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## Conclusions

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## Conclusions

References to a poetics and politics of place and its relations have been made at various stages. The linking of poetry and politics emerges most clearly in the work of writers whose concerns are closely connected to questions of place and the earth. Heidegger's work is one of the notable instances in the twentieth century of a relating of philosophical thinking to both poetry and the earth. He focuses on the nature and extent of the alienation of human thought from care for the planet in ways that both Arran Gare and Edward Casey regard as being of major significance. The regaining of a more responsible form of relation to the planet and cosmos is seen as crucial. While the political element related to Heidegger's project has been a major obstacle to providing more positive interpretations of his work, Anna Bramwell's account of the development of ecological thinking indicates that he was not alone in developing dangerously reactionary forms of political orientation. Even David Harvey, while expressing clear reservations about the unmediated and essentialistic aspects of Heidegger's approach to place and the earth, recognises, to an extent which contemporaries such as Doreen Massey find dubious, the significance and power of his appeal to notions of home and rootedness. Edward Relph's evocation of placelessness was observed to be Heideggerean in its approach and also connectable to earlier criticisms of modern urban planning and the socio-economic system from which it stems, such as those produced by Mumford, Jacobs or Lynch. To open a concluding discussion of relations between place, poetics and politics from this perspective might seem to confirm the suspicion that reactionary or nostalgic elements hold these three concepts together, even in the latter half of the twentieth century. Olson's poetry provides the opening case study in this respect. He writes a radically open form of verse in conjunction with a highly ambitious poetic that relates developments in psychoanalysis and process philosophy to a searching examination of myth and history. A centred sense of self, grounded in a deeply explored relation to place is promoted against what is perceived as the shallow commercialism of a dominant contemporary culture. As with Pound's epic, politics are of central significance to the poetry but are nearly always examined at a local level. The problem is whether epic projects like Olson's, more than approaches of relatively limited scope, manage sufficiently to challenge and provide credible alternatives to the disorientating, nihilistic tendencies they dramatically evoke.

The place focused on in Olson's epic is small but the dimensions of the relations projected onto it are formidable, as well as being complex and arcane in their expression. In partial contrast, Sinclair highlights the arcane elements of his approach in a mode of grotesque irony, which satirises but never totally dismisses them. Williams, unlike Sinclair, has no direct relationship with Olson's writing but his last novel covers a comparable range of time in relation to an equally comparable specific-

ity of geographical focus. In Williams' approach, though, there is no more than a hint of arcane knowledge. Issues are presented in as clear a fashion as possible. At the same time, his depiction of the landscape of the Black Mountains suggests an area that will not instantly surrender itself to a stranger. It is not the other-oriented tourist place of Edward Relf's negative characterisation but has to be lived with and worked at to be properly understood. This is perhaps indicative of a degree of affinity with the notion of truth as something difficult, as well as a degree of protectiveness that suggests a partially exilic stance.

Sinclair, particularly in *Downriver*, offers an approach which is characterised by a complex, ironically mediated sense of mysticism in relation to place, as well as strong elements of satire and parody. At the same time, a sense of superiority to and disdain for the culture represented by the Widow and her gang is still present. Sinclair's novels speak for the values of an 'aristocracy', so to speak, rather than those of any landed class. They inhabit a territory which, in formal terms, seems to lie on the border between cliqueish, precious, poeticism and urbane, democratic satire. Williams, in *People of the Black Mountains*, also includes a degree of gentle parody of the various cultural modes his novel takes us through, but also speaks for the people of an area in a manner which might be seen as partly reminiscent of the ancient bards.

Both Arran Gare and Paul Carter strive, in different ways, to produce a politics and poetics of place and the earth which avoids the traps of defensive essentialism or reactionary nostalgia. Gare's ecological politics include elements which verge on both. His condemnation of later twentieth century culture as nihilistic might be seen as evidence of conservatism, as might his enlisting of Vico against the modernism of Descartes. His approach to Heidegger is partly critical but also emphasises his positive achievements. Like Olson, however, Gare protects himself from charges of nostalgia by a strong interest in positive and progressive elements in modern thought. Furthermore, his approach offers a global politics to counter tendencies in global capitalism, one which emphasises justice as a process of recognition and tolerance of the nature and practices of others. Again, this approach is not without a potentially dangerous element — his view of the role and nature of nationalism. But the kind of nationalism Gare proposes bears a strong resemblance — particularly in the way in which relatively small and non-imperialistic forms of nation are proposed as models — to what might equally well be regarded as a form of regionalism. Gare presents not merely a politics but a philosophical poetics in the form of a wide-ranging and complex narrative regarding perceptions of relations between different elements of the cosmos. Like Lefebvre and Harvey, Gare is sensitive to the problem of complicity with fragmenting elements in a totalising, nihilistic culture represented by the notion of a global culture of dissociated minorities and insists on the virtues of a strong, if complex and flexible, form of grand narrative.

