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Deposited on 21 October 2022
Matas Pons, Àlex, *Els marges dels mapes: una geografia desplaçada* (Tres i Quatre, 2021), pp. 188.

*Els marges dels mapes: una geografia desplaçada* is a carefully conceived and innovative monograph analysing border literature in contemporary Catalan culture through a focus on the Monegros in the *Franja de Ponent*, the Vallespir in Northern Catalonia and the Besòs area in Barcelona and Badalona. At a time in which the legacy of modernity has become a matter of social and cultural controversy globally, the strength of this book lies in showing how Catalan border fiction problematises from particularly original perspectives the univocal narrative of Western modernity and its capitalist and imperialist ethos. Key to Matas’ argument is illustrating how contemporary liberal discourses of progress conceal multiple exclusions organised around the dialectic centre vs. periphery: ‘tot allò que no combrega amb l’ideal del progrés resta lluny del centre en termes estrictament geogràfics, però també endarrerit en termes històrics’ (15). For Matas, such dichotomy came into operation with the advent of modern states which have fostered social and cultural homogenization by establishing strong, artificial borders that erode the memory of the past and ‘escapcen antics camins, [...] desfan històriques relacions de veïnatge i [...] aïllen localitats abans connectades’ (15). Nevertheless, as Matas’ convincing literary and cultural analyses illustrate, the modern project has historically been challenged by human groups and subjectivities operating in liminal spaces who aim to develop alternative relations.

Divided into an Introduction, three long chapters and a wide-ranging Conclusion, the book draws upon an impressive array of critical theories and authors, ranging from Immanuel Kant, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to Homi Bhabha, Walter Mignolo, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deluze and Félix Guattari, among others. The Introduction offers a riveting reflection on the history of borders together with a specific discussion of the Catalan cultural space and its natural, linguistic, religious and political frontiers. The first chapter, entitled ‘El desert’, focuses on the representation of the *Franja de Ponent* in Jesús Moncada’s *Camí de sirga* and Francesc Serés’ *La pell de la frontera*. For Matas, *Camí de sirga* departs from the state-oriented narratives of national progress at the core of the nineteenth-century historical novel, instead shifting the focus to ‘la lluita sense treva contra l’oblit que pretén imposar
el progrés’ (37). In the second part of the chapter Matas puts forward a sophisticated interpretation of *La pell de la frontera* as a text which problematises Spanish and Catalan ideologies of language purity and which illustrates the fallacy of liberal discourses of cultural diversity and hybridity; as Matas argues, Serés’ original and proper representation of migrants and refugees in the Aragonese town of Saidí unveils the capitalist nature and exclusions of the ‘discursos falasament cosmopolites de l’individualisme competitiu de caràcter transfronterer’ (45) which define globalisation. Entitled ‘La muntanya’, the second chapter looks at narrative works from Northern Catalonia, in particular *El dia de l’ós* by Joan-Lluís Lluís and *Un país de butxaca* by Joan Daniel Bezsonoff. Of special interest is Matas’ analysis of Bernadette, the poor protagonist of *El dia de l’ós* who was sent to exile from her native Prats de Molló due to a lesbian flirtation, though ultimately this was a punishment for her family’s lack of collaboration with the French army. Matas reads Bernadette’s return from Barcelona to Prats years later from two interrelated perspectives: on the one hand, as a disruption of the narratives of a continuous French national history and, on the other, drawing upon Foucault’s work on biopolitics, as a critique of the state repression on subjectivities, bodies and behaviours that deviate from the norm.

In ‘El riu’, the third chapter, Matas analyses Julià de Jòdar’s trilogy *L’atzar i les sombres* through a focus on liminal spaces surrounding the Besòs river. If the two previous chapters focused on rural areas, here Matas turns his attention to Jòdar’s representation of peripheral working-class neighbourhoods located in Barcelona, Sant Adrià de Besòs and Badalona. As Matas illustrates, Jòdar’s trilogy represents the detrimental impacts of modernity’s broken infrastructural development, organised around the notion of progress; in his own words: ‘Jòdar explora les «cicatrices sobre la terra i la memòria» que ha deixat l’obtusa fe en el progrés i les seves arbitraries delimitacions simbòliques’ (120) – by connecting its debates to a number of contemporary Catalan neighbourhoods such as la Mina, el Besòs and el Bon Pastor, the chapter beautifully illustrates how exploring Jòdar’s trilogy helps towards a better understanding of the tension city vs. ghetto at the core of modern urban organisation. Inferring from Benjamin’s work on the disparities between storytelling and novel, Matas also deploys a particularly stimulating analysis of how Jòdar narrative perspective foregrounds the neighbourhoods’ collective memory of political resistance in a way that problematises the historicist, chronological
model of narrative fiction. The Conclusion turns its attention to the sea and opens with an evocative discussion of the Alacantí-Minorcan connections with Algeria, from the large number of Catalan-speaking labourers who arrived into the cities of Alger and Orà in the mid-nineteenth century and the Republican refugees leaving for Algeria from the port of Alacant in 1939 to the pied-noirs disembarking also at the port of Alacant in 1962 under a Francoist regime immersed in an interrelated process of historical forgetfulness and touristification – as Matas notes, such experiences illustrate the ‘arbitrarietat de les divisions frontereres’ (154). The remaining of the chapter analyses a series of photographic projects, literary narrations and films representing the sea as a border space: the CNT-organised Barcelona dockworkers, the wall paintings at the Fuerteventura migrants detention centre, the book Lampedusa (2016) by the French author Maylis de Kerangal and the film Spectres Are Haunting Europe (Niki Giannari and Maria Kourkouta, 2016) filmed at the Idomeni refugee camp in Greece, among other cultural products. While these creations foreground the sea as a key element of the imperialist, capitalist and colonial project, they also display imageries of resistance reminding those previously analysed ‘als espais liminars del desert, la muntanya i el riu’ (175; italics in original).

Overall, the monograph offers an original and remarkably cohesive study of a diverse set of contemporary Catalan literary texts with a particularly strong critical framework bringing together cultural studies, philosophy and historical narrative – one of the volume’s key strengths precisely lies in contributing to broaden the borders of Catalan Studies by engaging with such diverse array of critical methodologies. While the volume is particularly cohesive, the Conclusion departs a bit from the rest of the monograph, discussing as it does photography and film as well as non-Catalan creations – the Mediterranean framework does certainly provide some coherence here, though this is not spelled out by the author. In terms of structure, the substantial chapters would have benefitted from being divided into subsections guiding the reader through the different discussions and critical perspectives. These minor observations aside, Els marges dels mapes: una geografia desplaçada makes a noteworthy contribution to Catalan literary and cultural studies by drawing much needed attention to border literary texts, some of them overlooked and meriting critical interest, while contextualising them within particularly relevant cultural debates taking place globally.