
Rebecca Walsh, *The Geopoetics of Modernism*

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Rebecca Walsh, *The Geopoetics of Modernism*, University Press of Florida, 2015, 212 pages, 74,95 \$, ISBN-10: 0813060516

- 1 Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities* (1983) that “the ‘end of the era of nationalism’, so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson, 2006, 3). However, the modernist writers whom Walsh gathers together in her provocative book, *The Geopoetics of Modernism*, are at least interested in looking beyond nationalist accounts of the world(s) they describe. For Walsh, “geopoetics” suggests an interaction between poetic experiment and a vision of nature that either transcends or turns the tables on human influence. One of the core writers for this thesis, Gertrude Stein, aphorises in her prose poem, *The Geographical History of America; or, The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936), that: “In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is,” with the implication both that “space” is its own entity and that it has the capacity to diminish other entities: her word “anybody” blindly attributes non-somebodiness to whoever might darken an empty horizon (Stein, 1995, 45). Walsh draws on Stein and other geographically informed modernists to construct a portrait of modernism that pits what she terms “environmental determinism” against the increasingly hackneyed narratives of imperialism. As she puts it herself, panoptically, in her conclusion: “My study has traced [...] the rise of environmental determinism in the early twentieth [century]” (Walsh, 2015, 147).
- 2 Anderson’s imprint may be traced throughout Walsh’s book, although she explicitly distances herself from the crowd of literary critics and historians who, as Anderson puts

it in his preface to the second edition, “link the objects of [their particular] fields of enquiry to nationalism and nation” (xii). What Walsh takes from Anderson is a concept of “nationalist” geography as a discourse to be resisted on political grounds. Stein is summoned as an especially vocal and insightful example of an early twentieth-century writer who rejects the notion that places may be controlled by their inhabitants – even as phenomena of perception. Walsh cites her famous precept: “there is no there there” as a touchstone in her discussion of Stein’s representation of Oakland – her childhood home – in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). Stein writes: “yes it might have been Thirteenth Avenue when I had been. Not of course the house, the house and the big garden and the eucalyptus trees and the rose hedge naturally were not any longer existing, what was the use” (Stein, 1993, 291). The opposite of a colonialist, Stein has no lasting purchase on the places she moves through; the most she can hope for is their independent continuity. As Walsh brings out, there is a felt mismatch between Oakland’s formative influence on Stein and the impregnability of the avenue to which she returns doubly, in memory and fact. Environmental determinism is a one-sided relationship.

- 3 Stein is untypical of Walsh’s haul of modernists in her failure to be linked concretely to a major geographer. Ellen Churchill Semple’s *American History and its Geographic Condition* (1933) may seem to play behind Stein’s similar-sounding title, while Semple’s influential pronouncement that: “Man is a product of the earth’s surface” is broadly reinforced by all Stein’s musings on geography (Semple 1911: 1), but “it remains unclear whether Stein was directly familiar with Semple’s work” (Walsh, 2015, 98). Walt Whitman, on the other hand, with whose proto-modernist “Passage to India” (1900) Walsh opens her discussion, is indebted to the nineteenth-century geographers Alexander von Humboldt and Mary Somerville in clearly demonstrable ways (Walsh writes of “Whitman’s relationship to Humboldt,” 57); and H. D.’s “lifelong companion and lover Bryher [Annie Ellerman]” owned Semple’s *Mediterranean Region* (1931) (125). The image Walsh presents of a geographically aware modernism may thus be mapped with relative confidence onto to the general rise of geographic awareness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The popularity of Semple’s books and her “singular success as one of the very first female professors at Clark University” is an example of this trend (32); Walsh writes of her “public visibility” after the publication of *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911): a tract that wears its environmentally determinist colours on its sleeve (33).
- 4 Semple’s popularity is among the components of Walsh’s argument that gave me pause in working my way through her generally persuasive, rich, clever, and conceptually ambitious book. I was struck by what seemed to me the pseudo-mysticism and silliness of Semple’s claim that: “the earth has mothered [man], fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation and irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution. She has entered into his bone and tissue, his mind and soul” (Semple, 1911, 1). I wondered how Stein’s notoriously unsentimental candour (perhaps best exemplified by her announcement to Hemingway: “You’re all a lost generation” (Hemingway, 2000, 26)) squared with Walsh’s (admittedly tentative) hypothesis that she read and liked Semple, and how H. D.’s perennial melancholy squared with Semple’s jubilant conception of “man” as “the earth[’s]” umbilically unsevered child.
- 5 Reading Walsh’s interpretation of H. D.’s poem about Egyptian ruins and the bombing of London, “The Walls do not Fall” (1946), with this reservation in mind, I was conscious of quarrelling with Walsh’s gloss of the conflative phrase “here and there” or “here, there [H.

D.'s italics]" as a rejection of the imperialistic logic that would normally give London primacy over Egypt; Walsh writes: "London has materially taken the place of Egypt in this equation, and it is found wanting" (142). In the eyes of environmental determinism, all space is equal, though distinct: hierarchically, there is nothing to distinguish "here" from "there." However, if we read H. D.'s repeated phrase as a truncated echo of the saying "here, there, everywhere" or "here, there, and everywhere", the case for Egypt and London's equality is complicated by what may be understood as a thwarted last move in a tripartite act of generalisation. Walsh makes much of the slant rhyme between "here" and "there", and the cohesive effect of its reverberation through other assonant words in the text ("square", "hare", "enter", "endure", "doors," 139); but the introduction of "everywhere" or "and everywhere" would have consolidated this coherence by stabilising the rhyme sound ("here, *there*, everywhere"). By leaving "everywhere" out, H. D. both queries the generalising disposition that allows her to think between London and Egypt, and aurally hallucinates a scenario in which harmony cancels out difference and distance. There is an off-keyness, and a lack of reconciliation between the comparative ambition of the poem and the text itself, which Walsh's theoretical framework fails to accommodate.

- 6 Walsh writes in the introduction to her book that, according to her reading: "Modernist poetry becomes a form of geography [...] in which traditional geopolitical alignments are complicated and redrawn" (5). Poetry becomes geopoetics. In spite of my admiration for the originality and daringness of this proposition and for its Andersonian politics, I remain unconvinced that "poetics" are compatible with the forms of geographic discourse that Walsh imagines modernist writers lapping up. Geopoetics would perhaps be a more congenial project for a contemporary poet versed in *Imagined Communities*, itself a kind of prose poem.

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Subjects: Recensions

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