James R. Giles. ***The Spaces of Violence.*** Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 209p.

Kyle Wiggins
Brandeis University

James R. Giles' *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel* (2000) placed him within the crowded halls of insightful scholars investigating the cultural fascination with bloodshed. His most recent effort, *The Spaces of Violence* (2006), roams similar passageways, but the end result is an adroit study that establishes Giles as one of our most incisive and energetic critics of violence in late 20th-century American fiction.

In *The Spaces of Violence*, Giles builds upon Edward Soja's conception of an unfixed "thirdspace" at the fringe of urban cultures that contains potentially redemptive or revitalizing forces by blurring the distinctions between race, gender, and sexuality. Giles however performs a "negative extension" of Soja's argument into what he terms the "fourthspace"—a dimension in many contemporary American cultural productions in which "the liberation inherent in thirdspace has been co-opted and is no longer possible" (13). According to Giles, the result of a cultural saturation in violence is a fourthspace that exists at "the margins of physical, mental, and social space threatening to erupt in the 'real worlds' of the text and transform these worlds into grotesque, surreal spaces" (14). In the postmodern novels that Giles examines, violence has been scrubbed clean of its potentially regenerative capacity and instead lurks within blood rituals like a cancerous pollutant that awaits explosion into unintelligible excess. Giles pinpoints the unique ineffable character of violence in recent American fiction, treating it as a force that scatters beyond the social or physical register and wallowing at an "extra-geographic" level.

Giles offers deft readings of some of the most accomplished writers in American letters. His chapter on Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* is superb, and the ruminations on sacrificial performance and desire move swiftly between the two novels. The chapter serves as a nice field test of the book's interest in the un-localizable effects of violence. When discussing *Child of God*, Giles uses Lester's necrophiliac desire to merge his body with others until what is left is a pure physicality from which all boundaries have been removed" as evidence of a recurrent drive for McCarthy's characters to obliterate the confines of spatial order (36). Giles punctuates the chapter with the intriguing argument that though McCarthy believes humans perpetually face the "potential of a sacramental crisis," humanity is not completely beyond salvation. Rather, only those figures who have transcended spatial and social bounds and "exist in a largely metaphorical dimension"

or fourthspace are beyond saving (41). In the McCarthy chapter, and in the book as a whole, Giles' writing is lucid and always on pace with his terrific close readings. Moreover, the chapters on Russell Banks' *Affliction*, Don DeLillo's *End Zone* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* are all sterling examples of Giles' ability to elucidate the inner logic of a text and situate it within the historical or cultural moment that underwrites it. However, Giles is thankfully not merely interested in constructing a new historicist account of postmodern American fictions. He diligently assigns each text a place on a mythological to naturalistic "continuum" in order to convey the various mutations that the subject of violence has undergone in recent fiction.

Giles offers his most compelling discussion of the imbricated relationship of violence and space in his chapter on Denis Johnson's *Angels*. He reads the interior limits of the novel's rooms and vehicles, banks and Greyhound busses, as "metonymic representation of a repressive capitalist system that dwarfs human beings" (115). Giles makes a strong case that space in Johnson's novel functions "as metaphor for class" (112). He sees a fourthspace beyond the physical and mental realms emerging from the "violent interaction" between geographies of the debased public space assigned to the economically destitute and the dream space of those condemned to economic poverty. More than in any other chapter, Giles demonstrates how the spatial dimensions of mental anguish and physical disadvantage rub up against one another and combust into a violent fantasy that cannot be understood by the society of dominant classes. In the case of Johnson's novel, the bank robbery and execution of the guard indicate the permanence and imminence of violence in the world. Giles reads this outbreak of bloodshed as evidence that even the very threat of violence can escape the control of its wielder and "establish its own chaotic geography" (118).

As fascinating as Giles' discussion of the interrelation of space and violence is in the Johnson chapter, the spatial prong of his argument gets quite underused in some of the book's weaker sections. The analysis of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* is intriguing for the argument about writing's power to confront "abusive paternalism" and claim "marginalization as [an] identity" (89). Yet, this chapter drifts across meditations on sexual trauma and cyclical class violence without ever zeroing in on the spatiality of violent iterations that supposedly links all of the texts to one another. While Giles is very forthright that the cultural obsession with rites of violence primarily relates to "images and cults of masculinity" (190), it is unfortunate that the only chapter in *The Spaces of Violence* that focuses on a female writer underperforms. Additionally, the book's concluding chapter, a composite look at the hazardous effects of violence upon family structures, is also a weak point. There is little discussion in the conclusion of domestic "space" and what is present seems hurried and uninteresting. Giles is much more illuminating when he evaluates the

corrosive and cyclical effects of violence particular to each novel rather than gathering them together under a single spatial theory. In fact, the "fourth" spatiality component of Giles' argument about violence that has outstripped its emancipatory efficacy is often lost in the shuffle of his more intriguing analyses of violence writ large.

Taken individually, the chapters of *The Spaces of Violence* are magnificent pieces of criticism. Giles' handling of Bret Easton Ellis' mordant novel of 1980s consumerism, *American Psycho*, is first-rate and exemplifies his unique ability to ramify a text's cultural importance while never losing sight of what makes it great literature. Giles has crafted a humane and nuanced analysis of the role of violence in both the mythological and political order of U.S. nationalism. It would be legitimate to usher Giles into the collective of the most productive American cultural critics alongside Richard Slotkin, Steven Shaviro, and Michael Kowalewski. Even if the unifying idea of "fourthspace" occasionally orbits a little too far from the close analytic movements, *The Spaces of Violence* is nonetheless a welcome contribution to scholarship on American preoccupation with cyclical carnage. ❊