

Of Maps

Sarah Wylie Krotz. *Mapping with Words: Anglo-Canadian Literary Cartographies, 1789-1916*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 252pp.

Mapping with Words offers fine and necessary, historically-grounded close readings of eight texts of what the author, Sarah Wylie Krotz, describes as early Canadian “nonfiction writing” (20)—botanical studies, poems, sketches, and travel writing—coming out of the colonial settlement period. Krotz uses theoretical work that advocates “regarding the map as text” (15) and reading it to understand how it is involved in the construction of space as a basis for her own work of reading writing-as-mapping. In reading writing-as-mapping, she moves beyond seeing landscape description in the settler texts as either reportage or evidence of the aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime to look at how the writers of those texts “contributed to the creation of a spatial order predicated on the future-oriented gaze of the surveyor” (152).

To produce her readings, Krotz positions herself as a “literary geographer” (135) looking at the texts’ “literary cartography” (7), which she explains, “encompasses processes of representing and poeticizing—or ascribing literary value to—the land” (23). In her readings, she sees these processes sometimes arising out of an aesthetic influence that cartography has on a text, sometimes arising out of a text’s historical connection to a map or maps—and always resolving into a verbal map that the text constructs of the land or environment, the place or space, of which it treats. Although she says, “these texts are not just maps, but also *about* mapping practices” (16), it might be more accurate to say that her approach involves her in an analysis of mapping practices to aid her literary interpretations.

The approach is productive. While Canadian literary criticism in the nationalist vein of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood tends to bland overgeneralizations about literary texts in its efforts to produce an encompassing vision, Krotz’s approach is nuanced: it pays close attention to the historical and geographical details—and to the literature itself. I was glad to be given the opportunity to review Krotz’s work because of its affinities with my own, and it is its marrying of geographical and historical awareness that I find convincing.

I also appreciate the sensitivity of her interpretive contributions. Although her work is about “the role that cartographic aesthetics and strategies played in the discursive claiming of settler space” (167), it is also about how these strategies break down—for writers writing out of lived experience of the land and the Indigenous peoples who inhabit it. Thus, her interpretations elucidate how the settler texts “give us glimpses of counter-maps” (153), showing the ways in which space is not orderly and place is not empty, whether it is through the writer confronting an unfamiliar habitat or encountering Indigenous lifeways and knowledge. Her work broadens the scope of interpretative possibilities concerning “Canada’s colonial literary history” to move away from seeing the literature involved in “a simple process of territorial overwriting (and thus reinscribing the land claims of nationalist narratives)” (16) and move toward seeing some of its written complexity.

Chapter one addresses two long poems: Thomas Cary’s *Abram’s Plains* (1789) and Adam Hood Burwell’s *Talbot Road: A Poem* (1818), both celebrating colonial settlement. These two poems Krotz uses to lay the groundwork for her argument that spatial constructions in settler writing are based in surveying. Although here her interpretation favours simple overwriting—she argues that the poets write about the land “in order to lay claim to it” (23)—her cartographic approach reveals how these poems celebrating settlement also celebrate the surveyor-as-creator bringing forth settlement from the imagination. The landscape description is visionary. The poet has a God’s-eye view.

Her approach also reveals the ways in which both poets were influenced by maps and both poems offer descriptions of the land that are map-like. She argues that maps are “agents of ... aesthetic design” (24), that “maps ... modelled a way of seeing that permeates the very structure of these poems” (27). The territorial view is from a distance and impossibly comprehensive. Much space is traversed, as if the poets are guiding the reader along some “route,” as if “tracing” it “on a map” (30 and 49). She fully commits to her cartographic approach and makes her argument with artistry and conviction. For instance, she argues that “the heroic couplets that both Cary and Burwell employ parallel the abstract geometrical lines of occupied space” (41). Even if I am unconvinced, I like such formal considerations.

