

Lowell Wyse, *Ecospatiality: A Place-Based Approach to American Literature*, The University of Iowa Press, 2021, ISBN 978-1-609-38774-7, 272 p.

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As the world continues to experience an “ongoing ecological collapse” (3), the evidence that points towards a collective effort in recording and understanding man’s centrality within this phenomenon is undeniable: over the course of just a few decades, numerous fields of study pertaining to different ecological branches and theoretical modes of analysis have emerged in direct correlation with the environmentalist movement and the newfound heights of its recognition. Environmental humanities, in particular, has emerged against the backdrop of the late twentieth century and the climate discourse endorsed during the last few years as a conjunction between scientific and humanist approaches to the field of ecology. Namely, this has come to be recognised as a new interdisciplinary area of study which concerns itself with the epistemology of space and the ways in which place operates as it “underpins and intertwines with human experience.” (3)

The title of Wyse’s volume is evocative in this regard: the novel term ‘ecospatiality’ means to further particularize the relationship between the field of ecology, its environmentalist discourse, and the more rigorous means of geographical studies. *A Place-Based Approach to American Literature* does indeed anticipate the theoretical angle of the volume, which is to propose “an understanding of place as simultaneously spatial, ecological and historical” (3) by means of literary representations. As such, Wyse brings together fields that have so far not intersected one another in order to delineate the interdisciplinary relationship that can be delineated as a result of the ecospatial angle theorized within the volume. The scope of *Ecospatiality* is to provide new ways of understanding the concept of place and the way in which an ecospatial critical lens may lead to newer, more complete interpretations of both fictional and nonfictional narratives.

The volume is comprised of five chapters: one theoretical, introducing the reader to concepts pertaining to different fields of environmental humanities (such as ecocriticism and geocriticism), while the rest propose practical analyses on various American works of fiction with the purpose of expounding different angles of the author's ecospatial theory.

The first among them is fittingly entitled *Orientation*. This is indeed the chapter which not only provides the context of the volume, but also its theoretical foundation, essential to understanding the critical analyses conducted in the remaining chapters. *Orientation* revisits deep-rooted concepts such as place and human orientation, in order to pinpoint the deficiencies in their canon representations and consequently vouch for the necessary re-evaluations enacted from an ecospatial perspective. Thus, the axis of this chapter revolves around deconstructing man's perception of space beyond the practical purpose of cartographic representation, and deep into the ecological tapestry of the literary universe. 'Geocriticism' is a term often employed by Wyse throughout the volume, referencing the theoretical standpoint that "geographical knowledge is attainable through reading, especially when a given place is portrayed in multiple works of literature" (14). Channelling multiple geocritical observations and theoretical approaches Wyse presents various theories of place and ecospatial orientation which lead him to believe that "our understanding of a text is incomplete if it fails to account for the complex dynamics of nature, space, and story with regard both to the text itself and its cultural milieu" (4).

Starting from E. V. Walter's understanding of place as "the site and repository of human meaning" (6), Wyse bridges different conceptions of locale in order to understand it from a literary standpoint. Doreen Massey's definition of place as a 'plurality of trajectories' is among the interpretations the author takes into consideration. Wyse argues that, following this logic, human stories too become trajectories, and that "the more trajectories we understand, the better we can comprehend a place" (7). Spatial relationships (geology and ecology) intertwine with human experience (imagination and orientation) to constitute a conflation of environment and story – a 'matrix of place' in the words of Wyse. In short, the point that is sent across is that the epistemology of place should not be regarded as exclusively generated by the 'empirical world' and its analogous data, but also by the cultural imaginaries and the compendium of human experiences associated with it.

This brings Wyse to the mapping function of literature, more specifically to the geocritical concept of literary cartography – or “the authorial practice of narrative world making” (9). The author deliberately endeavours to map out their territory of choice, be it fictional or nonfictional, by adding or leaving out specific details in order to create a place that properly anchors, as well as augments, the human experience woven into the narrative. This process of literary cartography instils a sense of ecospatial meaning into the reader, which allows them to navigate and immerse themselves into the story with the possibility of supplying the already represented world with their own data and contributions – quoting Robert Tally, “the critical reader becomes a kind of geographer who actively interprets the literary map in such a way as to present new, sometimes hitherto unforeseen mappings [...] to which end, the more detail the better” (10).

Indeed, for Wyse, both literary and physical cartography “participate overtly in the same kind of literary work that some writing does only incidentally” (17): while the map does provide empirical data and convey stories about locations in the world through said data, Wyse notes that these stories are not always straightforward, meaning one would have to further interpret them, to “read [the] maps rather than merely look at them” (17). Moreover, the ecospatial processes of reading a map, just as those of reading a literary text, involve historicism. As will become apparent in the remaining chapters of the volume, for Wyse environment is closely intertwined with time and its subsequent ramifications. The referentiality of place implies by default the presence of the temporal, the chronological; thus “literary texts evoke not just places but places in time” (19). Literary cartography generates another kind of orientation which concerns itself with revealing, or triggering the process of discovering one’s ‘place’ in the empirical or textual world which manifests around them.

