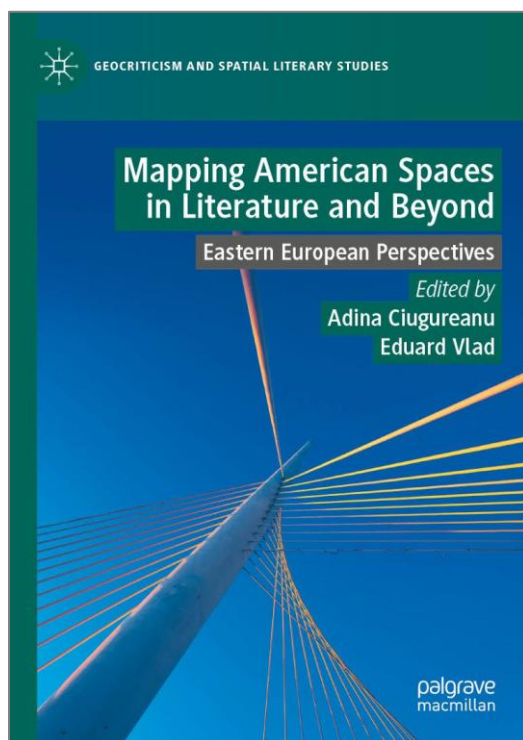


## BOOKS

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**Adina Ciugureanu and Eduard Vlad (eds.), *Mapping American Spaces in Literature and Beyond: Eastern European Perspectives*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 254 p.**

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The editors of and contributors to this ambitious volume explore critical spatial thinking in American literature and culture as well as digital humanities through what they call an “Eastern European perspective.” This perspective – Robert T. Tally Jr. clarifies in his “Foreword”– points to “a literal but also critical distance from the United States and its cultures that is extraordinarily productive,” since the authors come mostly from Romania and Turkey, a space “allowing them to excavate and illuminate sites of cultural fecundity with an acute awareness of the distinctiveness of the spaces surveyed” (vi).

Different real and imaginary spaces, including those represented in literature, art, architecture, cartography, and digital media are analysed through methods pertaining to spatial and geocritical studies that focus on the “spatial turn” in academic thought.

Structured in three sections and sixteen chapters, the volume first maps spaces (with contributions by Meldan Tanrisal, Adina Ciugureanu, Emerald Anne St Clair Drysdale, Alina Bottez, Florian Andrei Vlad and Ileana Marin), then imagines geographies (with contributions by Ana Cristina Băniceru, Gabriela Tucan, Eduard Vlad and Anca Dobrinescu) and, finally, it engages with space in literary works (with contributions by



Buket Boz, Ștefan Ionescu-Ambrosie, Elena Ciobanu, Michaela Praisler and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, as well as Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu).

In their Introduction, the editors, Adina Ciugureanu and Eduard Vlad, explain that their volume grew from the “fascination with space in literature, including directions like ‘literary cartography’ and ‘literary geography’” (1). Starting from Michel Foucault’s “other spaces” (1986) and concept of “heterotopias,” which, unlike utopias, are real places, Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace* (1989, 2000), Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and moving on to Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical approaches (2011) as well as Robert Tally Jr.’s *Spatiality* (2013) and *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2019), the editors have gathered contributions based on the theoretical works that foreground the importance of space and mapping in literary imagination. All authors are interested in the work of various thinkers who endeavoured to define a poetics of space, from Bachelard’s eponymous volume to Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” which developed the notion of heterotopias, those tangible locations which have different rules and meanings and which can be libraries, museums, prisons, cemeteries, as well as Henri Lefebvre’s Marxist critique of “the production of space” and his notions of Perceived Space, Conceived Space, and Lived Space (2). The approach is also focused on gender studies, deriving from Lefebvre’s equating the modern city to “a masculine will-to-power,” and “a symbol of power and fecundity” (2). Moreover, the authors start from the spatial turn marked by Robert T. Tally Jr.’s *Spatiality* (2013), since when interpreting literary texts, one should see them as constructions that make us understand and visualize space (4).

