's “world republic of letters” in its various distortions and evasions as a formal Paris-centered system of consecration and translation, see Wilson, “World Gone Wrong.”

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship. Spatially oriented literary studies, whether operating under the banner of literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism, or the spatial humanities more generally, have helped to reframe or to transform contemporary criticism by focusing attention, in various ways, on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. Reflecting upon the representation of space and place, whether in the real world, in imaginary universes, or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality, scholars and critics working in spatial literary studies are helping to reorient literary criticism, history, and theory. *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* is a book series presenting new research in this burgeoning field of inquiry.

In exploring such matters as the representation of place in literary works, the relations between literature and geography, the historical transformation of literary and cartographic practices, and the role of space in critical theory, among many others, geocriticism and spatial literary studies have also developed interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary methods and practices, frequently making productive connections to architecture, art history, geography, history, philosophy, politics, social theory, and urban studies, to name but a few. Spatial criticism is not limited to the spaces of the so-called real world, and it sometimes calls into question any too facile distinction between real and imaginary places, as it frequently investigates what Edward Soja has referred to as the “real-and-imagined” places we experience in literature as in life. Indeed, although a great deal of important research has been devoted to the literary representation of certain

identifiable and well known places (e.g., Dickens's London, Baudelaire's Paris, or Joyce's Dublin), spatial critics have also explored the otherworldly spaces of literature, such as those to be found in myth, fantasy, science fiction, video games, and cyberspace. Similarly, such criticism is interested in the relationship between spatiality and such different media or genres as film or television, music, comics, computer programs, and other forms that may supplement, compete with, and potentially problematize literary representation. Titles in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory, and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the series reveal, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and in the world.

The concepts, practices, or theories implied by the title of this series are to be understood expansively. Although geocriticism and spatial literary studies represent a relatively new area of critical and scholarly investigation, the historical roots of spatial criticism extend well beyond the recent past, informing present and future work. Thanks to a growing critical awareness of spatiality, innovative research into the literary geography of real and imaginary places has helped to shape historical and cultural studies in ancient, medieval, early modern, and modernist literature, while a discourse of spatiality undergirds much of what is still understood as the postmodern condition. The suppression of distance by modern technology, transportation, and telecommunications has only enhanced the sense of place, and of displacement, in the age of globalization. Spatial criticism examines literary representations not only of places themselves, but of the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it. In sum, the work being done in geocriticism and spatial literary studies, broadly conceived, is diverse and far reaching. Each volume in this series takes seriously the mutually impressive effects of space or place and artistic representation, particularly as these effects manifest themselves in works of literature. By bringing the spatial and geographical concerns to bear on their scholarship, books in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series seek to make possible different ways of seeing literary and cultural texts, to pose novel questions for criticism and theory, and to offer alternative approaches to literary and cultural studies. In short, the series aims to open up new spaces for critical inquiry.

## Praise for *Rethinking Place through Literary Form*

“Theoretically informed and broad in literary scope, *Rethinking Place through Literary Form* offers a thoughtful challenge to prevailing models of global literature and hierarchical understandings of the relationship between European and non-European literary forms. Its nuanced theorization of place and local attachment, as well as its attention to the permeable movement of cultural identities across geographic borders, will be of great interest to students and scholars of twentieth- and twenty-first century literature, post-colonial studies, and migration.”

—Supritha Rajan, *Associate Professor of English, University of Rochester, USA*

“*Rethinking Place through Literary Form* engages with literature from a range of languages, genres, and places, pushing us to think beyond national or disciplinary borders. The essays draw on materialist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and ecocritical approaches, questioning the very categories in which we construct public and private, global and local, animacy and the inanimate. The result is a substantial contribution to the study of global literature in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.”

