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Writing the Northland: Jack London's and Robert W. Service's Imaginary Geography

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REVIEWS

Writing the Northland: Jack London's and Robert W. Service's Imaginary Geography, by Barbara Stefanie Giehmann. Germany: Konigshausen and Neumann, 2011. 455 pp. Cloth, €49.80.

Barbara Stefanie Giehmann maps out the northern literary landscapes of London and Service in *Writing the Northland: Jack London's and Robert W. Service's Imaginary Geography*. Giehmann argues that with the closing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, Americans began to view northern territory as the new West; that is, many imagined and idealized the North as a replacement for Western wilderness, which had become increasingly obsolete. Throughout the book, Giehmann distinguishes the north as a physical geography encompassing the Arctic regions of Canada, Russia, and the United States from the Northland as an imaginary untainted terrain standing for imperial dreams, hopes, and visions. *Writing the Northland* does a fine job of mapping out its mission: by illustrating that London and Service share an outsiders' perspective on the Arctic, Giehmann differentiates her work from that of recent northern studies scholars who focus on "insiders' depictions of the north." Moreover, at both the beginning and end of her book, the author affirms the importance of her study by reminding readers that no scholars have compared and contrasted the northland narratives of London and Service. At a time when critics seek new and exciting approaches to literary naturalism, *Writing the Northland* offers a refreshing reading of London in particular.

Giehmann prefaces her chapters by noting the book's critical contribution to the field of northern studies as well as its significance to literary scholarship on London and Service. The author devotes her introduction to the definition of key terms like "Klondike": "a place for hopes, dreams, and illusions." Furthermore, Giehmann historicizes this term by explaining that a turn-of-the-century Gold Rush, reminiscent of the Western quest in 1849, occurred between Yukon and Alaska. By introducing the Klondike Gold Rush, Giehmann places her readers on a path toward understanding the extreme expectations and subsequent illusions surrounding this historical moment. Her examination of the myths resulting from

this real event enables Giehmann to transition smoothly into her second chapter, "Northland as Imaginary Geography," which contains three inter-chapters that look closely at various dimensions of this fictional landscape. In chapter three, Giehmann extends her discussion of this "imaginary [northern] geography" to the American Western "frontier," which she defines by referencing the well-known Turner thesis: according to Frederick Jackson Turner, the "frontier" functioned at the end of the nineteenth-century as a "zone between the civilization in the east and the wilderness in the west."

This portion of Giehmann's book, in particular chapter three, effectively captures the nostalgic impulse of many who sought to venture into previously uncharted and unmapped territory; the Northland became a new frontier onto which Americans could project their imperialistic desires. The book's middle chapters focus specifically on the "North as projection space for gender, racial, and national ideologies"; in so doing, Giehmann nicely situates her reading of London and Service within the context of current ecocritical arguments about wilderness as culturally constructed by a dominant white male ideology. While she notes that both authors partake in this imperialistic and masculine rhetoric, Giehmann gives London the more favorable treatment. Service includes within his poetry and prose solely weak female characters and almost no natives; however, London's writings offer a "more varied, balanced, and inclusive picture" of both "masculinity" and ethnic identity. Giehmann goes on to show that while neither author can avoid partaking in Social Darwinian discourses of Anglo-Saxon superiority, London in particular tries hard to transcend racial borders. For example, in "The Forests of the North," he creates a community of natives that survives and even thrives because of its "closeness to nature."

Although she presents this analysis of London's short story as subversive, I would caution Giehmann against a romantic racialism that results from such a reading. As we have seen with African American slave narratives, for instance, a harmonic existence within the natural world neither empowers nor emboldens the "other." My other critique of Giehmann's work is that she devotes far too much space and time to telling readers what she argues, rather than showing her audience the reasons for her claims. The portions of the book that read most clearly and convincingly are those that closely analyze the primary texts of London and Service; more frequent textual analysis and fewer statements about methodology would have greatly enhanced *Writing the Northland*.

The book's strongest arguments, I think, emerge in chapter seven

where Giehmann engages in careful close readings to “imagine the Northland as wilderness.” Over the past several decades, environmental and cultural critics alike have struggled to define *nature* and, in so doing, have debated and discussed the meaning of *wilderness*. By defining the latter term from the perspective of “non-native people” who idealize Western wilderness as an untouched and uncharted natural terrain, Giehmann invigorates these wilderness debates and discussions. Furthermore, Giehmann marks out her scholarly territory by persuasively pointing out that the Northland narratives of Jack London and Robert W. Service merit attention because of how they influence North American perspectives on place and space. Overall, I recommend Barbara Stefanie Giehmann’s *Writing the Northland* to those who seek an insightful and invigorating approach to the northern narratives of London and Service.

—Cara Elana Erdheim, *Sacred Heart University*

Making American Culture: A Social History 1900–1920, by Patricia Bradley. NY: Palgrave, 2010. xii + 264 pp. Paper, \$28.00.

Charting the progress by which American popular culture came to be synonymous with American culture is the task Patricia Bradley sets herself in this wide-ranging treatment of American popular culture of the first two decades of the twentieth century: a time when emerging technologies, new marketing strategies, and exploding urban growth combined with aspirational immigrants, the white urban underclass, and newly mobile African Americans to supplant the genteel, and largely imported, culture that had dominated the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Bradley’s thesis is that popular art producers (understood as anything from makers of nickelodeon reels and magazine illustrators to coon shouters, stage actors, and band leaders) bowed to the imperatives of Capital and Patriotism, seeking to entice the aesthetically cautious, moneyed, and politically powerful middle class American audience away from genteel culture and into “the reign of the spectacular” through a “merge to the middle”: a process of under-seasoning the earthiness savored by underclass American audiences just enough to make it palatable to more refined tastes. A Ziegfeld girl might appear as lightly clad on stage as any showgirl in gamier surroundings, but packaged as “Glorifying the American Girl” she appealed to the audience members’ national pride as well as to their lower sensibilities. This seems an uncontroversial, if somewhat under-theorized, thesis, productive of a pleasant, if not crucial, reading experience for a broad

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