

*Nation and Region in Modern American and European Fiction.* By Thomas O. Beebee. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press. 2008. ix + 200 pp.

The content of Thomas Beebee's book certainly meets the charge of this journal's title. The literature he compares ranges from Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (1816/17) to Euclides Da Cunha's account in *Os Sertões* (1902) of late nineteenth-century tramping and battles in the *caatinga* of Northeast Brazil to the contemporary Quebecois novelist Nicole Brossard's depictions of the homoerotics of the Arizona desert in her *Le Désert mauve* (1987). One would be hard pressed to think of a more wide-ranging geographical and historical literary comparison. The book is impressively scholarly, based on an immense amount of reading, much of it not written in English, visits to archives, and field research, that is, "being there" and with grainy black and white photos to prove it. I found the writing sometimes strained (it was too self-consciousness and fussy in places). And the seeming tic of sandwiching large chunks of foreign-language prose (in German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and at one point Russian) between the main English-language text was annoying. But of course it may not be a tic at all. Rather it might be the rules of the game for writing comparative literature.

In contrast, I write in geography. Beebee significantly draws on the subject. His argument is that the various authors he examines – apart from the three already mentioned, he discusses (in chronological order) Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Juan Benet, William Faulkner, José Lins do Rego, Mary Austin, and Joy Harjo – make geography central. He means that in two senses: that geography is part of the literary project of each author, and that each author strives to achieve a geographical project. For example, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is inseparable from the "postage stamp of soil" that is Yoknapatawpha (Lafayette) county, Mississippi, where

the plot of the novel unfolds. At the same time Faulkner uses the novel to persuade readers to think of Mississippi in a different kind of geographical relation. He tries to construct a new geographical imaginary in which Mississippi is both a distinctive region within the United States (challenging the centralised hegemony of a unified nation), but with cultural and historical commonalities with places outside (as a region it geographically resonates with plantation economies distant from it such as the Caribbean, and Central and South America).

Beebee draws explicitly upon at least two geographical ideas (although in both cases not invented by geographers): mental maps and heterotopia. Mental maps, coined in 1960 by the MIT urban landscape designer Kevin Lynch, were used as a technique to improve city “legibility.” By comparing the maps that residents of different cities carried around in their head, Lynch was able to distinguish features of the urban landscape that were distinctive and memorable, and those that were blah. The imperative for the urban designer was to use the distinctive features, but discard the blah ones. Heterotopia came from Foucault, although he was never happy with the idea. Its prominence emerged only after Foucault died, and associated with proselytising works of some geographers and architects. Heterotopia is the notion that some geographical sites possess the potential to rupture the old order, replacing it with the different order found at such sites.

I was never entirely clear how in Beebee’s mind mental maps and heterotopia were related. He used mental maps much more than heterotopia, but neither seemed foundational to his book. In Lynch’s use, mental maps possess an instrumental function, they are the means to improve city design. Beebee presumably would want to discard that instrumentalism. Instead, for him, a mental map is more like the cultural imagining of a place, or a nation, or even the globe. In this sense, each of his authors through their works try to shift that imaginary. I think

“geographical imaginary” is a better term than “mental maps” which comes with the baggage of instrumentalism, even social engineering. There are also conceptual problems. Do we really have maps in our head? Also minds are found only in individuals, but Beebee is primarily interested in culture which is a collective. It is cultural meaning in which he is interested not sparking synapses in the brain. Heterotopia was even more problematic. Beebee does not use the term very much beyond his introduction. In addition, as he recognises, there are several competing definitions. But I found it difficult to understand his definition, or why he selected it over and above other versions. But most of all I did not understand the geographical work it performed.

I realise this is an ungenerous reaction, maybe a case of disciplinary chauvinism: if you don't do it geography's way, you must be wrong. There is in my discipline a sub-field called the geography of literature. But it is not very good. Its focus, to use Beebee's vocabulary, is mimesis, with barely a nod to diegesis and nothing at all about diataxis. The subfield tends to turn on such mundane activities as plotting Thomas Hardy's fictional Wessex on to non-fictional West England county maps. By comparison, there is a lot that geographers could learn from Beebee's volume. For a start he provides a theoretical framework, one objective of which is precisely to move beyond mimesis. Further, he presents a spectacularly diverse range of geographical (and historical) sources, emphasising comparison. It makes those geographical Wessex studies appear parochial and narrow. Finally, he is not afraid to makes various appearances in his own text, and explaining those snap shots. He doggedly follows the dusty trail of Da Cunha in Brazil, and with detective-like astuteness tracks down in a rental car Faulkner in Mississippi. All this is to the good. I see the potential for an interesting collusion of comparative literature with geography (although I realise this may not be Beebee's end). But I

am not yet convinced that Beebee best uses what geography has to offer. The geographical concepts on which he draws are neither well articulated, nor effective given his aims. An obvious omission in his work is a lack of discussion about geographical scale. His talk of site, region, nation and Empire cries out for scalar analysis. But none is offered. Likewise, he would profit from discussions by geographers, many longstanding, about the relation between centre and periphery, heartland and hinterland, space and place, natural and cultural landscapes. Let the conversation begin.

*Biography*

Trevor Barnes is a Professor and Distinguished University Scholar at the Department of Geography, University of British Columbia. He has taught there since 1983. His research interests are in economic geography and the history and philosophy of the discipline. He is the author or editor of nine books, and over a hundred papers and chapters in edited volumes. His current research is on the influence of World War II and the Cold War on American geographical thought.