—Raphael Dalleo, *Professor of English, Bucknell University, USA*

“The dazzling essays in this volume map out new coordinates for the dynamic relationship between place, identity and literary writing. From anticolonial Bengal to the barrios of Los Angeles, from anarchist fiction to ecological elegy, these essays range brilliantly across periods, regions, and literary forms. Emphasizing migration and dispersal as much as rootedness, dwelling on translation and networks as much as belonging, this book suggests vital new directions in the criticism of literature and place.”

—Timothy P. Watson, *Professor of English, University of Miami, USA*

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# Introduction: The Interconnectedness of Place and Literary Form

*Rupsa Banerjee and Nathaniel Cadle*

Forrest Gander's poem "The Sounding" from the collection *Be With*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2019, conflates the drive to situate oneself in place through the available resources of language and the simultaneous fact of finding oneself located in a plurality of places. Gander's entire collection reimagines and reexamines the intimacies between the individual and society, between the US as a nation and its neighboring states. "The Sounding" itself examines the conceptual paradoxes implicit within the act of self-situation—an action that is both physically determined and linguistically enacted. Each of the four stanzas is connected by enjambed lines, linguistically foreshadowing the stanzas' formal reluctance to be extracted and emplaced elsewhere. Here are the first, second, and third stanzas in their entirety:

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What closes and then  
 luminous? What opens  
 and then dark? And into  
 what do you stumble  
 but this violet  
 extinction? With  
 froth on your lips.  
 8:16 am. The morning's  
 sleepy face

rolls its million  
 eyes. Migrating flocks  
 of your like same species  
 incandesce  
 into transparency.

A birdwatcher lifts

her binoculars. The con-  
 tinuous with or without  
 your words  
 situates you here  
 (here (here)) even while  
 you knuckle your eyes  
 in disbelief. Those (30)

The inability to locate meaning or even to situate a signifier at the location of the repeated interrogative pronoun “what” demonstrates the vacuous act of locating oneself in the empty signifier of a singular place. The contrasts between “closes” and “opens” and “luminous” and “then dark” hint at the impossibility of fixing the speaker of the poem to a specific location or drawing conclusions about the speaker’s political allegiances, emotional anxieties, and economic ties based on the speaker’s spatial positioning. These stanzas, and *Be With* as a whole, present language as both determining and dislocating this tendentious positioning of identity. The poetry collection rethinks the positioning of American identity in its attempt to revisit the questions of gender and race through the perspective of an outsider, with the binoculars fixed on the “Migrating flocks/ of your likesame species.” The poet is an outsider to national identity, and within the historical timeline of the birth, collapse, and reorganization of national territories, all legitimized citizens become migratory intruders.

The third stanza articulates the intersection of multiple discourses into which the human subject is displaced, calling into question the exceptionalist nature of any political identification. The breakdown of grammar as the line “your words” continues into “situates you here” demonstrates the non-linkage between spoken words and the speaker’s act of self-locating. Each repetition of the word “here” creates and intensifies the ambiguity associated with locating the subject in language. The clustering of the words amounts to an attempt to reclaim the place of the subject, and it suggests that positioning oneself in place gives rise to an endless proliferation of identifications that resist any such locatedness. The repetition of “here” emphasizes place as both the private longing for shelter and the physical basis for having a political and cultural identity.

Place no longer remains a singular occurrence but becomes a series of concentric identifications that position the individual in an expanding series of displacements: “here / (here (here)).”<sup>1</sup> The title of the poem underscores a particular relationship between the lyric speaker and the reader (or listener) of the poem—one based on intentionality. A shared cultural experience of place emerges as the text is read (or heard) over an interpretative distance that seems to connect author and reader. In other words, an implied possibility of dialogue between author and reader(s) renders the world into aural echoes, variously heard across and through different registers of languages. The world in this case is not a singular phenomenon that requires well-meaning but prosaic acts of translation to

<sup>1</sup> In *The Fate of Place* (1998), Edward S. Casey states that place within philosophy, from the time of Aristotle, is commonly taken as a position that “is a correlate of the physical body—which has its own extension” (135). The world mapped in relation to such an understanding of place “exceeds any body or group of bodies” (135) and in fact becomes a metaphoric container for places. Casey’s work provides a strong argument for bringing the critical attention back to places where they are no longer loci contained within the world, but instead, the world is mapped around the given locatedness of places themselves, “belonging to [their] gradual ontogenesis and implicit in it” (275). Works of speculative realists, such as Levi R. Bryant’s *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), argue that the impossibility of locating the world as a singular container for diverse places promotes the idea of plural worlds.

