



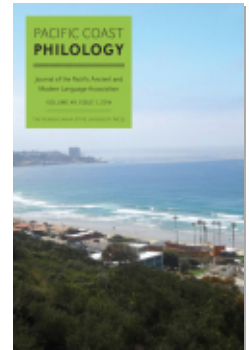
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Out of Place: German Realism, Displacement and Modernity by
John Lyon (review)

Katra Byram

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like this could explain why the transformations in physics, even if carried out initially by a small number of actors, had an impact on science and society.

Marita Hübner
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John Lyon. *Out of Place: German Realism, Displacement and Modernity*

London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 224, \$110

In this book, author John Lyon makes a dual claim. First, he contends that the writing of the German poetic realists reflects a nineteenth-century transition in the way people viewed the physical world—from conceiving of place as uniting human experience and identity with physical locale to thinking of space as empty and quantifiable. Second, he rejects the critical tendency to view German poetic realism as retreating from or disregarding this modern development. Late realist writings, Lyon claims, view the advent of a “spatially” organized world clear-sightedly and, often, dispassionately. In fact, he believes that poetic realism was primed to apprehend and represent this shift, since “both realism as an artistic and theoretical movement and place as a concept are characterized by the competing pulls of materialism and idealism” (17). Using readings of novels by Wilhelm Raabe, Theodor Fontane, and Gottfried Keller, he offers a convincing case for such arguments. The texts he discusses depict a disintegration of place and suggest that, while their authors mourn some aspects of this dissolution, they also refuse a transfiguring nostalgia for place. Indeed, they recognize the constraints that the ties to place impose—constraints that may be shed in the emerging, potentially open spaces of modernity.

This argument is developed through four chapters. In chapter 1 Lyon provides a historical ground for the argument by discussing Berlin’s rapid expansion and urbanization in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Using historical accounts, population statistics, and statements by architects, housing reformers, bureaucrats, and city planners, the author traces how physical, demographic, and attitudinal changes transformed place into space. In chapters 2 through 4, Lyon discusses Raabe, Fontane, and Keller in turn, first seeking to follow the transformation of place into space within literary writing by contrasting their representation in Raabe’s first and penultimate novels, *Chronik der Sperlingsgasse* / *The Chronicle of Sparrow Lane* (1856) and *Die Akten des Vogelsangs* / *The Files of Birdsong* (1896), then focusing on late

novels by Fontane (*Irrungen Wirungen* / *On Tangled Paths*, 1888) and Keller (*Martin Salander*, 1886). The three chapters of literary analysis also work with a variety of philosophical and theoretical approaches to place and space, including those of Edward Casey, Yi-Fu Tuan, Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.

This combination of historical, theoretical, and literary analysis effectively documents both the emergence of space and the realist writers reckoning with it. With its account of the metropolis's development and the accompanying debates, a chapter on Berlin grounds the plausibility of the claim underlying Lyon's arguments about realism: that the nineteenth century saw the experience of an attitude toward space change significantly. Successive sections discuss several aspects of this shift. The first links rampant real estate speculation to the differentiation and commodification of space; the second the housing shortage and the proliferation of the infamous *Mietskaserne* (rental barracks) to an increasing sense of space as restrictive and limiting; the third connects abstract notions of identity fostered by colonialism and the founding of the German nation-state to the dissolution of the relationship between place and identity and to the "transportability of space"; and the fourth links reform efforts in city planning and housing to the desire to use space to achieve political and social control. For the most part, Lyon is very convincing in connecting the physical changes taking place in Berlin and the contemporary statements about those changes to the theoretical conceptions of place and space that structure his argument. As a result, his historical foundation lends considerable credence to his argument about the literary manifestations of this shift.

His treatment of theoretical accounts also supports his literary interpretations well. Rather than constructing a detailed theoretical framework at the outset for a one-size-fits-all approach, Lyon introduces different theories in each chapter to complement the conceptions of place evidenced in the literary texts under discussion, but this variety of theoretical approaches avoids incoherence in that nearly all of the theories share a general framework that contrasts traditional, affectively-invested places with modern spaces emptied of inherent meaning. Still, the theories' emphases shift. Thus, Lyon pairs Raabe's novels with Heidegger's valorization of place in "Building Dwelling Thinking" / "Bauen Wohnen Denken" but also sees a parallel recognition in Raabe and Heidegger that a grounding in place stands in tension with individual freedom (83). The seemingly stable (although always undermined) places of *Irrungen Wirungen* are read through the lens of the phenomenological accounts of Casey and Yuan, while the modern, commercial spaces that appear toward the novel's end are seen as emergent instances of the "smooth" (nomadic, open) spaces that Deleuze and Guattari contrast with traditional,

hierarchical “striated” space. And in the chapter on Keller, Lyon views modern place/space as Benjaminian allegory; locales are no longer meaningful in themselves, but only as reminders of the places that have been lost. (One might say that they are, literally, placeholders.) The literary interpretations gain from the complementary theoretical frameworks, but the exposition of the frameworks also benefits. Rather than appearing as a single, abstract block, they receive closely linked elucidation and illustration in sections throughout the text.

