

**Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place by Eric Prieto. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.**

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In his recent book, *Explore Everything, Place-Hacking the City* (2013), Garrett provides a manifesto for the tech-savvy millennials of 'these militarised, Orwellian cities we reside in'. For Garrett, and urban explorers like him, the city is represented as a locus of systematised power and control, the most important node within an all-embracing network of capital. This sense of resistance is never far away in Eric Prieto's latest book. Although Prieto uses the term 'place' to refer to any socially-constructed site, his real focus remains what he calls 'emergent forms of place' (p.2). By this he means in-between places, edgelands lying off the official map of any town or city. Prieto describes the proliferation of these non-places, of being in a state of *entre-deux*, as a key condition of postmodernity. It is to these borderlands that Prieto applies his gaze, treating such *terra incognita* as social laboratories, offering dynamic insights into how all of us can embrace adaptation and resistance in the face of the postmodern behemoth.

To help in this journey, Prieto dismantles and then reassembles a working methodology. It is this process that forms a key part of the book. Prieto arrives at what he calls an 'holistic theory' (p.192) which divides place into three distinct layers - phenomenological, social and natural/material - 'a stereoscopic melding of theoretical and literary accounts of place' (p.188).

To get to this point, Prieto takes the reader through an impressive analysis of key theorists, from Entrikin and Malpas, to the poststructuralism of Foucault and Lefebvre. Yet it is Michel de Certeau who remains at the heart of the book. And it is not hard to see why. Certeau's notion of tactical opposition, of urban resistance to the state's apparatus chimes strongly with Prieto's own vision for how to survive in the twenty-first century. In his discussion of novels, poems and film, Prieto successfully demonstrates how fictional representations both instantiate and shape the lived environment. These representations become the glue which binds Prieto's three layers

together. Entrikin's notion of narrative as a 'configurational act', bridging the epistemological divide between subjective/objective experience remains an important one in this context. Yet in the conclusion it is the survival of Prieto's own academic discipline that becomes the real focus of his concern, unmasking perhaps the author's primary concern with postmodernity. Borrowing E. O. Wilson's term, 'consilience', denoting the search for a grand unifying theory across the disciplines, Prieto ends with a rallying cry for the humanities in the hope that it does not 'disappear from the consilient equation' (p.199).

It is to his credit that Prieto recognises the overlap between his own three layer model and the rhizomatic structures proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. He criticises the latter as being theoretical rather than practical but there is a danger that his own model is close on its heels. Although there is interesting discussion of the Parisian banlieue and postcolonial landscapes, for example, Prieto's thesis remains essentially theoretical too, offering up a methodology which others are invited to explore.

This focus on theory is a double edged sword. Although it provides a strong foundation for Prieto to explore the evolution of social-constructed notions of 'place', it offers little in terms of practicalities, of the sort of urban transgression that Certeau in particular was championing. This is a shame as one of the more interesting aspects of Certeau's work is the relationship that he expounds between storifying and space. For Certeau the act of walking creates a 'space of enunciation', individual journeys forming 'unforeseeable sentences' across the city. A reader translates a written text, an encoded system of signs, into a story. In the same way the urban planners' map of symbols and signs is transformed into a 'practiced place' through the act of walking. Notably absent too is the iconic figure of Baudelaire's flâneur, or reference to Guy Debord and the Situationists. The latter's free-form psychological wanderings of the *dérive* would seem particularly apt in terms of Prieto's wider aims, as would the activities of psychogeographers, the reclamation of the forgotten places, of mentally re-booting the city through the creative act of the physical journey. Certeau saw such 'tactical and makeshift'

actions as part of what he called a 'network of an antidiscipline', a deconstruction of cityspace through the formation of alternative narratives. Prieto's holistic model needs to explicitly embrace these ideas. Throughout his book the 'citizen' is notably absent. The individual's role in the creation of new meanings remains abstract. This is a shame as the theoretical discussions provide an excellent bedrock on which to build a more critical examination of 'poetics' itself in terms of movement, place and memory. Yet Prieto's ambition to examine the meaning of place in the twenty-first century remains an important one. As cities become evermore complex and our relationship to space increasingly mediated through mobile technology, there remains a growing imperative to understand how their citizens can find fulfillment. Yet Prieto is only partly right when he says that the answer lies in the postmodern edgelands of the Parisian banlieue or the postcolonial hinterland. If there is a lesson from the psychogeographers and the Situationists, it is that all space is *entre-deux*, each and every path we take interstitial. Perhaps the solutions Prieto is trying to find lay much closer to home than he thinks.