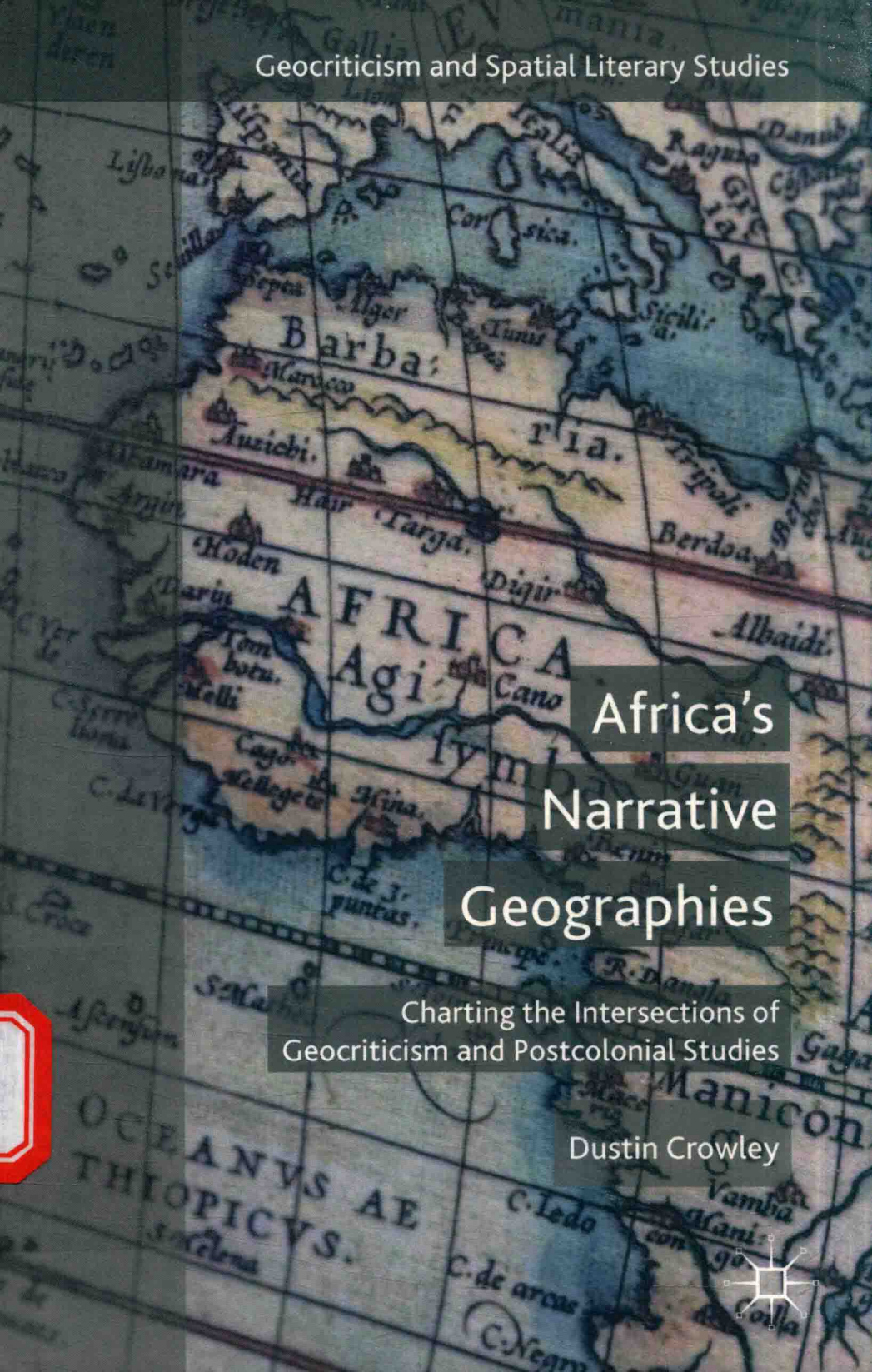


Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies



# Africa's Narrative Geographies

Charting the Intersections of  
Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies

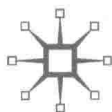
Dustin Crowley



AFRICA'S NARRATIVE GEOGRAPHIES  
CHARTING THE INTERSECTIONS OF  
GEOCRITICISM AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

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palgrave  
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## Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies

Series Editor:

**ROBERT T. TALLY JR.**, Texas State University

Series description:

*Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* is a new book series focusing on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship in recent years, and geocriticism, broadly conceived, has been among the more promising developments in spatially oriented literary studies. Whether focused on literary geography, cartography, geopoetics, or the spatial humanities more generally, geocritical approaches enable readers to reflect upon the representation of space and place, both in imaginary universes and in those zones where fiction meets reality. Titles in the series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory, and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series disclose, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and in the world.