Nearing the conclusion of the introductory chapter, Wyse refers to Holling Clancy Holling’s *Paddle-to-the-Sea* in order to demonstrate the applicability of his ecospatial theory. The protagonist of *Paddle-to-the-Sea* travels the Great Lakes watershed in an adventure that abounds in geographical descriptions and beautiful illustrations depicting his journey. The reason behind Wyse’s choice to invoke Holling’s work lies in the “strong sense of geographical orientation” (20) that the text provides through colourful maps and topographical references, which ensure that the reader can easily follow where the protagonist is at any given time of the story. Thus,

in *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, human experience intertwines with environment, ecosystems and social systems, the likes of which are navigated through this very ‘sense of place’ – human orientation – that has been mentioned thus far. It is for this very reason that this particular literary work remains of great relevance from both ecocritical and geocritical perspectives: “*Paddle-to-the-sea* demonstrates the connectedness of nature, space, and story” (25). It is geocritical due to its cartographic representation through maps and topographical symbols, and ecocritical due to the complexity of the ‘world building’ and narrative substrata, which refuse to fall under a nature-culture binary categorisation. However, Wyse is quick to point out that neither of these critical perspectives is entirely valid on its own, as they both seem to somehow miss the larger point, which is providing an interdisciplinary representation of place – namely, the ecological, geographical, and historical phenomena all ought to be simultaneously satisfied. Thus, Wyse’s notion of ecospatiality emerges at the intersection of ecocritical and geocritical methodologies in an attempt at further expanding the canonical angle of spatial interpretation.

Throughout the remaining chapters of the volume, Wyse makes use of maps, travel guides and historical imaginaries to apply both geocritical (following the topography of place through maps) as well as ecocritical methodologies to twentieth-century narratives. He examines each text in order to provide a theory of writing as a deliberate cartographic act – of the textual production of place. According to Wyse, “reading [texts] for place” (27) might uncover new angles of interpretation and deepen one’s critical understanding of theme, character, and structural logic.

Thus, the second chapter lends Wyse’s ecospatial approach to the works of William Least Heat-Moon in a deconstructive attempt to delineate the potential, hidden dynamics of the text. The theoretical mechanism separates space, nature, and story from the narrative whole to ultimately conclude that the method applied leads to a broader understanding of Heat-Moon’s writing, which “consistently presents the human-environment dynamic as an ongoing negotiation within an eco-spatial and historical framework.” (89) Stories are presented as products of place, which begs for fluid phenomena such as history, nature, and culture to be regarded as part of its epistemological composition.

In the third chapter, Wyse employs the concept of geocritical multifocalisation, an approach synonymous to Massey’s ‘plurality of trajectories,’

which essentially stipulates that multiple representations of a locale are required in order to properly understand it. *Ecospatiality at the Crossroads* maps out Central New Mexico through the medium of three different novels and their subsequent inherited cultural consciousness: the mid-to-late 1800s era and the social and environmental effects of colonization in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the Native American individual and collective experience amidst the twentieth century in *Ceremony*, and lastly, the imminent danger a chemical plant poses both for the environment, and for the people in *So Far From God*. Such different portrayals of Central New Mexico lead Wyse once more to the ecospatial conclusion that place is simultaneously defined by its nature, history, and the identity of its inhabitants. These three perspectives offered by Willa Cather, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Ana Castillo in their literary works overlap and resonate with each other – “each author’s literary cartography overlaps with and adds to that of the other” (31). Different cultures shape different perceptions of environment. Thus, the representation of place can be considered neither static, nor monolithic.

The remaining two chapters further demonstrate the complementary relationship that ecospatiality establishes between literary texts and their geographical referents. Namely, chapter four follows the literary works of John Steinbeck and the environmental understanding of the Salina Valley region as a “changing spatial and ecological system” (28) that affects people, while chapter five addresses the urban ecospatiality in Richard Wright’s portrayal of Depression-era Chicago.

Ultimately, *Ecospatiality* represents a well-conducted exercise into uncovering the political and ethical dimensions of place. In his pursuit of recording the interaction between place and human experience, Lowell Wyse builds a compelling case in favour of viewing it as more than just the neutral backdrop of events. The epistemology of place goes, thus, beyond a reductive understanding of place as an “empty container for history” (210). Instead, place is deservedly beginning to signify an all-encompassing ecosystem comprised of nature, culture, history, and tradition, which not only intertwines itself with, but also generates human experience, to the same extent human imagination generates its framework.