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REFERENCES

HARDING, Wendy, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2014, 258 pages, ISBN-10 : 160938279X, 39 \$

- 1 In her new book, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place*, Wendy Harding sets out to expose “the falsity of the myth of empty space” (ix), a myth which, she suggests, has been prevalent in American culture since the early seventeenth century ; concomitantly she shows how a new American literature of place is now debunking this myth. This double approach, cultural as well as literary, is what makes Harding’s demonstrations both new and enlightening.
- 2 The essay’s problematic is elegantly introduced with the study of two photographs, one by Ansel Adams, the second by Robert Toedter (xiii), the aesthetics of which are premised on radically different conceptions of “emptiness.” In Adams’s work, the mountains are represented as ideal empty otherness while Toedter’s photograph interrogates the meaning of “empty” by cunningly blurring the “conventional distinctions between what is natural and what is human-made” (xi-xii).
- 3 Six writers have been selected for analysis : Rick Bass, Charles Bowden, Ellen Meloy, Jonathan Raban, Rebecca Solnit, and Robert Sullivan. All have in common the questioning of the dichotomous representations of space as either “zones of plenitude” or “zones of emptiness” (xiv). Harding’s study is informed by the work of a host of contemporary historians, sociologists, philosophers and geographers (as the profuse bibliography illustrates), but it is primarily literary. It means to show how the “crisis in representation” (xx) brings about new modes of writing committed to correcting the

distortions of dualistic thinking and “to reconnect[ing] the social and the natural” (xxi).

- 4 The first chapter is crucial in establishing the definitional boundaries of Harding’s object of analysis, the “new literature of place,” and in showing how this new literature departs from other conventional forms of nature writing (3-20) ; it also delineates the stylistic characteristics of “scripting,” (as Harding calls it) a mode summoned by the necessity of expressing complexity, hybridity, mutability, in relation to geohistory (20-26).
- 5 The new literature of place, Harding argues, expresses three concerns : it does not dwell on celebrated and iconic places, but rather on disinherited places ; it questions the polarizations between culture and nature, emptiness and inhabitation ; it reinscribes the land and our relation to it in a historical perspective (6). It thus departs from the exoticism and escapism of travel literature, from the often overt environmentalist agenda of ecoliterature, and from the authoritative mode of natural history.
- 6 “In the new literature of place, emptiness is not represented as an objective quality found in the land, but as a subjective projection imposed on it” (127). Therefore placing land under the sign of “empty” always signals cultural prejudice or intentionality. The new writers of place lay bare the illusion of out-of-time, out-of-space places. For them, “[p]lace is not a tangible material object apart from human subjects but rather a geotemporal palimpsest” (18). Steering clear of modernist and imperialist dualisms, these writers expose cultural suppressions and herald new forms of emplacement capable of cancelling the traditional sanctification/obliteration mode of spacing. They are, Harding says with a sure sense of formulation, “the new griots for an amnesiac nation” (20).
- 7 In order to break away from the either/or approach and to better suggest the hybridity and historicity of place, these writers adopt “an aesthetic of complexity” (196). Their new ecopoetics mean to deconstruct the split between object and subject and to accommodate less authoritative forms of writing. This literary form invites, indeed requires, the reader’s participation in constructing novel ways of interpreting the connectedness between people and place. Scripting is defined as being bimodal : it disrupts and connects, deconstructs and reconstructs. “Dispersed, erratic, discursive elements are gathered into personally angled texts to produce original representations of those places” (23). Scripts form multicentered, multifaceted and multilayered texts that resist fixity, authority, and teleological orientation. “In [the new writers’] postmodern and postcolonial explorations of space-time, a patchwork of discordant, partial, fragmented stories displaces the official national accounts” (25).
- 8 The second chapter produces a very convincing rereading of American geohistory in the light of the empty/full dichotomy. The overview revisits American history and illuminates canonical texts and authors from the early seventeenth century onward : Smith, Bradford, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, Tocqueville, O’Sullivan, Emerson, Thoreau, Turner, Leopold, Stegner. The critical survey (which students and teachers alike will find precious) ends with the contemporary problematic of dichotomous zoning, whereby land can serve as much as a dumping ground as an artist’s canvas, and reaffirms the historical dimension of place : “land is not simply spatial ; it is spatiotemporal” (47).