World literatures is read by critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from this perspective of multiple linguistic worlds where marginality of tongues is the outcome of the ways in which texts are read and critiqued rather than preconditioned by the cartographic organization of the world. Our collection reads literatures written about and from different geographic places as mapping plural worlds around them, expelling insular interiority while retaining a quality of inwardness that communicates accountability to geographically specific histories.



communicate cultural difference; every single heterogeneous linguistic utterance, as Taylor Eggan writes, enables one “to see how the world is a pluriverse constituted by many overlapping worlds on many scales” (1313). Situating oneself in language involves mapping oneself in plural worlds, where translation builds conceptual bridges between languages and, indeed, reveals the framework of close-knit linguistic interdependencies that promote self-translations of historical inconsistencies within a given geographical locale.

Gander’s collection places English and Spanish contiguously in the poems, albeit differentiated by the quantitative number of lines, making recognition of the semiotic borders of languages an essential part of determining the plural nature of the world. In *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature* (2015), Rebecca Walkowitz studies the various convergences of languages that make English less of a universal mediator of cultural experience and more of an arbitrary map for literature’s correspondence to economic determinations and its various points of departures from a singular history of the world.<sup>2</sup> The role of readers within such a non-hierarchical relationality between languages determines local and national borders, “add[ing] circulation to the study of production by asking what constitutes the languages, boundaries, and media of the work” (51). *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* approaches the study of literary form at the microscopic scale of the choice of words and at the macroscopic level of aggregating historical differences and readerly receptions across different geographies, and it argues for the influence of “wording” in the “worlding” of texts. Texts do not come located in languages and their corresponding locales but are emplaced through the conventions of reading habits.

<sup>2</sup>Walkowitz suggests the process of “close reading at a distance,” expanding the commonly held perception of a text as the expression of an idiolect to include “a narrative’s visual as well as verbal qualities, paratextual materials such as typography and illustration, and aspects of the work that exceed the single monolingual version” (pp. 50–51).

Taken in such a way, any given text can be read as a multilingual entity, depending on the modifications to the style of publication. This argument identifies the foreignness of the text in its diegetic and narrative features rather than solely by the nature of its content. The study of literary form makes it possible to locate local divergences from the norm, and literary works start to offer intersections of multiple strands of histories and not simply reflections on and of the geographical territories where they are written.

## RETHINKING THE TRANSNATIONAL

Subjective emplacement—both in language and within the nation-state—is a central concern for this volume, just as it is for Gander’s poem. What makes “The Sounding” such an appropriate starting point for this collection of essays is that, in its preoccupation with defining the self across the border between the United States and Mexico, it questions the too-easy distinctions between the national and foreign territories where the quantifiable use of the English and the Spanish languages comes to demarcate political borders. Place, for Gander, is defined by the poetic exchange of significations across the registers of the languages that determine political borders, so much so that the act of engaging with poetic form allows for revised political identifications. The cross-border linguistic displacement of Spanish into the English poems in Gander’s collection identifies the unceasing overlaps of the self’s linguistic positions with those of others, making place itself a product of the organizational capacity of language. *Be With* demands a comparativist approach to the study of its own poetry and sets an example for the engagement of the chapters in this collection. The comparativist approach brings an openness toward putative externalities and discloses the reversible and constructed nature of national boundaries, often determined by the zones of use and abandonment of particular languages.

