

Book Reviews

Brian Jarvis. *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination In Contemporary American Culture*. New York: St. Martin's P., 1997. Pp. 208. \$55.00; \$19.95 pb.

Brian Jarvis' study of contemporary textual mappings of America is a mimesis of its subject in that it ranges broadly over the various discourses in which American landscapes and bodies have been figured. Essential to Jarvis' work is "the central role that geography plays in the American imagination and the way in which that imagination bifurcates towards utopian and dystopian antipodes" (6). In an introduction entitled "A Brief History of Space," he establishes a context for his study by summarizing historical sources, notably Puritan and Revolutionary ones, in which the new world takes shape as either a wilderness harbouring savagery and evil, or a paradise awaiting entrepreneurial exploitation. This tendency to view the landscape "through some form of ideological eyeglass" (2) persists into the nineteenth century and through modernism, in the literary "mappings" of Hawthorne, Emerson, Dreiser, Eliot, Faulkner, and the Black Mountain poets.

Contemplating postmodern manifestations of the geographical imagination from this historical perspective, Jarvis asks whether "there is an essential continuity in the geographical imagination, or, whether postmodern mappings of space constitute a decisive break with previous traditions" (6). The three sections that follow—on the mappings apparent in social science, fictional, and filmic texts—provide Jarvis with sufficient evidence to conclude that no decisive break with earlier incarnations of the geographical imagination is discernible. His discussion of these texts, shot through with a sometimes polemical antipathy to postmodernism, also demonstrates his own commitment to a view of space, landscape and bodies as "more than words alone" (10).

Jarvis' understanding of postmodernism as an inclination to dissolve social relations into signs that can be re-configured to suit the political ends of the theorist makes his first chapter on postindustrial spaces in social science texts bristle with criticism of the writers Daniel Bell, Marshall McLuhan, and Jean Baudrillard. Jarvis identifies the first two as partaking of the utopian aspect of the geographical imagination, and the latter as expressing its dystopian character, but emphasizes their shared fascination with technology as the marker of both their postmodernism, and their political conservatism. Jarvis doggedly traces the articulation of a technological sublime in their works, a vision of industrial space and traditional class relationships as displaced by the radically new world of the post-Fordist age.

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This is the most interesting section of Jarvis' book, and the one making the strongest claims about contemporary criticism's ability to engage political issues of representation without subsiding into murmurs about the indeterminate textuality of it all. Jarvis is tough and insightful in his rhetorical analysis of these writers, pointing over and over again to their persistent erasure of uncomfortable or theoretically inconvenient spaces—particularly the brown fields of urban industrial collapse, and the offshore of America. These places exist as surely as Nike's factories do, but acknowledging the "elsewhere" of material production as its own space would disturb the utopian contours of these particular cartographies.

The presence of Baudrillard in this section is a complication of its own, for while the road trip recorded in *America* is clearly apropos of Jarvis' interests, including Baudrillard's work as an element of contemporary American culture feels like a stretch. Also curious is the short shrift given to the "left" cartographers Jameson, Harvey, Soja and Davis in this section. The treatment of Davis' *City of Quartz* in less than one page of discussion is particularly odd, since Jarvis invokes Davis frequently in later chapters on fictional and cinematic cartographies as a positive example of mapping sensitive to local geographies of race and ethnicity. Jarvis concludes this section by identifying in the works of these authors, all male, an absence of attention to matters of gender and sexuality. One wonders why, then, Jarvis himself did not include the work of Donna Haraway as an example of a postmodern cartographer whose rendering of social and physical bodies and spaces mediated by technology takes up these matters explicitly.

Questions about Jarvis' own critical mapping surface again in each of his remaining chapters, one on the fictional cartographies of Pynchon, Auster, Phillips and Morrison, and the last on the cinematic cartographies of *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, the *Terminator* films, and the films of David Lynch. The problem is identifying the principles of inclusion governing Jarvis' decision to examine certain authors, auteurs, or particular texts in his work. It is not that any of the works is inappropriate to Jarvis' purposes, but rather that the reader could think of several others that might do just as well, or might wonder whether other, excluded texts by these authors might yield readings which contest some of Jarvis' claims about them. The choices strike one as haphazard, or indeed, postmodern in their idiosyncratic shaping of a particular conceptual space to be discussed.

Jarvis is primarily interested in postmodern fiction which plots "the contours of the social relations of capitalism as they are inscribed in space" (57). He charts in these fictions the representation of spaces marginalized by postindustrial cartographies: the sewers of Pynchon, the teeming urban streets of

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the underclass in Auster, the spaces of “disembourgeoisement” in Phillips’ novel, and the place of the racially marked body in Morrison’s fictions. Of these, Jarvis valorizes Phillips’ and Morrison’s mappings for their treatment of social relations as informed by more than an inevitable drift toward alienation. Instead, Jarvis finds in these plottings of the postmodern a qualified triumph of memory, feeling, and agency over commodity fetishism. Jarvis’ own intellectual and political investment in these elements of the spatial imagination is offered with argument but without apology, a gesture refreshing in its willingness to claim for itself a place vulnerable to critique.

The last section of the book, on cinematic mappings of future bodies and the spaces they inhabit, finds Jarvis with less to celebrate. He notes the aestheticization of the dystopic cityscape in *Blade Runner*, the gynophobia that mitigates the anti-commodity criticism of *Alien*, and the “testosterone topographies” of Cameron’s *Terminator* films. While interesting, his readings do not offer anything really new to extant critical work on these films. Much better is his chapter on David Lynch as a kind of postmodern Republican whose work outlines a world suffused with homophobia and gynophobia in which an obsession with surreality in the suburbs disavows the corporate and corporeal horrors of America’s urban-industrial spaces.

The concluding pages of *Postmodern Cartographies* make the unsurprising point that contemporary cartographies are still determined by capitalism, patriarchy, and white hegemony. Rescuing his study from the potential banality of this observation is Jarvis’ contention that attention to the body, a nihilistic turn toward self-erasure, an oppositional attempt to reclaim the value of remembrance, and the centrality of the abject in contemporary texts distinguishes them in important ways from their antecedents. Jarvis’ call for more “radical mappings” is made with caution but without irony, something that makes this book, despite its occasional cheap shots at postmodernism, a provocative, politically engaged, and engaging academic work.

Brenda Austin-Smith

Bruce King. *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Pp ix, 714. \$39.95 cloth.

Bruce King’s extensive biography of Nobel Prize winning poet, playwright, journalist, and painter Derek Walcott is subtitled with the indefinite article “a.” It is appropriate in that any life is subject to a range of readings. Furthermore, King’s precaution is well taken because Walcott’s frequent auto-