The first part navigates from the Natives’ real and lived-in space to the spatial configurations under biased and/or life-boosting propaganda and from the real and imaginary space of a poet’s mind to the digital space of virtual reality. Tanrisal explores the value systems of Native Americans inhabiting the New World who regarded nature and land as divine gifts and held dear “an environmental ethic among the Great Lakes” (22) before the white Europeans colonized their space. Ciugureanu, who studied the archives of *The Los Angeles Times* from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, investigates the way in which Los Angeles immigrants of Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican origin and the space they occupied in town were discriminated in the pages of this major newspaper through double-standard narratives. Based on Lefebvre’s right to the city concept, David Harvey’s territorial justice, and Soja’s understanding of spatial rights as the possibility “to participate openly and fairly in all the processes producing urban space, [...] to avoid all forms of imposed spatial segregation and confinement” (Soja 2010, 99-100), Ciugureanu discusses the “racialization” and the “criminalizing” of space, which produced the “Yellow Peril” and the “Brown Peril” that discriminated the inhabitants of China and Japanese towns and the Mexican barrios against the white Americans. As the author claims, both the space and the people living it “have [...] gone through the process of becoming illegal, unwanted, criminal” according to the interests of the local white administration (31).

The way Norman Rockwell framed space in his paintings and illustrations published in the weekly *Saturday Evening Post* during and after World War II is the main topic of Drysdale’s chapter which attempts to look beyond the propaganda that

followed “the official ideologies which were meant to win the war and to re-establish the family roles and institution when the war was over,” since the various ironical touches that the author identifies reveal “a personal reading of the official discourse” (46). For Bottez, Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural designs in the 1940s and 1950s harmonized public and private spaces, since he believed in unity that became the “dominant principle” of his work, which had an intrinsic “Edenic dimension” (63). For Florian Andrei Vlad, John Quinn’s collection *The Wolf Last Seen* is not only a geographic space but a map of human history, wildlife, and geological stories; the chapter examines “Quinn’s poetic journeys and their attending poetic cartographies sketched in various places across America and abroad” as traces of “memorable markers of both sameness and difference” (86).

Marin endeavours to assess readers’ responses to digital writing: electronic texts and hypertexts engaging with digital spaces that became the space of communication in the twenty-first century. Starting from Merleau-Ponty’s intentionality which “is fundamentally related to the body and its senses” (92), she analyses Laura Okkema’s Digital Archive of Traumatic Spaces, *The Deserters*, and Serge Bouchardon’s *Loss of Grasp*. Marin reads Okkema’s “heavily symbolic space” (94) as a critique of the Nazi past and the communist era of the former East Germany, as well as an emotional engagement with a dark heritage that the creator still carries with her although she crossed the Atlantic. Bouchardon’s work on haptic perception generates a meta-critical multimedial narrative (101), whose digital space records and deforms the image of the computer user with each movement on the haptic device (103-4).

Băniceru explores Nathaniel Hawthorne’s real and imaginary spaces as representations of the untamed natural world, consistent with an ecophobic and female trans-corporeal perspective that she reads through the theoretical lens of geocriticism and ecocriticism, especially the EcoGothic and ecofeminism. Băniceru demonstrates how the female body was regarded as an untamed territory that the Puritans thought of controlling as they controlled wild nature. Tucan offers a new perspective on Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, whose “travels zigzagging America with his pubescent stepdaughter, from motel to motel” (127) she follows in order to analyse how disheartened he was by what he imagined to be America’s highway journey and roadside culture. Agreeing with Castronovo (2002, 36), who demystified Humbert’s sustained fight against America as “a country of wonders and curiosities,” Tucan shows that Humbert’s “paranoia and obsession with controlling and isolating Lolita from others” prevented him from admiring “the beauty America had to offer throughout their entire journey” (138).

Eduard Vlad focuses on Cormac McCarthy’s mapmaking in his novel *The Orchard Keeper* that builds an imaginary geography of the author’s native Tennessee rural Appalachian settings in the same way that Faulkner created the Yoknapatawpha County, “his famous literary cartographic venture” (143). Eduard Vlad endeavours to find the “Faulknerian skeleton in McCarthy’s closet,” and investigates how “the imaginary map” of McCarthy’s debut novel “features an Appalachian spatial contrast and a group of interwoven subplots linked to the central characters” (145-6). For Dobrinescu, America is a real and imaginary space inhabited by real and imaginary

people, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction reveals through its treatment of the way in which Nigerian immigrants pendulate between coping with their adopted country's culture, while conserving the distinctiveness of their own identities. Dobrinescu's conclusion is that Adichie's novels and short stories "are about the US and us, contemporary migrants, travellers across frontiers" (172).