In *Transnationalism in Practice* (2010), Paul Giles writes of the cultural biases that determine linguistic acts of national identification, “Discourses of nationalism rarely declare themselves to be particularist rather than universal models, and it is one of the tasks of comparativist criticism to recover a sense of that latent contingency” (27). It is, then, the work of critics to identify self-positionings across what is vocalized and what is left out in the silences of discourses that present universal descriptions of nations, which in turn reflect a singular image of the globe. In *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form*, place, as a conceptual category, is approached both as a political territory, indisputably pinned into a cartographic representation, and as an imaginative precondition for thought—characterizing allegories for self-locations and possible utopias for self-displacements. In acknowledging both the material and fictive quality of “place,” the collection questions the efficacy of any form of territorial affiliations based on cultural specificity and, subsequently, writing that presupposes any regional classificatory relations with the individual. The singularity of the globe, and the transformations it exacts on economic

relations between countries, is replaced by the mutative quality of places whose elasticity is determined both by the circulation of the texts and of literary form's particularized egress from normative patterns of diegesis and lyrical modes.

Writing in or about places—characterized by the tangible borders of the home and the neighborhood and the discursive boundaries of the region and the nation—requires a simultaneous tracing of the discourse against plural narratives from around the world, making comparativist criticism a necessity, regardless of the chronological timelines to which the texts belong.<sup>3</sup> One could very well argue that the incommensurability of the literary works with the historical descriptions of and about the political territories that produce them suggest the unmappable quality of public and private places and their resistance to unitary modes of representation. Susan Bassnett states that comparative literary criticism has struggled with a non-recognition of this “historical perspective,” specifically “invasions, colonization, [and] economic deprivation” (37). *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* acknowledges this aspect of chronicling and argues that, on numerous occasions, historical documentations fail to account for the contradictions within subjective responses toward places: from thematic variations in plot to the development of mixed-genre narratives to interruptions in narrative continuity. If the particularized accounts of places—from the intimately possessed home to the publicly determined nation—are diverse and disparate, then their organization within a map of the world comes across as arbitrary, unable to account for the ways in which literature resists and counters the cartographic relations between places.<sup>4</sup> Places threatened with political erasure become palpable in their literary representations, leaving their marks on the collective consciousness, and other

<sup>3</sup> In *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions* (1987), Swapan Majumdar claims that regional literatures written within India cannot be contained within the derivative category of the “region” because literatures produced within a multilingual context are creatively oscillating between “collectivity and individuality” (26).

<sup>4</sup> In *Distant Reading* (2013), Franco Moretti suggests that literature's resistance to accepted cartographic relations is further supported through acts of reading that can make geographic horizons into a “brake” and, alternately, can expand the limits of those horizons, offering “unexpected chances” for inhabiting new realms of thinking (8). The geographic demarcations that distant reading presupposes are, in fact, malleable even while they are charted out within a monolithic sphere. By studying places and their literatures as offering multiple loci for a fragmented globe, reductively framed in the image from space, this collection eschews the hierarchy of scale and explores reading practices as strategic ways of emplacing and dispersing the self.

places that history has rendered non-inclusive of multiple cultural identities start to disclose their own inconsistencies.<sup>5</sup>

This impossibility of stretching the particular to include the universal or of fitting the nation into a larger category of the planet or the world, even with the growing networks of relations between nations, is highlighted by Philip Leonard: “[the] schism between affiliation and universality, pointing to a cultural and ethnic particularity that can be encompassed by neither broad and regionalizing classifications nor an inclusive sense of the global” (45). *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* explores this very “cultural and ethnic particularity” as being fundamentally displaced from itself by literary form, looking into the ways writing itself identifies the foreignness of the self from its surroundings and of the literary form as more of a remnant of and response to cultural transactions dependent on economic transformations of national borders than an inheritance of an exclusivizing geography. The “global” and the significance of the material signifier of the globe to world literary discourse are continuously debated. In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Spivak puts forward the “planet” to “overwrite the globe” (72); contrasted with the globe, which is overrun with economic determinations, the planet signifies an “alterity [that] remains underived from us” (73). The particularity of places and the reticent nature of literary writings from supposed “peripheries” are both retained and dissipated within such a formulation, as our own alterity “contains us as much as it flings us away” (73). By focusing on narratives of places determining the cartographic mapping of the world rather than the other way around, this collection argues that prose and poetry offer representations of worlds that are plural, where the sense of a unitary spatial whole is already lost in the innate inclinations of texts to remain both disconnected and open to assimilation.

