Reading takes place, and place takes reading. This multidirectional, dynamic relationship between environments and their representation is a central concern of both ecocritical and spatial theory. To take a spatio-environmental approach to the study of premodern texts is to emphasize the importance of reading texts in place and to implement a critical practice of context-driven interpretation that attributes an interpretive weight to the geographies of the places in which a text is both produced and consumed. We might call this an emplaced reading of a given text. But which place takes priority? Historicist criticism (of all modes) has tended to prioritize the original context of production, attempting to reconstruct the material and spatial conditions that influenced the creative formation of the text: Bede writing in Jarrow, or Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, for instance. But equally important are the places in which texts are consumed. How does reading Arthurian literature in North America, or La Chanson de Roland on Réunion Island, affect our understandings of literature? The geographical intimacies of textual consumption subtly, yet profoundly, impact the interpretation of texts. These geographies may be local or regional. We might be affected by reading on the bank of a river on a summer’s day or by reading Shakespeare in the Global South, but in both cases our interpretations are influenced by the environments in which we read.

Like transplanted flora or fauna, old texts can take on fresh meaning in new environments. This process is geographical translation in the true sense of the word. My own pedagogical movements have given me a certain degree of insight into this process: I first read premodern texts as an undergraduate in the South Pacific Islands of New Zealand, before heading to the misty Isles of Britain for graduate work, and finally – for
the moment at least – to the west coast of Canada in Vancouver. Having taught in all these places, I have witnessed first-hand the function of geography in the interpretative matrices through which undergraduates come to premodern literature. Two examples from my recent teaching experience may serve to illustrate some of the complications of time and place that I have been gesturing towards here.

Let us consider the woods, that common medieval trope of the often dangerous and threatening space of the forested wilderness in which protagonists find both adversity and adventure. An important geographical feature of medieval romance, the forest, in a text such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is replete with the historical and legal connotations of the medieval forest. But it is also an environmental context highly dependent upon the experiences of the individual reader. When I first began teaching this narrative of Gawain’s trial of truth in the United Kingdom, I found that students passed over the horrors of Gawain’s travels through the wilderness of the Wirral. The forest to them was far from a dangerous wilderness, but rather was unconsciously viewed as relatively benign “Nature” through which Gawain moves. The poet’s partial joke about the weather being the worst of the dangers that Gawain encounters – as opposed to bears and boars and *wodewoses* – accorded with an internalized middle-class experience of twenty-first-century British woodlands. The idea that the woods in medieval literature represented a harsh and unforgiving environment in fourteenth-century England was one that challenged their own unspoken assumptions about the nature of “Nature.”

In contrast, when I first began teaching in British Columbia, I was struck by the ease with which my students took to this concept of nature as a dangerous place. For students born and raised in Canada, the woods are inhabited by bears, cougars, fell weather, and other dangers, and they are taught to respect such environmental hazards. In an interpretive sense, reading some eight time zones west of Britain re-emplaced *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in an environment closer to its original context, at least in terms of the cultural understanding of the forested wilderness. As Jeffrey J. Cohen’s chapter in this collection explores, a text such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is already redolent with such trans-temporal potential, transforming as we read it across not only time, but also place.

While premodern texts are necessarily distanced from the modern reader by time and place, some more contemporary incarnations of the premodern intentionally deploy alternative geographies in order to create a sense of difference and distance. In the case of the modern medievalist fictions of the fantasy genre, these imagined pasts often play
a game of sleight of hand when it comes to places, substituting imagined medieval places for the spaces of our own world. While much of my teaching remains firmly within the traditional sphere of medieval British and Continental literatures, I have been increasingly drawn to the teaching of medievalism, examining how the medieval – and its fictional counterpart, the fantasy genre – positions the idea of “The Medieval” in conversation with our contemporary world. As critics of popular genre writing have long noted, science fiction and fantasy fiction are far from escapist genres: they speak to contemporary social and political issues in ways both direct and indirect.

For the past few years, I have taught classes examining that phenomenon of literature and television, George R.R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* (or *A Song of Ice and Fire*), and my second example of the interplay of place and interpretation – *emplaced* reading – is drawn from these experiences.