- 9 Parts two and three leave theory for demonstration. They propose to illustrate the way the works of contemporary authors disprove the myth of empty space.
- 10 In her discussion of Rick Bass's *Winter*, Harding shows how the "dream" script of emptiness evolves into scripts of lessons learned, adjustment and emplacement. The tone itself adjusts to the self-reflexive frame of mind which oscillates between playfulness and plenitude, doubts and loss. With its emphasis on social contact and its unromantic insistence on tools and machines, hard work and hard life, the memoir departs from traditional solitary nature writing. The narrative is no longer that of an Emersonian transparent observer. "The Yaak is not an empty space of projection found in earlier nature writing but an existential testing ground whose dense reality demands human interaction. The writer [...] represents himself in *Winter* as a molting, changing individual who becomes increasingly clear about his objectives in life—the aim is neither escape nor self-aggrandizement but integration, commitment, and responsibility" (75-76). Harding provides a fine analysis of the writer's recording of existential development and its attendant poetic adjustments. The script of passage to adulthood and "growing into responsibility" (70) is accompanied by a change in poetics: the initial baroque exuberance leaves room for quiet understatement and the suggestive power of the untold at the end of the narrative.
- 11 Charles Bowden's *Frog Mountain Blues* recounts the settling and occupation of the Santa Catalinas Mountains, north of Tucson. The account is nonlinear and made of a plurality of scripts, "a maze of traces gathered from oral accounts, from documents, and from the land itself" (77-78). Unlike Bass's *Winter*, Bowden's emphasis is on the past and the palimpsestic nature of place. Frog Mountain has known successive waves of occupation: the Hohokam Indians, the Spanish missionaries, the miners and loggers, the ranchers and homesteaders, the recreational visitors and finally the preservationists. All have left their layers of marks on the land.
- 12 Bowden's prose resists the often scientific environmentalist prose "dressed up in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes" (81 [127]) and offers "his more personal, idiosyncratic scripts as both an antidote and a complement" (81) to institutional discourse.
- 13 The scripting is occasionally nostalgic and appeals to the readers' affect, but the text's primary strategy is montage. The photographs included in the book interact with the texts: they ironize, contrast, authenticate, contradict, expose; they confuse the reader. The text itself, made of "memories, biographies, conversations, and interviews," "spirals from present to past, spanning the American territory, and mixing present-day explorations and encounters with historical scenes and intimate childhood memories" (85).
- 14 A "meshwork structure," "a braid of scripts" eventually emerge, that shape—in Leopoldian fashion—a sense of responsibility towards the nonhuman world. However, the last script of the book, consisting in a private dialogue with the mountain, suggests contact but also exclusion, ending inconclusively on a sense of unknowability.
- 15 Harding argues that Bowden offers "a new kind of literature of place." "Instead of posing as a knowing subject informing readers about an objectified and knowable territory, Bowden tries to suggest the appeal of a place that remains elusive in spite of the many discourses that try to evoke it" (100).
- 16 *The Last Cheater's Waltz* is a cryptic title for a book in which Ellen Meloy, in Harding's words, stages "the shift from the impossible dream of an unchanging, pristine desert to

the reality of humanity's continuous relations in and with the land. This discovery necessitates a shift from the fantasy of a solitary waltz with a beloved place to the recognition that the desert is not faithful to her alone—it is a cheater” (102).

- 17 Meloy's scripting copes with, and tries to reconcile, the cohabitation of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the personal and the ontological, beauty and violence, in the Southwestern desert. Ultimately trying to suture the split worlds of culture and nature, Meloy's book is an exercise in reconciliation with the impure.
- 18 The narrative opens on an initial malaise due to the illusion of solitary and exclusive communion with the desert and close to “the anomie of the desert mystics” (104), which prompts the author's quest for reconnection with the desert through aesthetic fulfillment. But Meloy's experience is far from serene and her text is no desert pastoral. The script records man's pervasive exploitation and desecration of the land— with the atomic age looming large in Meloy's book, as it did and still does on the arid Southwest and its nuclear test sites. Meloy underlines the conceptual irony whereby both the nuclear industry and the defense agencies imagined the desert to be empty. Acceptance of contradictions (destruction and vitality, sublime and monstrous) is a necessary step towards finding a new form of habitation and moving toward healing.
- 19 Meloy's writing is scientifically informed ; it is also informed by personal experience and meditation. Even if it is conversant with the abstractions of scientific discourse and the neutralizing effect of military jargon, it is marked by sensuous investment, lyrical rhapsodizing, cartoonish light relief and burlesque playacting. “The resulting creation is a montage of various styles, places, perspectives, moods, and modes of address. *The Last Cheaters' Waltz* offers a new construction of place through juxtaposition [...] It creates a reflection on space made of confusion, discovery, and acceptance, rather than intellectual cogitation” (122). This montage of scripts evinces a key aspect of the new literature of place—self-distancing. Yet Harding is right when she underscores the passion with which the three authors write about the (if not their) land, respectively “troped as wife (Bass), friend (Bowden), and lover (Meloy)” (123).
- 20 As a complement to part two which focuses on individual engagement with the land, part three explores collective, and national, interpretations of the American territory, by focusing on less celebrated places and more upsetting histories.
- 21 In *Bad Land: An American Romance*, Jonathan Raban evokes the history of immigrant families settling in eastern Montana. The unromantic, postlapsarian irony contained in the title suggests that Raban's story is one of failure, not of success. In fact, it captures “the traumatic failures of the homesteading system” (129). The book explores the social and political machinery, the propaganda, surrounding the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 and the resulting commodification of space and expropriation along the abstract lines of the federal Land Office's grid.
- 22 Here again, scripting is based on thematic and textual montage (family memoir, school textbooks, popular American fiction, past and present anecdotes). Harding shows how Raban, himself the alien émigré, the greenhorn, learns to see beyond the illusion of empty (137), how “ekphrasis” becomes “a form of apprenticeship” (138). In Raban's analysis, Harding says, the immigrant families who endured extreme adversity have forged a strong attachment to the land and have developed an authentic form of habitation based on interaction and mutual shaping.

