Nyerges, Aaron. *American Modernism and the Cartographic Imagination*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. 250pp (cloth).

Reviewed by Pavel Andrade, Texas Tech University

Situated halfway between spatial literary studies and media studies, Aaron Nyerges's *American Modernism and the Cartographic Imagination* is an ambitious effort to chart the shifting relations between literature and cartography during the first half of the twentieth century. Tracing literary geographies that disputed the use of the map as an authoritative representation of US empire, the book examines how different authors responded, in both theory and practice, to the "cartographic flux of the early twentieth century" (6). *American Modernism* characterizes these responses as literary counter-maps, positioning their authors as "counter-cartographers who were diversely affected by a historical proliferation of transport and communication technologies" (9). Central to the book's theorization of the infrastructural experience of space, and of the production of alternative geographies, is the notion of geotechnical aesthetics, a term used to designate an emerging regime of aesthetic representation mediated by new technics of communication and their impact on human perception. Moving between literary studies, critical geography, and Native American studies, *American Modernism* aims to demonstrate how mass-media infrastructures allowed early twentieth-century authors to contest and, to varying degrees, break away from the representational politics that consistently erased Indigenous and insular territories from the US national logo-map.

Taking inspiration from Edward Said, *American Modernism*'s approach to the cartographic literature of US empire outlines a contrapuntal methodology based on "pairing a canonical author with an outlying one" (25). For example, Chapter 1 reads Gertrude Stein's airborne maps "in counterpoint" (33) to Zitkála-Šá's shadow spaces to call into question the authoritative projections of US territory. Given the centrality of the contrapuntal to the book's structure, as well as its stated aim of complicating "the territorial logo of the United States by attending to viewpoints located in its former and current island 'possessions'" (184), the absence of any sustained reflection on the contrapuntal legacies of Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) is, to a certain extent, dissatisfying, not least because the "adoption of contrapuntal music as a model for literary criticism"

(184) accredited to Said has a longstanding tradition in Latin American and Caribbean cultural studies. What would it mean to read Ortiz's and Said's contrapuntal methodologies in counterpoint? The closest *American Modernism* comes to answering the question is through a reflection on the stereophonics of cartographic literature (Chapter 4), where Ortiz's name is invoked in a broader discussion on the geotechnics of sugar cultivation. Despite the missed opportunity, *American Modernism*'s contrapuntal method effectively interrogates the detachments and interstices produced by the cultural technologies of US empire, opening the political imagination of American modernism to the archipelagic cartographies repressed by the narrative of its territorial integrity.

A second conceptual compass for *American Modernism*'s literary travels is Edouard Glissant's theory of errant thought, which Nyerges deploys as an explicit challenge to the "rootedness of national literature" (20). Embracing the free-floating submarine roots of errantry, *American Modernism* complicates, for example, the fixed authority of the aerial photomap by contrasting it to the provisional logic of the periplus in Ramon Muzones's *Margostaubig* (1946) and Ernest Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* (posthumously published in 1970) (Chapter 3). Focused on how technologies of audio recording supported "an aesthetic that marked cartographic literature with the errant possibilities of new media" (151), the book's fourth chapter similarly draws inspiration from Glissant to assemble a cartography of aural spaces that could transform the cry of the plantation into a "shattering cry of pleasure" (174). Analyzing works by Zora Neale Hurston, Florence Mill, Jean Toomer, Agustín Acosta, and (perhaps too briefly) Nicolás Guillén, the chapter works to produce a contrapuntal reinvention of the soundscapes of plantation slavery, a collection of aural solidarities that float freely across the boundaries that separate the continental United States and the Caribbean.

Particularly riveting in their account of the emerging confrontation between official and literary cartographies are chapters devoted to energy poetics (Chapter 2) and the phantasmagorias that haunt the maps of American modernism (Chapter 5). Chapter 2 invites the reader to consider energy as infrastructure by comparing the petromodern accelerations of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound with the sonic realism of Nazik al-Malā'ikah. As Nyerges suggests, Malā'ikah's "poetic emulation of the radio's acousmatic voice […] provides a bodiless

presentation of the infrastructural violence that imperial maps took pains to omit" (95). Analyzing Malā'ikah's experiments with the multisyllabic metrical unit (*taf'īlah*), Nyerges develops an interpretive framework that dynamically intervenes in global modernist debates focused on the tension between influence and originality without losing sight of the elemental effects of imperial violence. The chapter's closing discussion of parataxis and the dangers of automotive speed in the poetry of Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens brilliantly tops off the sociological dimensions of the argument with a series of close readings that demonstrate how modernist collisions reverberated across geographies.

Equally engaging is the book's final chapter, which examines how repressed Indigenous and insular viewpoints continue to haunt the cartographic authority of the US logo-map. Drawing inspiration from Marxist critics, Nyerges retools the term *phantasmagoria* to describe the "omissions that make maps hallucinatory and incomplete" (205). Faithful to the book's contrapuntal methodology, the chapter pairs Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925), whose visual style and ambivalent feelings toward technologies of mass culture are explored as a form of cinematic modernism, with the making of *Moana of the South Seas* (1926, dir. Robert Flaherty) and with the letter writings of Fialelei, the Sāmoan interpreter who served as a local producer and interpreter for the documentary film. Through the Samoan conception of *vā* ("division" or "space between"), Nyerges proposes to read Fialelei's diaries as a decolonial atlas that unmakes the "continental nationalism" of imperial cartography and the "insane romanticism found in European conceptualizations of islands" (222). As in Chapter 2, the close readings that punctuate the middle sections of the chapter, in this case devoted to Cather's *The Professor's House*, yield a good amount of insight into the formal mechanisms that mediate the novel's geotechnics.

The energy with which *American Modernism* sets out to survey the cartographic imagination of US empire is admirable, as is its insistence on the interpenetration between technological developments and the Indigenous and insular cartographies hidden behind the image of the US logo-map. More broadly, *American Modernism* accompanies recent efforts to theorize how narratives map and engage with the projection of alternative places, such as Robert T. Tally Jr.'s *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2018), Sheila Hones' *Interspatiality: Inhabiting Literary Geography* (2024), and Bertrand Westphal's *The Plausible*

World: A Geocritical Approach to Space, Place, and Maps (2013). While not explicitly in dialogue with these authors, *American Modernism* expands their lines of inquiry by effectively demonstrating how the spatial imagination of the early twentieth century was transformed by developments in representational media and technological infrastructure. In closing, it is worth mentioning that *American Modernism*'s contrapuntal program, generative as it is as a dynamic framework for comparative analysis, is conspicuously repressed by its title, which tends to de-emphasize the truly global scope of the argument. *American Modernism* excels at dissolving its own titular image into the relational geographies of a literary world map.