

The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America

Catrin Gersdorf
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Reviewed by Chris Coughran¹

A book less about the ecology of deserts than their rhetorical function in historical constructions of national identity, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* is concerned not with the arid regions of America's west and southwest per se, but with a range of cultural artifacts – encompassing written texts, painterly and photographic representations – by which the desert landscape has been pressed into service for various political and economic purposes.

The meat of the book is divided symmetrically into four, as Gersdorf attempts to map the various rhetorical strategies by which the arid regions of the American West and Southwest – “territories that were foreign both topographically and culturally, and which seemed to be of no use economically” (111) – were assimilated into “the discourse of American national identity” (97). Her (albeit non-linear) account takes as its starting point the Mexican–American War of 1848, as a result of which “the US ... extorted large tracts of what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Southern California from Mexico” (97), and subsequently charts in considerable historical detail the gradual induction of these anomalous topographies into “the pantheon of canonical American landscapes” (112). Yet Gersdorf's book is not, essentially, a work of history (arguably, the author's political preferences, while laudable in themselves, make for a less than objective cultural history). It is, rather, a series of critical readings – of paradigmatic authors and seminal texts, alongside lesser-known artists and their works – clustered around the four “eco-spatial metaphors: garden, wilderness, Orient, and heterotopia” (32) which, according to Gersdorf, have informed cultural attitudes towards American desert landscapes at various points in history.

For Gersdorf, the desert is a landscape in which complex relations of class, race and gender are brought to light, rather than effaced; a tenet which substantially informs her project of literary and cultural criticism. Accordingly, texts which reveal historical traces of US imperialism, militarism, sexism, ethnocentrism and/or ecological abuse – notably, contemporary works by photographer Robert Mischke and novelist Alfredo Véa, Jr – are implicitly accorded a higher standing in Gersdorf's revisionist canon than those which fail to disclose (read: serve to conceal) such traces. For example, Gersdorf ascribes to W.E. Smythe's *The Conquest of Arid America*, a seminal exercise in “literary desert boosterism” (72) first published in 1899, “a narrative trajectory ... strategically aimed at erasing the desert's cultural history as one informed by diverse racial and ethnic presences, and at reinventing it as a garden that nourishes white Anglo-Saxon fantasies of mastery, control, and abundance” (79). Somewhat less offensive – though evidently still culpable – are twentieth-century writers such as Ann Zwinger, taken to task by Gersdorf for *The Mysterious Lands: A Naturalist Explores the Four Great Deserts of the Southwest* (1989), a book which

concentrates on natural history, never completely erasing human history but selectively choosing from it. While the story of the West's Anglo-American settlement surfaces here and there in the text, ... Native and Spanish American presences are either categorized within a self-contained, pre-historic past or

virtually unrepresented. Not to mention allusions to the desert's cultural history as waste dump, bombing range, or nuclear testing ground. (235)

Such criticism seems harsh, especially in light of the fact that Gersdorf herself – having all but conceded the arbitrariness of her own book's fourfold classificatory schema (34, 40) – is just as guilty of “selectively choosing” from a potentially infinite variety of source material. For an academic writer determined to expose the “radically conservative ideolog[ies]” (183) underlying various historical representations of the desert landscape, Gersdorf seems at times curiously oblivious to her own cultural biases and subject position, apparently unaware – or unconcerned – that in her work a contemporary (eco)critical sensibility has become the de facto benchmark for moral evaluations of American history.

After the fashion of Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) – an influence duly acknowledged by Gersdorf (257) – *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* serves as a political corrective to post-WWII American studies typified by Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), a seminal text which (not least by way of Smith's pupil, Leo Marx) has informed the practice of ecological literary criticism in the United States. Gersdorf's critical insights into the politics of representation have implications, certainly, for ecocriticism and the nature-writing canon. For instance, developing an argument suggested by David Mazel and others, Gersdorf maintains that under the aegis of a domestic or nativist Orientalism which flowered briefly at the turn of the twentieth century, “desert appreciation became a mode of taking possession of an area ... that [otherwise] resisted ... modes of establishing territorial authority and control, such as agriculture” (147). Literary and painterly representations of the desert landscape, in other words, performed an essential ideological function, serving to appropriate “hitherto ‘foreign’ territory as the cultural property of the United States” (136).