**Robert T. Tally Jr.** is Associate Professor of English at Texas State University, USA. His work explores the relations among narrative, representation, and social space in American and world literature, criticism, and theory. Tally has been recognized as a leading figure in the emerging fields of geocriticism, spatiality studies, and the spatial humanities. Tally's books include *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism*; *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique*; *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System*; *Spatiality*; *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*; and *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer*. The translator of Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Tally is the editor of *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*; *Kurt Vonnegut: Critical Insights*; and *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative*.

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*Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies*

By Dustin Crowley

## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship. Spatially oriented literary studies, whether operating under the banner of literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism, or the spatial humanities more generally, have helped to reframe or to transform contemporary criticism by focusing attention, in various ways, on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. Reflecting upon the representation of space and place, whether in the real world, in imaginary universes, or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality, scholars and critics working in spatial literary studies are helping to reorient literary criticism, history, and theory. *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* is a book series presenting new research in this burgeoning field of inquiry.

In exploring such matters as the representation of place in literary works, the relations between literature and geography, the historical transformation of literary and cartographic practices, and the role of space in critical theory, among many others, geocriticism and spatial literary studies have also developed interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary methods and practices, frequently making productive connections to architecture, art history, geography, history, philosophy, politics, social theory, and urban studies, to name but a few. Spatial criticism is not limited to the spaces of the so-called real world, and it sometimes calls into question any too facile distinction between real and imaginary places, as it frequently investigates what Edward Soja has referred to as the "real-and-imagined" places we experience in literature as in life. Indeed, although a great deal of important research has been devoted to the literary representation of certain identifiable and well-known places (e.g., Dickens's London, Baudelaire's Paris, or Joyce's Dublin), spatial critics have also explored the otherworldly spaces of literature, such as those to be found in myth, fantasy, science fiction, video games, and cyberspace. Similarly, such criticism is interested in the relationship between spatiality and such different media or genres as film or television, music, comics, computer programs,

and other forms that may supplement, compete with, and potentially problematize literary representation. Titles in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory, and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the series reveal, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and in the world.

The concepts, practices, or theories implied by the title of this series are to be understood expansively. Although geocriticism and spatial literary studies represent a relatively new area of critical and scholarly investigation, the historical roots of spatial criticism extend well beyond the recent past, informing present and future work. Thanks to a growing critical awareness of spatiality, innovative research into the literary geography of real and imaginary places has helped to shape historical and cultural studies in ancient, medieval, early modern, and modernist literature, while a discourse of spatiality undergirds much of what is still understood as the postmodern condition. The suppression of distance by modern technology, transportation, and telecommunications has only enhanced the sense of place, and of displacement, in the age of globalization. Spatial criticism examines literary representations not only of places themselves but of the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it. In sum, the work being done in geocriticism and spatial literary studies, broadly conceived, is diverse and far-reaching. Each volume in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series takes seriously the mutually impressive effects of space or place and artistic representation, particularly as these effects manifest themselves in works of literature. By bringing the spatial and geographical concerns to bear on their scholarship, books in this series seek to make possible different ways of seeing literary and cultural texts, to pose novel questions for criticism and theory, and to offer alternative approaches to literary and cultural studies. In short, the series aims to open up new spaces for critical inquiry.

Robert T. Tally Jr.

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## INTRODUCTION



### CHARTING A PATH FOR GEOCRITICISM

*There never was an is without a where.*

—Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*

Lawrence Buell's seemingly obvious declaration plainly states the reality of emplacement: all things literally *take place*, rooted in and to an extent conditioned by the concrete materiality of place and environment. Even overtly social, discursive forms like identity and culture engage meaningfully with the places of their formation, as "all human experience occurs in a spatial setting" (Sample 25). Space, Henri Lefebvre tells us, is a tool for thought and action. Space enables and space constrains. That spatial environment "becomes an important ingredient in the shaping and construction of a harmonious self" (26) or contributes to the lack of a stable subjectivity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o insists that culture, too, derives from "the process of a people wrestling with their natural and social environment" (Ngũgĩ 27). And the relationships between those places, played out across a mottled terrain of borders and flows at various scales, help to shape, facilitate, control, or hinder social and material relations of all kinds: structuring a sense of similarity or difference, connectedness or segregation; channeling the flow of people, ideas, resources, and capital; marking off territory for projects of power, resistance, or alterity; and so on. Alongside the well-accepted axiom to think historically and metrics like race, class, and gender, then, we might add the imperative to think geographically, to be attuned to the dynamics of space, place, and scale that undergird these other concerns.