When one examines the geography of Martin’s central continent of Westeros, one is immediately struck by a sense of geographic similitude, and while the scale of the continent is evidently larger, the basic geography and ethnography of the world overlie those of medieval Britain. In the southeast we have the political heart of the realm, with King’s Landing positioned roughly where we might find London; Highgarden and the Reach are in the southwest, standing in for verdant Gloucestershire and Somerset; House Lannister and Casterly Rock are located in the west, representing perhaps Wales – it’s worth noting that Wales was home to Britain’s lone producing goldmine in the premodern period, Dolaucothi; and Winterfell and the Starks in the north represent that inexhaustible font of British regional cliché, the gruff northerners of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and beyond. In the far north, as a magical and monstrous simulacrum of Hadrian’s Wall, lies The Wall – that bulwark against the unknown and the barbaric – and its warders, The Night’s Watch. Martin’s regional overlay is no accident, of course, as the medieval history of Britain and its regions has formed the default geography of many fantasy worlds from Tolkien onwards. Later in this volume, David Matthews demonstrates, in the register of architecture, the aesthetic and political ends to which the medieval past could be used. For his part, Martin has been explicit in talking of British history – in particular the Wars of the Roses – as being an important influence on his own narratives. Such a fantasy world as Martin’s is uses geo-temporal *othering*, which deploys “The Medieval” as a prophylactic dustbin of history, to explore contemporary issues in a context that is safely removed from a more realistic contemporary setting.
As recent public and scholarly controversy has noted, such medieval and pseudo-medieval othering has often been deployed in the interests of cultural fantasies of the racial purity of the premodern past. While the medieval European past has been, time and time again, demonstrated to be culturally and racially diverse, the pernicious and persistent fantasies of cultural purity that are essential to the imagined communities of modern nation states still carry their own historical weight in the public imagination. Such fantasies are explored in the places and spaces of Martin’s world, which – apparently safely British and past for the majority of his North American readers and viewers – become more politically and culturally problematic when we focus on Martin’s own geographies of writing, and the places of consumption – both in print and on screen – of his narratives.

To take just one example: if we consider the geographical resonances of Martin’s Great Wall in the North, we find that this most northerly of places becomes much more complicated if we read it through Martin’s own emplaced writing practice. The Wall, in A Song of Ice and Fire, protects the Seven Kingdoms from the Wildings and other dangers to the north. As such, it appears to function as many political walls are imagined to operate, as a barrier against the racial and political other, a bulwark that keeps out the forces of barbarism and safeguards civilization. However, as the novels progress, a major point of dissension within The Night’s Watch becomes the question of whether to allow the Wildings passage south beyond the wall as they flee the oncoming winter and its horrors. While this may seem like a far off and once-upon-a-time fantastical problem, if we remember ourselves that Martin is writing these novels from his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a very different reading of The Wall and the attendant issues of the movement of peoples become apparent. When read through the economic and geographical realities of the Southwest United States, the Wall comes into focus as something similar yet different: The Wall of Brandon the Builder becomes the fantastical reimagining of what has come to be known as Donald Trump’s “Build the Wall” Border Wall; the Wildings become economic migrants; “Winter Is Coming” becomes the looming disorder of climate change; and the political issues of Westeros suddenly become all too real and present for the contemporary reader.

The essays in Premodern Ecologies represent various intimate and complicated connections between literature, place, and time across a range of locations and texts. But what they hold in common is an emphasis on the importance of place, both local and global, in encountering and
understanding the environments in which we read, understand, and write about premodern literature in the early twenty-first-century globalized world. They are examples of emplaced reading. Taken as whole, then, this collection reaffirms the importance of remembering that, while we think with our hearts and with our heads, and strive to write with our hands, our clay feet remain inextricably mired in the places and spaces that we inhabit. To misquote Sidney’s muse, the environmentally minded critic might best be advised to “look at thy feet, and write.”

NOTES


2 For an example of the latter, see Michelle R. Warren, Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier’s Middle Ages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).


4 Ursula K. LeGuin, amongst many others, has argued against fantasy and science fiction writing being viewed as mere escapism. For her discussion of this, see The Language of the Night: Essays on Science Fiction (New York: Ultramarine, 1979), 204.