In Paul Carter, while there is a marked emphasis on the virtues of interactive communication, the priority is on an attentive relation to the land which is primarily presented in terms of the behaviour of peoples whose culture predates the epoch of modern capital and nation-state imperialism. This includes elements of Renaissance

art, in the form of Giorgione's curvilinear aesthetic, and more recent forms of sympathy with the uneven nature of the landscape, whether in the form of Light's cultural hybridity and atmospheric sensitivity or Prynne's peripatetic aesthetic in *Kitchen Poems* or *The White Stones*. Elements of movement and a cultural diplomacy derived from an openness and sensitivity to the difference(s) represented by the local environment are elements central to Carter's approach. The examples presented are neither static nor exclusive, but they do insist on a complex poetics of sympathy with the environment.

As observed earlier, there is overlap between Carter's approach and that of Deleuze and Guattari, although one needs to be cautious about asking the concept of nomadism to do too much work. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari also work with a long time scale to escape from more limiting forms of historicising into a potentially more open form of social space. Deleuze and Guattari's 'smooth' space is characterised by unevenness and heterogeneity, comparable not only to Carter's versions of place but also to the rugged, relative impenetrability of Williams's constantly colonised Black Mountain area. Sinclair's depictions of the operations of locally situated and sensitive individuals also suggests another location beneath the social striations of a dominant culture of finance and property speculation. Like Carter, but to a greater extent, Deleuze and Guattari, insist on the virtues of movement in relation to 'smooth' space. De Certeau's approach to questions of social space seems particularly comparable to that of Deleuze and Guattari in terms of its emphasis on a polemological analysis of the deployment of tactics on occupied territory. On both counts, Deleuze and Guattari offer a less cautious and reflective rhetoric than de Certeau, developing a poetics and politics of local operations, molecularity, movement and difference in relation to social developments that tend to stultify such tendencies.

The writers most critical of semiotic or rhetorical approaches to questions of social space are Lefebvre and Harvey. Lefebvre presents a conceptualisation of 'representations of space' which suggests that theoretical representations tend towards collaboration with more profound and less easily represented processes of the kind with which he attempts to engage. Similar approaches can be found in both Jameson, with his appeal to a 'political unconscious' in literature, followed by a broader critique of postmodernism, and in Harvey. Harvey tends to aggressively force the question of whether complex but primarily rhetorical theories and dramatisations, conceived in relative isolation from attention to detailed empirical studies, are an adequate form of opposition to flows of socio-economic power. It can be claimed, though, that this is to move in the direction of imposing too rigid a division between a material base and a cultural superstructure, or one between speech and action. This is a dubious strategy if one takes the view that economic systems and relations are as much a part of culture as any other aspect of human behaviour. The advantage of Harvey's approach is an attention to the details of economic trends and discourses. The disadvantage is his arguably rather crude notions of art and culture as things which can be tacked on to economic realities — an approach which, in some respects, seems to conform

too readily with the prevailing, economics-dominated, dogma of the socio-spatial regime he attempts to critique and with whom he accuses others of collusion.

Other geographers have attempted somewhat more subtle approaches in this respect. Neil Smith's suggestion of a series of levels of socio-spatial organisation, from the body to the global is one example. Thrift and Leyshon's suggestion that the world of money and economics is highly sociable, and therefore strongly susceptible to social influence, is another. Here, Deleuze and Guattari's approach, which particularly focuses on connecting micro-elements to larger forms, is relevant. The emphasis on molecularities, local practices and minorities in relation to machines, planes of consistency, molarities and the like offers the possibility of a subversion of capitalist social relations which focuses on tactical developments of differential tendencies already present but co-ordinated to the needs of the dominant culture. This is close to Lefebvre's emphasis on contradictory spaces but proceeds more directly from a physics of action and movement than from a logic which tends towards the possibility of replacing one system with another.