The study of African literature in particular would benefit from attention to such geospatial considerations. To date, questions of identity (in the form of nationalism, ethnicity, and gender), language and culture (European versus indigenous), economics (development, neocolonialism, gendered division of labor), and politics (imperialism, governance, corruption, Marxism versus democratic pluralism) have dominated the study of Africa and its literatures. Important as these issues may be, there is no *is* without a *where*, and questions of ontology and social relations have been inextricably fashioned by the *where* of Africa and its specific geohistorical conditions and spatial relations, both within the continent and between Africa and the rest of the world. The central questions of African literary study have fundamentally geographic components, beginning with a history of colonialism and imperialism that were themselves thoroughly geographic endeavors—establishing cities and ports to facilitate global flows of people and resources, undoing extant geographies of identity and relation, and replacing them with new colonies and territories. These colonies, of course, would largely become the outlines of new nation-states, the borders and contents of which have provided endless fodder for concerns over national and ethnic identity, as well as debates about (typically) differential development of urban and rural spaces in order to expedite the exploitation and exportation of resources for foreign markets, and so on. Indeed, much of African studies might be characterized as the study of the continent's uneven entrance into globalization and its effect on the places and peoples of the continent, prompting ever-growing engagement with thematic concerns in the literature regarding environmental crisis, genocide and refugeeism, migration and diaspora, urbanization and development.

In other words, underlying questions of African identity and social organization are the geographies that enable or constrain them, spatialities that are multiple, shifting, and operating at different scales and in different configurations simultaneously. This swirl of local, national, continental, global, and imperial spatial relations makes African literature ripe for new critical approaches that can attend to their significance. A growing body of criticism (variously labeled *spatial literary studies*, *literary cartography*, or *geocriticism*) has begun to stake out claims for the necessity and usefulness of a geographically informed approach to literary criticism. Though still relatively nascent, spatial literary studies have already been established on firm ground by works like Robert Tally's *Spatiality* and Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. These and other writers are making a strong case for geocriticism as a way to enunciate "the dialectical nature of the

relations between texts and their real-world referents" ("Geocriticism Meets Ecocriticism"), a method particularly useful for any activist criticism attempting to understand literature as a source of sociopolitical resistance and genuine alterity.

That would certainly apply to the authors and works included in this book, all of which register concerns with the dominant spatialities they encounter and use the literature to imagine alternative spaces and places of freedom and dignity. The five writers treated in subsequent chapters represent an extensive (though by no means exhaustive) catalogue of geospatial concerns that characterize much African literature: Léopold Sédar-Senghor's *négritude* poetry and the attempt to construct a sense of "Africa" as a unified place; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's efforts to negotiate the particularity of cultural nationalism with a broad-based global Marxism; Bessie Head's transgression of repressive borders (of both nation and identity) in order to claim a sense of belonging in exile; Nuruddin Farah's reconstruction of national identity around a core cosmopolitan urban ethos; and Chris Abani's ambivalent characterization of global urban cityscapes as places of simultaneous freedom and rootlessness, opportunity and disenfranchisement.

To a certain extent, few of these issues are entirely new, and it does not require geocriticism to announce their importance for these authors or for African literary studies in general. However, to this point, treatment of concepts like nationalism, borders, urbanization, and globalization in African literature has been broached almost exclusively through postcolonial methods heavily influenced by postmodernist and post-structuralist sentiments and assumptions. The same, in fact, could be said of much geocriticism and spatial literary studies as well. This book, then, represents an intervention on both African literary studies and geocriticism, an effort to clarify and course-correct some tendencies and practices by interjecting insights from new sources like cultural geography and political ecology. In general, the intention here is to supplement the predominantly postmodern/post-structuralist basis of most spatial and African literary studies, which has engendered some limiting and often dichotomous assumptions regarding the categories of geographic relations. In place of clear-cut categories, this book develops a model for understanding spatial dynamics in more flexible, conditional, and relational ways, allowing us to interpret and evaluate the complex geographic relationships and alternatives portrayed in African literature. Such an effort is especially important given that "African literature" is in many ways a convenient misnomer, standing in for a diverse set

of literatures bespeaking complex and often contending perspectives, all the more in need of nuanced tools for criticism that can interrogate these representations without predetermined evaluations and categories.