Using Marc Augé's concept of "non-place" and Gil Doron's definitions of "dead zones," Boz deals with Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*. The author invites the reader for a night walk through marginalized city districts where one fears to go after darkness. Ionescu-Ambrosie examines David Foster Wallace's encyclopaedic novel *Infinite Jest* as a narrative labyrinth in which the reader gets lost to find his way back through open-endedness. Ionescu-Ambrosie mentions briefly Thomas Pynchon's, John Barth's, and Don DeLillo's labyrinth as a key visual metaphor, "where the notion of narrative closure is questioned and a center is nowhere to be found" (193). In fact, from all these, Pynchon's case is even more fascinating for the topic of space, since his books are set specifically in Southern California. A chapter on Pynchon would have probably completed the set of American literary spaces from this section, since "in Pynchon's imagination Southern California is the place where the nation impinges upon the characters of his novels, the place in which his characters begin to think about their lives within the framework of the nation, as Oedipa does near the end of [*The Crying of*] *Lot 49* when she walks down a 'stretch of railroad track' and realizes 'she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic,' that America itself is 'coded in Inverarity's testament'" (Schaub 2012, 30).

Ciobanu, who starts from the controversial case of Sylvia Plath, focuses on the neo-confessional poetry of Sharon Olds, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Olena Kalaytiak Davis which is tied to Affect, and "becomes a stage for nonpolemical expression of political statements of speakers who have learnt how to live with their traumas through a deeper understanding of past and present circumstances" (219). Ciobanu's tools to explore the space of confessional poetry are psychoanalytic in nature, since "the 'lyric I' is usually used as a form of self-expression, describing the most intimate and personal experiences" (Yunusoğlu 2020, 125). Ciobanu admits that analysing this type of poetry "can rarely make do without the help of psychoanalytical and psychiatric approaches" (209). These poets either exposed personal psychotic spaces of mental illness, family dysfunctions, and suicide provoked by unresolved past dramas, making their readers empathize with the Other. Praisler and Gheorghiu analyse Michael Cunningham's gendered space in *The Hours* through a comparison with Virginia Woolf's "bustling city [that] stimulates the mind and instils life in her and her writing" (222). The authors are interested in how, for Woolf, "London sets in motion thought processes oriented towards the pressure of capturing the essence of experience and the possibilities of rendering that experience in language" (223) and how Cunningham transfers these processes into the space of New York City. They investigate *The Hours* as "oriented towards the time-space paradigm, bringing forth the mapping of (third)spaces inhabited by Others, with an accentuated gendered vein" (224). They see the novel as a heterotopia, since it is both "part of the institutionalized literary tradition and outside it," and it features "real women who inhabit the world and imagined women who

inhabit the book,” constructing gendering discourses. Marinescu builds her analysis of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Victory City* by establishing firm grounds of genre and authorship (mapping the empire, the world, the Other and gender, which is a new element that Rushdie introduced in his novel after having been criticized for his phallocentrism).

The volume fulfils its promise, navigating through different kinds of mapping: from virtual, bodily, labyrinthic and mental dimensions to real and imaginary spaces. The book is a refreshing read, captivating the readers with a multifarious, open-minded vision of the multicultural, multi-ethnic traditions of the United States, as well as a reliably balanced perspective, a highly inclusive 21<sup>st</sup>-century guide to the rich diversity of American spaces. *Mapping American Spaces in Literature and Beyond* proves to be a valuable reference tool for those students and scholars with an interest in American representation of spaces (including peripheral, marginalized and digital texts) as well as in critical and cultural theory and literary criticism. At the same time, due to its broad comparative span, it can be an excellent resource for those who teach American literature and culture, urban studies, as well as comparative literature.

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