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Jim Cocola, *Places in the Making: A Cultural Geography of American Poetry*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2016, 264 pages, \$55, ISBN-10: 1609384111

- 1 Places are always manifest as more than a mere setting or location. Certainly, events must (as we say) “take place” somewhere, and that somewhere will usually be a specific location on the face of the earth. However, most human geographers define “place” as a space or location that has been invested with human meanings. The meanings of a given place will – indeed, must – change over time, whereas its location may remain largely unchanged. What this means is that places do not simply exist but are made (and re-made) through the web of relationships and interactions that constitute human society and culture. One name for this process of making is “poiesis,” the root term in ancient Greek for our narrower and more specialised conception of “poetry.” However, if it is true to say that place-making is a characteristic activity of human cultures, then it might also be said that human cultures are conditioned by the places and landscapes in which they emerge and develop. For phenomenologically-inclined philosophers such as Edward Casey and Jeff Malpas, “emplacement” – being-in-place – is an ontological condition: to be at all is to be somewhere and to have some kind of relationship with place, even when that relationship is one of displacement or migrancy.
- 2 Jim Cocola’s latest book, *Places in the Making*, is a lucid critical study of the work of a diverse group of “poets of place” (6) or “geographer-poets” (199) active in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The book’s central concept is “topopoiesis” or “place making,” by which Cocola means the imaginative creation of place in and through language but also referring, ultimately, to “the world exceeding signification” (4). Although the poetic imagination plays a crucial role in the process of place making,

as Cocola conceives it, the places depicted in the poems he discusses are understood as more than merely imaginary, for poems are also particular engagements with actual places and contribute to the layers of meaning that such places accrue. Indeed, because of their nuanced uses of language and form, poems are able to explore, interrogate, and invent the meanings of places with a level of eloquence and sophistication rarely encountered elsewhere. Throughout the book, Cocola emphasises both the phenomenological and the political orientations of “the poem attuned to place” (6), and he is at pains to distinguish such poems from the hackneyed genre of “pastoral poetry” (12) that retains a tenacious foothold in critical discussion of ecopoetics and environmental literature generally. Where pastoral poetry fabricates artificial and idealised landscapes that perform a variety of ideological functions, the poetry of place concerns itself with the particularity of specific places as they are encountered by the poet’s imagination acting in and on the world. In this regard, it is also worth noting that while Cocola’s study explores the topopoetic character of much modern and contemporary poetry, it lays equal emphasis upon the ways in which places fashion both poets and the poems that they write (59).

- 3 The other key line of argument developed in the book concerns the “place-based” rather than “place-bound” character of contemporary poetry of place (19). Indeed, the kinds of places that figure in the poems that Cocola discusses tend to be porous and relational, exhibiting a “translocal” (79) character that registers the far-reaching effects of time-space compression in the place-world of modernity. Poets do this by establishing the (imaginative or actual) connections between particular places within wider transnational or global networks. For instance, the work of Kamau Brathwaite is at once profoundly emplaced and richly expansive in terms of its historical and geographical horizons, linking specific places and cultures in West Africa with others in the Caribbean archipelago as part of his ongoing engagement with the history of the Black Atlantic. As this example indicates, Cocola’s study focuses upon “American” poetry but does so within an extended geographical and geopolitical range, discussing the work of poets from the Caribbean (Brathwaite), Central and South America (Pablo Neruda, Roque Dalton, Ernesto Cardenal), and the Pacific Islands (Haunani-Kay Trask, Craig Santos Perez) as well as the continental United States. He also includes a chapter on the work of the Korean-American poets Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim; though (perhaps oddly), there is no room here to consider the contributions made to place making by Canadian poets beyond a brief passing mention (21).
- 4 *Places in the Making* is divided into three sub-sections, “Prospects,” “Translocalities,” and “Zones,” each of which contains three chapters. In turn, each of the nine chapters examines the work of two poets, and Cocola relishes the opportunity to create unexpected, and often illuminating pairings. For instance, in Chapter 2 Robinson Jeffers and Pablo Neruda are considered together as poets writing from “the American edge of the Pacific Rim” (42); and in Chapter 3, the differently-inflected local attachments of Charles Olson and Lorine Niedecker are delineated and compared. In Chapter 4, Allen Ginsberg’s protest poem, “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” is read in conjunction with the poetry of Roque Dalton, who was imprisoned in El Salvador in 1965 and interrogated by the CIA. Other pairings are more straightforward but no less effective in highlighting common themes or differences of perspective and approach. In Chapter 6, Cocola critiques Gary Snyder’s tendency to conflate “immigrant and indigenous experience” in his place making (122) by reading his work in apposition to that of Joy Harjo, who is of Muscogee Creek heritage. Gloria Anzaldúa and Jimmy Santiago Baca are both

considered as poets of *Áztlan*, the unofficial homeland of Chicano and indigenous peoples that straddles the US-Mexico border, in Chapter 7. Intrinsically comparative and “multi-ethnic” (16) in its critical approach, Cocola’s book also displays truly impressive and wide-ranging knowledge of Anglophone and Hispanophone poetry not only in the Americas but across the globe.

