Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Peter Hulme, Owen Robinson & Lesley Wylie (eds.)

Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio.
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The second volume in the Liverpool series “American Tropics: Toward a Literary Geography,” Surveying the American Tropics consists of twelve essays that extend the Caribbean's cultural geography in several directions: not only, as might be expected, to the Atlantic coastline of Central America, including parts that now belong to Mexico, but also to the northeastern and southwestern United States (New York, Massachusetts, and Arizona) and to South America, from the Guianas to Brazil. Doing so goes well beyond earlier ideas of a pan-Caribbean literature, which, although covering larger territories, typically suffer from chronic linguistic balkanization. While this is less of a problem here, texts written in English still predominate. The editors introduce the American Tropics—what Alexander von Humboldt, who has several cameos in this volume, often called “the Torrid Zone”—as “an area [that] has cultural and historical logics, which are based on—and inseparable from—a geographical or environmental logic” (p. 3). More fitting might have been Ottmar Ette’s neologism “TransArea,” for the American Tropics as presented here cut across national borders as much as they render porous divisions imposed by area studies. As a TransArea, the American Tropics comprises multiple and shifting geographical regions interconnected by human migration and the resulting layers of cultural, social, and economic history. At the center of this compendium, then, are migrants and descendants of migrants, displaced indigenous populations, and travelers of all sorts—explorers, scientists, journalists, and tourists.

Surveying the American Tropics offers a trove of intellectual riches. It is rare to find a collection in which each essay engages readers in so many challenging and satisfying ways. We can think of this volume as its own travel narrative, which makes the literary history of the Americas a spatio-temporal travel narrative with multiple points of departure and arrival. Prominent, as always, is transnational New York City, which we enter through accounts of the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn in Martha Jane Nadell’s “A Tree Grows in Bajan Brooklyn: Writing Caribbean New York.” Nadell reads Paule Marshall’s now rather neglected novel Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) as a “foundational text” in a literary history that belongs to the United States and to the Caribbean, alongside the “place-making” efforts in earlier and later narratives by and about white and Haitian immigrants. Nadell’s essay also sets an important conceptual marker for the entire volume: Landscapes, be they rural or urban, are never just...
“passive settings”; rather, they are what Wilson Harris thought of as “living landscapes” enlivened by the historical traces of human activity.

An emphasis on the way geographical spaces are ordered to become narrative settings links all the literary histories this volume offers. For Gesa Mackenthun, who focuses on Lloyd Stephens’s exploits in her “Imperial Archeology: The American Isthmus as Contested Scientific Contact Zone,” and Nina Gerassi-Navarro, who contrasts the writings of Louis Agassiz with the journals of Elizabeth Cary Agassiz and William James in “The Art of Observation: Race and Landscape in A Journey to Brazil,” setting refers to a scientific topography. For the late Neil Whitehead, in his thoroughly engrossing “Golden Kings, Cocaine Lords, and the Madness of El Dorado: Guayana as Native and Colonial Imaginary,” it is a mythography that, in Hsinya Huang’s “Inventing Tropicality: Writing Fever, Writing Trauma in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead and Gardens in the Dunes,” enters into an unexpected conversation with the counterpoint of medical discourse and Native American tropes of healing. For Jak Peake and Alasdair Pettinger, who brilliantly analyze liminal spaces and transit zones in “Dark Thresholds in Trinidad: Regarding the Colonial House” and “The Oloffson,” respectively, it is architecture. For Susan Gillman, whose “Black Jacobins and the New World Mediterraneans” delves into the different editions of C.L.R. James’s Black Jacobins, setting includes the relation between textual and paratextual spaces. And in María del Pilar Blanco’s dazzling “Reading the Novum World: The Literary Geography of Science Fiction in Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” setting becomes the “sci-fi space of the Antilles” (p. 53).

Although it is difficult to play favorites in such a strong collection, three essays merit special attention. Mimi Sheller’s “Space Age Tropics” focuses on the conflicting modernities—tourist paradise vs. bauxite mining—that the transnational aluminum industry, notably the Pittsburgh-based Alcoa, has helped produce in Suriname, Guyana, and Jamaica. Oddly, she does not even mention Pauline Melville’s novel The Ventriloquist’s Tale. No less absorbing is Russell McDougall’s “Micronations of the Caribbean,” which takes us to the tiny, oft-forgotten islands of Tortuga and Redonda, distilling “patterns of piracy” from the routes across the Sargasso Sea as it moves toward a more recent experiment in the “laboratory” of the Caribbean: the Republic of New Atlantis, the literally floating utopia of Leicester Hemingway (brother of Ernest). The volume would be incomplete without Richard and Sally Price’s “Suriname Literary Geography: The Changing Same,” a needed reminder of just how overlooked literature about the Guianas in Dutch, French, and English still is. Especially noteworthy is their insistence that “on both ethical and epistemological grounds discourse and event must always be considered together” (p. 302), no matter