## POSTCOLONIALISM AND SPATIAL LITERARY STUDIES

Given its prevalence in both the study of African literature and spatial literary studies, a brief overview of postcolonial literary studies and subsequent attention to diasporic and borderlands literatures and theory is in order. To its credit, postcolonial literary theory and criticism adopts geographic relations as one of its central concerns, challenging imperialism and colonialism that are, at their core, geographic endeavors. As a means to understand and counter the material and discursive efforts of imperialism, postcolonialism has introduced into literary theory a host of spatial concerns, concepts, and metaphors: center/periphery, globalization, Global North/South, nationalism, localism, and many others. In *Postcolonial Spaces*, Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone suggest seeing postcolonialism and geography brought together not through a conscious effort, but by a necessary relation right from the beginning. "In the field of postcolonial studies," they write, "[...] space has *always* been central" (1). They frame postcolonialism's central concern with identity geographically, claiming that "place plays a significant role in how one defines one's own identity and, equally, how that identity is defined by others" (2). Given the machinations of colonialism, the often arbitrary establishment and manipulation of colonial/national borders, and the increasingly globalized relations between postcolonial places, these identities have become very complicated. The geographic legacies of colonialism, they argue, might best be understood as engendering "complex relationships between postcolonial individuals, families, communities, and nations and, indeed, a broader global consciousness" (3).

As a result, thinkers in spatial studies often point directly to postcolonial theory as informing their own work on the dynamics of spatial relations. Edward Soja, for instance, points to Edward Said as an inspiration in *Seeking Spatial Justice*; he quotes Said as claiming, "Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about the control of territory" (36). Soja goes on to extrapolate an understanding of spatial control from European colonialism, which adopted "powerful spatial strategies of territorial dispossession, military occupation, cultural domination, [and] economic exploitation," practices of intrusive

colonial organization that produced and continue to reproduce geographic conditions of "exclusion, domination, disciplinary control" (37). In formulating his own understanding of geocriticism, Westphal, too, points to imperialism as the prototype of spatial power, "the old empire of that totalizing space, of positivism, of colonialism, of the always absolute and inhuman constriction" (38), against which he devises an understanding of transgression of boundaries and "nomadism" as the more desired mode of spatiality.

The study of geography in turn has not been immune from confronting a more complex "global consciousness" as well. Faced with post-structuralist and postcolonial challenges, cultural geography in particular has been made to account for more complexity, difference, and the *production* of spatial relations in part through discursive practices. In *Geocriticism*, Westphal makes clear that even fictional spaces have a sort of "weak ontology" (Westphal 37), that representations of place are "real" in their effect on material spatial relations, and vice versa. As a result, geography can no longer approach its subject with its former pretensions of objectivity or universality that characterized most Western academic pursuits before the discursive turn in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In both *Postcolonial Spaces* and *Geocriticism*, the interaction of postcolonialism and geography is facilitated by a particular post-structuralist bent that privileges notions of identity, difference, discourse, and anti-essentialism. For Teverson and Upstone, the emphasis on a specifically post-structuralist theory in both postcolonialism and geography has been profoundly impactful, given the way it makes them "more, and not less, aware of the specifics of location and situation which they have sometimes under-emphasized" (*Postcolonial Spaces* 4). In spite of criticisms from many that post-structuralism often trends overly discursive and "off-ground," they reject a need to offer "an alternative to the poststructuralist-influenced literary/cultural postcolonial theory"; rather, "postcolonial geography has led the way in illuminating the relevance of poststructuralist theories to both the interpretation of the physical reality of colonialism, and the material struggles of postcolonial societies" (5). Ultimately, they formulate the history of postcolonial geography as a mutually beneficial exchange between the disciplines, with geography shepherded away from objective empirical materialism and postcolonialism gaining an "understanding of material locations" that aids in "combining textual and material practice" (5-6).