- 23 Also at odds with post-Transcendentalist nature writing, Rebecca Solnit's *Savage Dreams* "relates the quest to uncover the realities beneath the layers of forgetfulness, indifference, falsification, and myth that surround the American West. To pursue this objective, Solnit investigates two sites that represent extreme cases of what are collectively recognized as empty spaces" (148): Yosemite National Park and the Nevada Test Site. "Projected unto these two very different sites, the sign of empty is not an expression of either transcendent or negative values, but a fabrication that masks social, political, and collective aspirations or 'dreams'" (148). Solnit's analysis highlights the mythical and biblical dimension in the collective representation of Yosemite (as simulacrum of Eden) and the Nevada Test Site (as Armageddon).
- 24 Can recreation make up for desecration? Harding's answer is no. To build an ontological gap between man and nature (as traditional preservation has done), to ignore the connection between geography and history, leads to tragic aporia.
- 25 Solnit's quest for understanding, and the writing thereof, does not follow straight lines; on the contrary it privileges movement and rambling, is attentive to ongoing changes, unfinished mutations, and improvisations in the American occupation of space. Her epistemology is peripatetic (see also Solnit's 2000 *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*). Her scripting relies on oral accounts, on stylistic equivalents of photographic or cinematographic effects, and on counterpoint images. It assumes a peripheral position yielding no expert knowledge, simply trying to give voice and visibility to the "uninhabitants" of the "empty" West.
- 26 Whereas the "wild dreams of sanctity or destructiveness" that humans project on the land are signs of their dissociation from it, the new emplacement that Solnit envisions and enscripts is nomadic, unfixed, unproprietary.
- 27 Ironically (or perhaps not so), Harding chooses to end her ecocritical survey by examining a book that takes its readers back East, and more precisely to a place which is a metonym for urban relegation and pollution—a critical gesture that somehow mirrors Robert Sullivan's ironic inscription of the New Jersey Meadowlands in the literature of place. Sullivan's *The Meadowlands* is "a discovery of America in reverse" (173). It borrows the codes of Romantic travel literature and applies them to the description of a new environmental space, "the strange new hybrid of the wild and the industrial" (173).
- 28 Mixing past and present accounts, the writer evokes the history of the swamps that resisted nineteenth- and twentieth-century development projects. Yet today, the blanked-out, "empty" swampland teems with life and continues to evince resilience. It is both "the repository of the nation's repressed memories" (181) and "the territorial equivalent of the unconscious of modern life" (182).
- 29 The burlesque mock naturalist vein, however, does more than just pastiche canonical texts like Lewis and Clark's *Journals* or *Walden*. It is also a powerful tool to bring ecological concerns into focus. This "reverse commute" back to "America's first West" (Sullivan's phrases and emphasis), Harding describes as "a writerly act of reclamation" (174). In his own parodic way, Sullivan's narrative suggests how the New Jersey Meadowlands, like so many other places disdained or simply ignored, illustrate the deleterious effects brought about by the spatial division that William Cronon critiques in *Uncommon Ground*.

- 30 Sullivan's new ecopoetics, much like Thoreau's thought-provoking style, implicitly calls for a change of mind, for only a collective mentality makeover that can give *wildness* (not the wilderness) its due.
- 31 Harding's book's logical organization is faultless, with its systematic micro-introductions and -conclusions. The bibliography offers a wealth of theoretical European and Anglo-American references, rich in themselves, but also capable of opening yet new investigatory trails. Formulation is always precise, often clever. Harding's essay, clearly on the postmodern side of ecocriticism and highlighting the postmodern leanings of the six writers analyzed here, amply succeeds in validating its initial proposition that a new literature has emerged in contemporary American conception and representation of place—a new literature of place which now places “empty” under the sign of myth.
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