John Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 237 p. ISBN: 978-1-137-45686-1

Claire Omhové

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/319>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.319

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2018

Number of pages: 155-156

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Claire Omhové, "John Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 40.2 | 2018, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 05 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/319> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.319>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place. By John Thieme. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 237 p. ISBN: 978-1-137-45686-1. Hardcover: \$95, e-book: \$74.99.

Reviewed by Claire OMHOVÈRE

John Thieme's latest monograph interrogates the hermeneutics of place that goes on to inform so much of postcolonial literature. The book analyses literary representations of place in a wide selection of postcolonial writings mainly, yet not exclusively, from Canada, India and the Caribbean, from the standpoint of cultural geography and the critique some of its leading theorists have given of Western conceptions of place as a fixed site of authenticity. Starting from Massey's analysis of the transformations modern forms of mobility have wrought upon our understanding of place in a globalized world, John Thieme observes how postcolonial writers have taken issue with the spatial practices European empires and their neo-colonial successors have deployed to gain epistemological and discursive control over the territories and populations they brought under their sway.

The volume's introduction presents a theoretical framework which articulates Massey's conception of place as dynamic and malleable with Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope." The Russian formalist first used the term to identify a specific category of literary representations in which spatial and temporal coordinates are fused within a single artistic motif, thus making it possible to dynamise space through temporal accretions that transform it into place. The volume subsequently follows a chronotopic organization with six chapters, each of which is devoted to colonial and postcolonial spatial practises that inform the literary construction of place through cartography, botany, the collecting of spices, ecological transactions, zookeeping, and finally the growth of cosmopolitan, global cities in a dual literary portrait of Bombay/Mumbai and London. The chronotope that serves as the focal point for each chapter has its historical antecedents minutely identified, thereby injecting time into the tropologies through which literature textualizes place. The book then demonstrates how the atlas, the garden, but also the desert island or therianthropes evolved into *topoi*, common places shared throughout the postcolonial world by writers who have sought to transform those legacies of Empire into chronotopes that undermine the fixity of the allegorical significations the West once ascribed to such places.

Replete with detailed information, the book never strays from its initial goal in the process of bringing to light the ramifications underlying the literary representations of place that have emerged in various periods and regions of the globe following the expansion of Western empires and the concomitant rise of postcolonial literature envisaged in all its diversity. With the gentle yet firm manner that characterises his style, Thieme steers his reader through different epochs, time zones and literary works while never losing sight of his argument. All chapters share a similar structure, beginning with a robust introduction replete with historical knowledge (the same holds for the nuggets of information awaiting discovery in end-of-chapter notes that provide details on a wide range of subjects, from the history of the Greenwich meridian to the Persian invention of gardens or the sugar trade) before moving on to consider several inter-related case-studies. Thieme's comparatist approach invites his readers to navigate between the literatures of Britain's former empire, occasionally narrowing his scope to

reconsider well-known British classics, as in the chapter on spices and its subsection on British Romantic poets, or enlarging his focus to include works born out of a slightly different context. Such is the case with the incursion into French Caribbean writing in the chapter devoted to horticulture which also contains illuminating pages on how the botanical trope of hybridity became a heuristic tool in postcolonial theory.

Close attention to the intersections between what Edward Said once called the “imaginative geographies” of Empire and the historical routes followed by Western material culture helps restore temporal depth and symbolic density to the places analysed in the literary case-studies complementing Thieme’s theoretical approach. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jamaica Kincaid, Robert Kroetsch and Eden Robinson, to cite but a handful of the writers who receive sustained consideration throughout the volume, write out of places that are never represented as stable givens, or the loci of reassuring forms of authenticity, because they are contested grounds, fraught with competing versions of history and land use, now reinvested with symbols that question the monolithic colonial allegories once vested in them. It is then no wonder that Thieme, in one of the book’s most insightful passages, should perceive a link between the fluid geographies that inspired those writers’ sense of place, the open reading practices their narratives encourage and the tropologies their writings never cease to reconfigure and expand.

From beginning to end, Thieme’s meticulous approach is characterized by an awareness of the hazards any generalization is likely to meet in the mutable, deeply heterogeneous field of postcolonial literature. It is true that the emphasis it places on chronotopes encourages the delineation of commonalities between, for example, the sea adventures pictured by Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* and those represented by Martel in *Life of Pi*, ultimately leading to the exposure of the materialism and of the colonial (even touristic) bias that endure in Martel’s take on the castaway novel. But *Postcolonial Literary Geographies* nevertheless remains extremely cautious in its analyses and never forsakes nuance in the process of establishing an underlying continuity, or defining a new paradigm.

This is what John Thieme ultimately does when discussing the dynamics defining the postcolonial condition in the chapter devoted to the global city where cosmopolitan mobile elites are portrayed crossing the paths of crowds of refugees and asylum seekers – “the migrant Anyman” Brian Chickwava depicted in *Harare North* in strategically shocking terms for a comfortably emplaced Western readership. “[T]he postcolonial condition,” Thieme explains in his concluding remarks on Chickwava’s novel, “generates a heightened sense of unbelonging, brought about by displacement, both at home, where land is appropriated, and in the diaspora, where new arrivals are often consigned to live on the margins” (189). I would therefore agree with John Thieme when he claims, with the whole of this fascinating study weighing in to back up his words, that “the postcolonial vision has become the dominant urban ethos of our times” (210). It is because of this specific aspect that postcolonial literature today has become of global relevance with respect to the challenges facing our modernity. This is particularly true concerning our attempts to understand the very local, embodied spatial practices that exclude and marginalize large sections of the globe’s population but that also contribute to altering and possibly destroying wide swaths of its environment. Such processes lead to further migrations and continued conflicts as to who possesses the right to exist in any particular place.