Most of the approaches described here can be characterised as ambitious mappings of socio-spatial relations which, as Lefebvre suggests, seek to provide different orientations to a dominant culture of accumulative capital without falling into the trap of providing an alternative which is more totalising and repressive than the cynical, relative openness of global capitalism. This approach has been characterised here as 'partial mapping', the premodifying adjective acknowledging that such mappings are neither complete nor impartial.

The fictional writing by Williams and Sinclair was explored in more detail as indicative of how certain forms of fiction can provide both partial mappings of this kind and a more accessible complement to comparable projects in the fields of poetry and cultural theory. *People of the Black Mountains*, like Williams' earlier novels, provides a sustained investigation and dramatisation of issues pertaining to place and to the other relations considered here — space, region and the earth. Williams's novels, as Tony Pinkney observes, deal with a particular area but usually in relation to influences well beyond it — amounting to an analysis of the truth of an international space. The space of Williams' 'border country' is, by definition, intermediary, falling between national boundaries and far from self-enclosed as region. In *People of the Black Mountains* its relation to a space dominated by multinational capital is less obvious, partly because the third volume of the novel was not completed. At the same time, the relation to contemporary developments is maintained through Glyn's reflections. As in Sinclair's novels, places hold secreted pockets of history, but in Williams' novel these are presented as revealing themselves in less haptic, more chronologically ordered fashion. Williams provides a 'long history' comparable to Lefebvre's. Despite the evocation of all generations being suddenly present, the stories still form a chronological progression from one generation to another. If this appears a less radical approach to time-space relations than Sinclair's or Deleuze and Guattari's, it is one which has its own advantages. It tends to insist on the notion of history as coherent, the Hegelian aspect of Arran Gare's insistence on the

importance to cultural regeneration of a sufficiently strong form of narrative, an attitude also supported by Harvey's perspective on the deficiencies of postmodernist thinking. In *People of the Black Mountains*, the region is provided with a history, a narrative, that incorporates events well before the advent of industrial capitalism, the Norman conquests, or even the Britons. Pretensions to cultural superiority over the values of the region are thus challenged by a longer perspective. The history and identity of the region is presented as one of struggle with a variety of forces, one of which is the arrogant aspect of incursions from the outside. Outsiders are not simply dismissed, but the length of the history outlined makes it difficult for them to gain the status of something overwhelmingly new. In this sense generations really do stand side by side, since the narrative makes possible comparisons between different kinds of incursion. These are not simply rejected as a series of unjust attacks upon an innocent population, though there is a tendency to portray a development of modes of domination from the time of Dal Mered through to that of Conan, the last major intellectual portrayed.

There would seem to be common ground between Williams' approach and that of not only Lefebvre, but also de Certeau and Deleuze and Guattari. The primary criticism is of domination by violence, but that violence is shown to be far from simply physical and the systems and representations devised by intellectuals are shown to be a part of it. Lefebvre's critique of the representations of space, de Certeau's distrust of the scientific distancing of intellectual historians, Deleuze and Guattari's alternative line of nomadic thinking, are all comparable to Williams' defending of local, non-dominating traditions of thinking which are represented in the opening section in the contrast between Glyn's actual father, the professional historian Sayce, and his real father-figure, Elis, in whose footsteps he follows throughout the novel. This valuing of a more local and amateur form of thinking partly returns us to the question of secret and arcane forms of knowledge in relation to place. Williams rarely highlights the mysterious, a characteristic he shares with Deleuze and Guattari, who are friends of complexity but not of mystification. In both cases there is an acceptance that both kinds of knowledge, the state-professional and the local-amateur are necessary, but it is the latter which is seen as having the greater need for defence and vindication. Williams's approach perhaps most closely resembles Lefebvre's in its picture of gradually developing forms of socio-spatial domination, though Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the Primitive, the Despotic and The Capitalist is not far removed from either. Williams's portrayal of a relatively early form of state domination in Menvandir is reminiscent of their insistence on the state always being present in form as well as the nomadic alternative to it, represented in the novel by lines of flight such as that taken by Dal Mered and other, comparable figures.