More convincingly, she argues that the poems’ structure reveals that the poets are invested in “the cartographic claiming and creation of navigable territory” (52). The idea that the poets are invested in navigable territory allows her to work against nationalist narratives like Frye’s

whereby to carve out a national literature requires that settler-writers be cut off from the rest of the world so that any cultural influence in their texts is revealed only in the texts' derivative literary style. Krotz places early settlement in the larger context of empire and trade relations; she argues that the poets depict "colonial space open to the world, not isolated from it" (48). I like that she broadens the view beyond the colonial to the imperial context because, while the poetry may well be derivative, it has something to tell us about emerging settlement: if not literary merit, it has historical interest.

With the groundwork of the first chapter establishing that spatial constructions in settler writing are based on surveying in place, Krotz uses the five chapters that follow to look for where the orderly and ordering lines of demarcation reveal themselves for the wished-for abstractions that they are. In chapter two, she addresses Susanna Moodie's collection of sketches of settler life, *Roughing It in the Bush: Or, Life in Canada* (1852), and, in chapter three, she addresses the botanical studies, *Canadian Wildflowers* (1868) and *Studies of Plant Life in Canada; or, Gleanings from Forest, Lake and Plain* (1885), of her sister Catharine Parr Traill. In both chapters, Krotz's argument is one of perspective: unlike Cary's or Burwell's, Moodie's is "up close" and Traill's is "intimate" (as their respective chapter titles indicate)—and it breaks down boundaries and deconstructs binaries. In chapter four, she addresses George Munro Grant's travel writing *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872* (1873) with its tensions between idealized and encountered colonial space, and argues that despite its future orientation, it also charts past and present habitation.

In chapter five, Krotz addresses Duncan Campbell Scott's lyric poem "The Height of Land" (1916), grounding her argument in Scott's biography and the geopolitics of his time. Although the poem is a meditation in the Romantic mode and includes landscape description that is not about one particular place, Krotz argues that Scott, nonetheless, employs strategies like those of Cary and Burwell to stake a verbal, territorial claim. From an imagined height of land, "[t]he sense of place that Scott creates ... is cartographic rather than experiential: it is the product of an omniscient bird's-eye view" (140). She argues that "its topographical descriptions reverberate with the colonizing imperatives of Treaty 9, which Scott helped to negotiate with the Ojibway and Cree of northern Ontario during the summers of 1905 and 1906" (135), that the poem "participates in the treaty's territorial impetus" (137) because "it is about the land and a way of imaginatively inhabiting it" (135). While I

agree with her argument in essence, I find it a stretch to think that “Scott’s lonely north comes to be characterized by a diffuse Indigenous spirit of place” (147), particularly when the material presence of guides, who fall asleep, is so evocative of, as Krotz says, “Scott’s elegiac representations of Indigenous peoples” (145).

In the conclusion, “Maps and Counter-Maps (On Getting Lost),” Krotz weaves together the works of the preceding chapters within the timeframe of 1789 to 1916 by celebrating David Thompson’s *Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812* (1916) and looking at the ways in which it “treads a fine line ... between map and counter-map” (156). Here, as throughout Krotz’s work, the “map” is that map produced by the surveyor with a farsighted view in service to the colonizing imperative. Here, as threaded through the preceding chapters, the “counter-map” is part interpretive, part corrective. Krotz aims to fill in the blank spaces in the early-Canadian literary record by charting Indigenous presence within each text as a means of revealing the legacy of the colonial period.

At that, she admirably succeeds. I find it, however, suspect that her argument seems to be made on moral grounds reducible “to surveying is bad but other forms are mapping are good.” I also find that she herself at times becomes surveyor-like when she gazes backward into the future to force connections: the first line of Scott’s poem “anticipates” (138) Frye’s (in)famous question; “Thompson’s cartographic legacy anticipated ... the east-to-west union of the country that Grant would help to solidify” (158). Finally, I find myself questioning the rationale for her selections: although she explains that she has not attempted a survey in favour of close readings, she does not explain why she chose the authors or texts or why she combines the genres that she does. Perhaps what I find simply highlights the problem (or the beauty) of literary criticism—which is that the literature itself is always escaping the bounds that we set for it.

Cheryl Cundell