However, subjective accounts of places are often incomprehensive and their corpus unreliable. Bertrand Westphal’s *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011) offers an argument for the incomprehensive nature

<sup>5</sup>Focusing on place is an assertion of the discursive nature of geography. In “Questions on Geography,” compiled from an interview given to the journal *Hérodote*, Michel Foucault maps out the semantic borders of geographic terms, from the “territory” and the “field” to the “domain” and the “region,” among others (68). The essays in this collection examine the refractions in the definitions of these terms and the necessary adjustments to their social significations. The materiality of place, then, comes to be mapped through the position of words on the page, the seemingly arbitrary changes in form, and the drifts of identity enabled through evolving habits of reading.

of the subjective accounts of place.<sup>6</sup> In *Topophrenia*, Robert T. Tally Jr. further qualifies the unreliable binary of personal narratives about places and their historical characterizations, as individuated responses to places exceed any particular, singular perspective: “[a] geocritical exploration might well take as its starting point a particular text and its relation to a place, whose almost unavoidable polysemy and heteroglossia will ensure that any reading of the text, place, and relations among them will exceed simple personal or autobiographical experience” (20). It is here that the conceptual limits of place come to be determined by the “reader and the writer” (20): the subjective narratives are by no means taken as replacing the empirical accounts of place, but they are studied to reflect the artificiality of geography as a discourse and, indeed, to allow the seemingly endless corpus of varying responses to place to be bounded by the creative interpretations of the reader and the writer.

Modifications to form, such as inserting interludes into prose narratives in order to disrupt conflict and the seeming flow of time or hybridizing the lyric through interactions between Asian and European forms, suggest that factual accounts of places are very often subtended and realized by the conceptualizations of imagined places. The following chapters actively participate in the reconsideration of places as both personal and social occurrences, shaped by the temporal dictates of narrative.

In many ways, these blurred distinctions between real and imagined places serve to critique the economically overdetermined character of the globe. In *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015), the Warwick Research Collective claims that varieties of “numinous narration,” such as “magical realism, irrealism, gothic and fantasy,” through an openness towards the conjunction between real and imagined places, make the “semi-peripherality” of the world-literary system” apparent (57). By focusing primarily on places as offering multiple projections of worlds, and thereby resisting reading habits that attest to localism, the essays in this collection locate the fictive quality of places in the ways narratives both go against and symbolically address the seemingly empiricist accounts of

<sup>6</sup>In the chapter “The Multiplication of Centres,” from *The Plausible World* (2013), published two years after *Geocriticism*, Westphal argues that places within the medieval imagination are themselves fragmentary and contribute to a lost whole. In his study of several religious texts, he identifies the often blurred boundaries between real and imagined places in the medieval world where the hierarchy between places becomes unstable. This volume contributes to his larger statement on the plurality of extant narratives on a place and the indeterminacy of any given corpus in relation to exacting the accurate qualities of a place.

history.<sup>7</sup> The foreignness of texts, and the subsequent questioning of centers and margins, are present not in the mapping of unknown territories and intractable psychological terrains but in the practices of reading, which unground places from their commonly held “local” attributes.

*Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* takes a comparativist approach toward the study of various literary forms in twentieth and twenty-first century world literatures, examining how literary works both recognize and forget place-specific identities across diverse geographical regions. The readings offered of the texts, in turn, extend beyond the politics of assumptions popular within the national contexts of their production and emphasize a translocational drift of ideas. Giles’ book effectively frames the two distinct approaches to texts across the Atlantic, one of “American transcendence” and the other of “British materialism.” Citing Myra Jehlen’s work in *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), Giles notes that refusing the materialist method takes one to the “limits of ideology” where “literature may offer a way to look a little beyond” (26).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, “British materialism reveals such transcendence to be relative and contingent rather than absolute quality” (26). The transatlantic distinction between the non-materialist, what Giles calls “transcendence,” and the materialist approach is diversified even further in this collection by bringing in literary works written in and about Asia and the Caribbean. Collectively, the eleven critical essays engage in identifying the boundary conditions of situatedness and study the ways forms migrate and, in fact, help shape the political identities of places within a changing global milieu.

The chapters in this collection, then, examine ways in which literary writings in and of places challenge, contradict and even reverse the range of semantic associations connected to a geographical territory. Inhabiting

<sup>7</sup>The work of the Warwick Research Collective separates engagements with poetry from the considerations of narrative form on the belief that these forms are not as sensitive to the logic of “combined and uneven development” (57). The essays in *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* argue that diverse literary forms, including those beyond prose, are just as crucial in mapping the ways in which topographic signifiers—from the neighborhood to the city to the nation—resist a concentric organization of scale.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Giles reads Jehlen’s criticism of cultural materialism as written in the same spirit as Sacvan Bercovitch’s recontextualizing of the “American” identity of the writings of the American Renaissance in *The Rites of Assent* (1992): “by accentuating Emerson’s links to Descartes on the one hand and to Nietzsche on the other, or by replacing the tautologies of exceptionalism with the trans-national categories of gender, class, and race [...]” (qtd. in Giles 26). Introducing a cross-geographical approach to the study of migratory ideas presents texts circumventing the very totalizing political borders of nations.

place is both a personal and a collective experience, and literature has a way of registering the deviations and connections between those two experiences in its very form. The geographic specificity of places, necessary for materialist criticism, finds itself variously characterized through the radical differences that places hold within themselves: the places represented in the writings are internally displaced, making the *local* dependent on the locatedness of the individual. Looking a “little beyond” includes the utopic instance of looking at place from a vantage point of observation. As Paul Ricoeur notes, utopia is a “special extraterritoriality,” from whose “‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual[....]” (16). Specifically, as the chapters from the first section of the collection show, the historic determinations of places are never without the hope of allowing for alternative possibilities of arrangement between the center and margin, city and suburbs, place and “no-place.”

Commenting on the contemporary dream for utopia in *Utopia in the Age of Globalization* (2013), Robert Tally argues that “utopia can be neither an ideal state elsewhere in world geography nor a realization of some ideal future” (x) but becomes a way of providing alternate maps of the world. Referring to works such as Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Frederic Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Tally’s work enlarges the literary discourse on utopia to include works of criticism that radically reexamine the relations between the individual and society. Shifting from impossible cartographic delineations, utopia comes to include the transformation of everyday places and identities through mass uprisings, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring.<sup>9</sup> The places explored in the chapters of the second section of *Rethinking Place Through*

<sup>9</sup>In *Topophrenia*, Tally differentiates literary cartography from the act of mapmaking: “Literary cartography is not a literal form of mapmaking, after all; rather it involves the ways and means by which a given work of literature functions as a figurative map, serving as an orientating or sense-making form” (116). Drawing from George Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel*, Tally builds on the idea that narrative form registers the separation between individual experience and objective reality and states that the novel’s projection of utopia is a recognition of “imaginative limits” (122) rather than a realization of them. Focusing on diverse literary forms and their innate contradictions, *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form* underscores the fallacy of attempting to map personal experiences of places onto their geographical correlates. The challenge of envisioning utopia is, then, studied as a radical zone of incommensurability, which brings with it attendant ways of dislodging representations of places from their historical and factual accounts.