- 5 The key features of Cocola’s critical method are perhaps most clearly evident in the first chapter of *Places in the Making*, where he differentiates the respective attitudes to place and place making that are evident in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Both are white male American modernists with strong attachments to places in the north-eastern United States, but their poetic sensibilities and aesthetic priorities are sharply distinct. Reading the work of both poets in light of the tradition of the prospect poem, Cocola points a contrast by arguing that Stevens exemplifies a broader tendency towards abstraction, whereby wholly imagined or metaphorical landscapes are created in favour of meaningful engagements with actual places. Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar” is a case in point, for, in Cocola’s reading, the poem gives expression to “a self-absorbed interiority” rather than any subjective involvement with “the environment of a particular place” (29). In short, the poem seems more concerned with the jar (as symbol of the poet’s imaginative power) than with the natural or cultural landscapes of Tennessee in which it is placed, thereby revealing Stevens as “the antithesis of a place maker” (31).
- 6 Stevens’s counterpart is Williams, the poet for whom there are no ideas but in things, who grounds the imagination’s powers in a documentary aesthetic and a stubborn fidelity to the everyday, material world of urban and suburban lives. In his late-modernist long poem *Paterson*, Williams’s “hyperlocal thought” (38) replaces solipsism with inter-subjectivity and a concern for the fundamentally social, collective dimensions of place making (34). However, as Cocola observes, Williams’s intensely local focus upon one carefully chosen and demarcated place can sometimes seem myopic. On the other hand, Williams is also guilty of overlooking “the utter singularity of all places” when he claims that the city of Paterson, New Jersey can stand both for “anywhere” and for “everywhere” (39). The deft counterpointing of Stevens’s and Williams’s respective poetics of place in this chapter is perceptive and revealing; and while Williams’s mode of place making is clearly more in tune with Cocola’s own critical ethics than that of Stevens, it is telling that its weaknesses and contradictions are also productively brought to light.
- 7 One of the strengths of *Places in the Making* is the way in which it elaborates a supple and persuasive argument through focused discussion of such a variety of textual examples, both the canonical and the little-discussed. Its interpretive strengths lie in breadth rather than depth, however: Cocola rarely quotes from the poems at much length and contextual or thematic analysis tends to predominate over close reading. His observations on poetic language and form are always astute, but they don’t often occupy a central place in the argument. Just occasionally, the book’s core preoccupation with place and place making gets displaced by the politics of identity, as, for instance, in the sections on Harjo, Cha, and Kim. It is also worth noting that Cocola’s subtitle – “A Cultural Geography of American Poetry” – is a little misleading. Cultural geography is a well-established sub-field of human geography with its own academic conventions, leading practitioners, and venues for publication – none of which feature prominently in *Places in the Making*. Instead, this is a work of literary history that is, as

Cocola himself puts it, “attuned to cultural geography and ethnic studies” (21). Its interdisciplinary character is sincere and important but not profound; and the book’s most significant points of reference are other geographically-informed works of literary criticism, such as Jahan Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), Paul Giles’s *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011), and Rebecca Walsh’s *The Geopoetics of Modernism* (2015). In this regard, it seems odd that Cocola should not mention the growing body of work in the field of literary geography, where similar lines of enquiry and argument to his own have also been pursued.

- 8 These minor caveats notwithstanding, Cocola’s study of place making in modern and contemporary American poetry is terrifically stimulating, cogent, and thought-provoking. Its expansive range and erudition ensure that even the most thoroughly-versed reader will find herself enlightened about the work of poets with whom she was at best half-familiar. The book’s core argument concerning the place-making function of poems and the poem-making function of places also has the potential to be transplanted into other literary and geographical contexts, where it will of necessity acquire new idioms and local inflections. It is, in sum, a very rich, suggestive, and rewarding piece of critical writing.

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Subjects: Recensions

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