I would suggest, however, that the exchange has remained unfinished, at least regarding criticism on African literature, where

post-structural and more materialist forms of postcolonialism have often existed in separate trajectories. Because of its history with challenging and intellectually dismantling the nation, much postcolonial criticism approaches all geographic categories and sense of place with no small amount of suspicion; even domestic and urban scales are often subject to the same erosions and transgressions as overtly contested categories like the nation. In lieu of place or materialism, this scholarship on African writing draws on geography mostly in the form of somewhat abstract spatiality with a heavy emphasis on migration, mobility, hybridity, and other forms of deconstructive and destabilizing geographic relations. What is left, rather than physical and material locations, is a sense of situatedness that is at best "social contextualization," and often "many of those for whom physical embeddedness is a central issue concern themselves more with 'bodies-as-places' [...] than with emplacement within physical environments" (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 65–6).

Even pointed efforts at incorporating geography into literary and cultural criticism have followed similar trends, as exemplified by Westphal's groundbreaking work on the subject of what he calls "geocriticism." While not directly postcolonial, *Geocriticism* is plainly a work of post-structuralist geography and cultural theory, centering on the notion of *transgressivity*. Westphal begins with a discussion of "smooth" versus "striated" space, taken from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: the distinction "is analogous to that between heterogeneous and homogeneous space" (Westphal 39). As the space of "sedentary" and restrictive city life, striated space is "striated by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures" (Deleuze and Guattari, qtd. In Westphal 39); it is the space "occupied by the state apparatus. This is the space of the polis, politics, the policed, and the police" (Westphal 39). Necessarily and binarily opposed to striated space is "smooth space," nomadic space that is "virtually open to infinity" (39). In Westphal's description, smooth space bears many similarities to Foucault's heterotopia, the convergence "in a single real place [of] several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible," symbolized by a ship, "a floating piece of space, a place without a place" (Foucault 6, 9). It also parallels Edward Soja's thirdspace, "*a space of radical openness*, a vast territory of infinite possibilities and perils" that lie "beyond" any structured or bounded formulation of centers and peripheries (*Thirdspace* 33). There is a common postmodernist thread here, a desire to define a space that escapes definition or strict delineation, which can be opposed to the constricting tendencies of established boundaries.<sup>1</sup>



The smooth/striated construction Westphal adopts enacts a clear dichotomy between these kinds of space. Though Westphal notes that these spaces are naturally “mixed” and that “the striated can become smooth, just as smooth space is exposed to striation” (Westphal 40), his reference to American military intervention in Iraq as a striating effort in the “smooth” Iraqi desert (40) strongly implies the inimical and conflictual nature of their relationship, with smooth space unambiguously the more virtuous of the two. After all, smooth space is by definition more in line with the oft-repeated claim that space itself is (and ought to be) “a heterogeneous (and socially open)” phenomenon; more smoothing, more openness, more indeterminacy of borders, then, would seem to be the privileged position of those who seek a space that “consistently escapes political control” (38). Yet in this spatial narrative, that geographic freedom is constantly under attack as “smooth space is constantly threatened by the striating that civilized, settled society imposes [...] space is essentially heterogeneous, but it is always subject to homogenizing forces” (40).

Westphal gives hints about how this formulation might be applied to the (post)colonial situation when he casts striated space as city life, opposed to the “bedouinism” of smooth space (39). The space of authority and rules, striated space would be the realm of colonialism and imperialism, setting up a center/periphery structure as a static hierarchy, “which would forever fix the poles of reference (i.e., to say, the center and the periphery), the privileged center point and the infinite series of points that are situated in a more or less distant array” (49). Constructed this way, smooth space (as it naturally opposes striated space) necessarily becomes the space of resistance, the “marginal space of freedom” (47). Indeed, smooth space is privileged and celebrated throughout Westphal’s account, especially as it gives expression to transgression, which itself is “coextensive with mobility” (45). Mobility of this sort is enacted both through and *as* smooth space, crossing borders and mobilizing the periphery against the center, where it encroaches and disrupts “according to a law of interference” (49). This, for Westphal, is the essence of resistance understood geographically, spatially. As such, it should not be “an isolated or spontaneous action,” but rather a continuous *state* of “perpetual oscillation” that he terms *transgressivity* (49).

In keeping with its post-structuralist origins, Westphal’s geocriticism ultimately understands the challenge to hegemonic forces and the expression of difference through a deconstructive principle, where the “transgressive gaze is constantly directed toward an emancipatory horizon in order to see beyond a code and territory that serves as