Finally, the readings of the novels are convincing, as is Lyon’s overarching contention that all three authors came to view place as yielding to modern space but (largely) abstained from a distorting nostalgia for the places of the past. In writing about Fontane, for instance, Lyon maintains that “[his] representations of place ... do not ignore the sense of displacement ... as much as they identify it without emphasizing its pathology. Fontane represents historical and social conflicts in terms of place, but refuses to valorize one side of the conflict over the other” (147). *Irrungen Wirungen* erodes the potential pathos of its characters’ displacement by undermining the ‘purity’ of the places that are lost; upon arriving at a supposedly rustic and remote retreat, for instance, the lovers Lene and Botho learn that it actually developed as a river port with close economic connections to the city (161–62). Raabe’s *Die Akten des Vogelsangs* shows the disorientation that the parents’ generation suffers when their close-knit neighborhood is consumed by the expanding city, but it also reveals the stifling aspects of the established home and family that ground the narrator’s life (134). There are compelling reasons for Raabe’s fascination with the lonely but footloose antihero. In *Martin Salander*, Keller recognizes clearly that “place is no longer singular, consolidated, unified and stable, but is instead a broken, diffuse ideal rife with unresolved tension” (212). The novel’s seemingly idyllic places are never really so; the serenity of a woodland pond is defiled by the presence of a swindler, and the picturesque forest behind a family home is slated to be logged. In contrast to his reading of Raabe and Fontane, however, Lyon’s reading of Keller does admit a negative response to this transformation; Keller’s novel longs for these lost places and clearly critiques the values that have “displaced” them (212).

The criticisms I have of the book do not relate to its central argument. Occasionally, I found textual interpretations to be either strained or not sufficiently explained, but these moments did not weaken the book’s overall readings. The book’s keen focus on late realism perhaps prevented a historical and theoretical account of the concept of place on the scope that Lyon initially intended. It is not clear whether Lyon believes “places” ever to have coexisted with a conception of place as such, or whether the ideal of place arose only once the places themselves were seen as disappearing. Additional treatment

of earlier realism or of eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century discussions of space and place might have been helpful here. Nor does Lyon delve deeply into the conceptual insights that the literary readings might yield. While the introduction signals an intention to use these readings to correct or complement both phenomenological and Marxist-influenced theories (Foucault and LeFebvre), the correctives that late realist treatments of place might offer remain mostly implicit and undeveloped.

Lyon's book is not a theoretical treatise on place, however, but an investigation of place as it was experienced and understood in late poetic realism. He makes a strong case that poetic realist works diagnosed and depicted the erosion of place under the conditions of late nineteenth-century urbanization, modernization, and capitalism. On the whole, the book provides excellent insight not only into the development of the phenomenon of place but also to late realism more generally. It is a strong contribution to the vein of criticism that sees in late realism a response to the realities of modernity, rather than a retreat from them.

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Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, ed. *Rebozos de palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*

Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2013. Pp. 296, \$35

As a critical reader on Helena María Viramontes, *Rebozos de palabras* accomplishes the dual task of affirming Viramontes's contributions to U.S. literature in accordance with traditional author-centered literary criticism and of demonstrating the theoretical capacity of Chicana feminism to connect the work of literature to larger cultural and political concerns. The evolution of Viramontes's creative writing career—from her first collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), to her critically acclaimed novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and, most recently, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007)—is carefully explicated in the nine critical essays of the reader. Likewise, a careful attention to Viramontes's craft of writing is manifest in the close readings of all the essays. Barbara Brinson Curiel's contribution, which offers Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as an intertext for *Under the Feet of Jesus*, is probably most illustrative of the function of this critical reader to place Viramontes in the field of U.S. literature. By examining the themes, symbols, and motifs shared by Steinbeck's canonical text and Viramontes's newer text, Curiel