One of the problems of Williams' narrative is the degree to which it represents a potentially sentimental approach to the position of the non-metropolitan intellectual, seeking a retreat from the crowded competitiveness of the dominant central culture represented by the power-triangle of London, Oxford and Cambridge. The same criticism might be applied to Olson and his retreat from mainstream politics

into a radical intellectual alternative with strongly mystical elements. But, as discourses such as those of Deleuze and Guattari indicate, retreat and escape can be highly active and creative forms of movement. A greater problem with *People of the Black Mountains* is perhaps the lack of concession it makes to more conventional expectations on the part of the reader in terms of length, form and modality. It is not such an extreme work, in this respect, as *The Maximus Poems*, but in comparison to Williams' other novels, it does appear to offer new forms of challenge. Multiplicity, repetition and variation are present on a scale comparable to those in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The reader has to cope with a multiplicitous narrative which is attentive to the significance of narrative in relation to other forms of cultural organisation and experience. As Dominic Head illustrates, most of these elements are available, in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (Head 1998: 70–72). The most obvious difference, apart from the greater popularity of Swift's novel, is that the latter is shorter, deals with considerably fewer characters and storylines and retains a close contact with the domestic romance and murder story which are the staples of modern popular fiction. The perspective presented here is that these different kinds of novel should be viewed as points on a cline rather than as competing models for a new paradigm.

Similar points can be made in relation to Sinclair's *Downriver*, which, like *People of the Black Mountains*, seems to inhabit an area between *Waterland* and *The Maximus Poems* in terms of the specialised demands it makes on its potential reader. In Sinclair, relation to place as part of the human condition is explicitly selected and focused on from the beginning. As with Olson, the relation of human to cosmos is meditated upon via relations to the city *oxpolis*. Sinclair's choice of London as the centre of his attentions distinguishes him from both Olson and Williams. Their focus is on relatively small and knowable communities, immediately bordering on a natural landscape and well-removed from the power-centres of the nation. This is a choice which encourages an identification with Wordsworth and his primarily positive and redemptive view of nature as potential paradise. Sinclair's choice of location connects him with a modern, French, urban tradition of the poetics of place. His gothic approach is common enough in urban literature but is not usually coupled with a specific attention to the notion of place as such rather than the condition of the city or metropolis. It is this aspect which helps to make it distinctive and allows for an approach to the city which connects it, and the modern socio-economic system of which it is a part, to an outside which is both geographical and historical. Place is presented as heavily used but still available ground, thick with history in the way that Sinclair's own narratives are full of allusions to those of other writers. London appears as a place that used to be the centre of everything but is increasingly the plaything of outside interests; a place where no one really understands what is happening — a site of disorientation.

The problem here, as with some aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's approach for writers such as Harvey or Gare, is the lack of an adequate political narrative to counter the negative features of dominant trends in social relations. Williams's approach in *People of the Black Mountains* provides a primary focus on and a clear, almost

schematic, analysis of social and political problems and relations in the context of an alternative history of a particular area. Sinclair presents a more playful and exploratory approach, one which is not without its serious elements but which focuses on the fascination rather than the problems of experience. In this respect there is a link with Deleuze and Guattari who are also less apt to produce a direct, highly coordinated, confrontational form of discourse in relation to oppressively dominant elements in the culture. The more anarchic approach of all of these writers clearly leaves them open to charges of a less organised and clearly focused politics but equally defends them from those of repression in the name of such an approach.

To conclude, an attempt has been made here to examine and compare ways in which aspects of the writing of a range of cultural theorists and two British novelists, have provided 'partial mappings' of issues pertaining to place, space, region and the earth. It has been suggested that in each case a relative broadness of scope combined with an actively disruptive or oppositional political element, are factors (seen as significantly shared with those elements of twentieth century poetry referred to) which might be viewed as part of a wider cultural movement in the struggle against disorientating and displacing tendencies in social relations dominated by the priorities of accumulative capital. Primary emphasis has been placed on a detailed examination of writing by the two novelists, since this has not yet received the degree of attention it merits, but the overall emphasis has been on the virtues of potential alliances, expressed as perceived convergences of approach, between otherwise considerably differing perspectives.