Gersdorf makes such claims in relation to specific texts, but there is an unfortunate tendency toward repetition – an implicit form of generalisation – in her work. In light of her book, writing appreciatively about the American desert or other wilderness areas seems a perilous undertaking for *any* white male subject, who (apparently) must “attempt to secure for himself and his peers a regenerative space, a territory that affords the white, male, bourgeois subject a place in which to indulge in reassuring fantasies of his own exclusivity and power” (156). For the (albeit white, male) reviewer of her work, such sweeping assertions are of questionable value, other than as forms of political rhetoric.

More cogent is Gersdorf's appeal for greater awareness of “the ideological repercussions and political implications of the tropes and images engaged in [wilderness] defense” (208). In the writings of male wilderness advocates such as Theodore Roosevelt and Edward Abbey, unsurprisingly, Gersdorf finds ample evidence for “the double articulation of ... wilderness and *white Anglo-Saxon* masculinist subjectivity” (193, italics in original). Certainly, we should like to know that “the association of wilderness with whiteness, masculinity, patriotism/nationalism, imperial expansion, and cultural domination is a consistent theme in Roosevelt's writings” (168). Abbey's oeuvre is cast in a similar light, prompting Gersdorf to question the politics of canon-building within ecocriticism, and in particular, the conceptual value of wilderness:

The inclusion of wilderness in the blood-and-soil discourse of the nation, the underlying moral bigotry of its rhetorical use, and the exclusion of those groups who, according to men like Roosevelt, threaten the nation's racial purity call into question the legitimacy of wilderness/wild nature as a conceptual tool for a critique of rationalism, science and technology. ... [T]he rhetorical recruitment of wilderness as a white, male space [has] not only damaged its discursive credibility as a revitalizing location for a multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multicultural nation, but dented wilderness as a conceptual tool for an ecological critique of modernity. (170–71)

Whether or not modernity per se is the proper object of ecological critique, Gersdorf does have a point – though in this passage, her own strong aversion to moral contamination by various (discursive) pollutants seems to contradict her appeal for a genuinely “ecological” approach. For Gersdorf, the merest hint of gendered imagery or essentialist discourse in a text effectively disqualifies it – on moral grounds – from serving its (ostensibly progressive) political purpose, including that of ecological activism (see, e.g., 206, 228; cf. 265). Rather than accept the (always already) paradoxical,

self-contradictory nature of subjects and discourses, the author seems intent on depicting the politics of landscape representation as a zero-sum game.

Paradoxically, in light of this apparent quest for a politically correct nature-writing canon, Gersdorf privileges representations of landscapes that are fragmented and multiply coded. If depictions of the American desert in metaphorical terms of garden, wilderness and (domestic) Orient have tended to gloss over crucial relations of class, race and gender, then Gersdorf posits a more appropriate discursive paradigm in a concept of "heterotopia" – that ideal "space between cultures, ideologies, and established orders" (320) which permits of any number of "alternative ordering[s] of the American cultural imaginary" (245). Among other potential benefits, heterotopia holds forth the promise of "new, ecologically conscious forms of gender" (265).

One suspects, however, that "heterotopia" is merely a grab-bag for all those desert representations that fail to illustrate one or another of the book's three other eco-spatial metaphors. The concept of heterotopia is notoriously under-theorised, at least in the work of its originator, Michel Foucault, and Gersdorf's contribution towards a reworked definition seems slight. Although Vía's novel *La Maravilla* (1994) may indeed exemplify "a literary project in which *desert* is translated into a rhetorical instrument that challenges the established social, ethical, and economic patterns of modern US culture" (248), it is difficult to see how such a text could possibly serve as a blueprint for "alternative orderings" of the social world beyond its fictional borders – with the possible exception of the nature-writing classroom, which the author implies could do with a healthy dose of border theory (Gloria Anzaldúa, et al.).

The argument of Gersdorf's book, while clearly relevant to current debates within ecocriticism, tends to sprawl. Readers interested in particular authors – Mary Austin, say, or Joseph Wood Krutch – may choose to dip into the book's respective sections and, more than likely, find ample reward there. Readers seeking a watershed in the development of a theoretically informed ecocriticism, on the other hand, may inadvertently find themselves, at the conclusion of almost 400 pages bristling with footnotes, in the same predicament as the feebler of the two title characters in the Gus Van Sant film *Gerry* (2002): parched and more than a little exhausted. That said, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* warrants a place in any library devoted to feminist perspectives on American studies, the politics of landscape representation, and ecological literary criticism.

Notes

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