Most histories of early jazz recognize a synergy between African American and creole cultural influences. Hersch travels this familiar territory highlighting dynamic qualities of creolization, thus bringing fresh perspectives to topics such as the role of Storyville and other sporting-life venues, creole ethnic and family networks, and the "Africanization" of European music. Mapping the many ways African Americans signified on received musical culture, Hersch draws a broad context for the hybrid qualities of jazz itself. Hersch provides excellent music examples throughout the study, explaining, for example, how ironic versions of patriotic songs crossed cultural boundaries between African, American, and European music, as well as blurring genre distinctions between sacred, ratty, ragtime, and jazz music.

Careful not to claim that jazz overturned racist norms in the early twentieth century, Hersch nevertheless shows how jazz expressed fluid musical and racial identities. Hersch ends with a provocative comparison of Morton, Nick LaRocca, and Louis Armstrong – all of whom helped take jazz to a more national audience. Hersch concludes that Armstrong succeeded, unlike the others, because he could negotiate multiple identities and communicate "impure" (188) performance to the larger entertainment world. In his assertion that "racial intersubjectivity" (205) provides a better model for jazz studies than many earlier ones, Hersch's work effectively complements jazz scholars, like David Ake, interested in the complicated dynamics of performance masks, racial identity, and music. Unlike these studies, Hersch records, in detail, a multivocal ensemble of musical influences beyond the captivating examples of individual New Orleans jazzmen.

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Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009, $93.60). Pp. 355. ISBN 978 90 420 2496 0.

The stated aim of this book is to stress the primacy of "the desert" in the constitution of the United States' national and cultural identity. In the author's words, it "is one of the most potent symbols representing America and Americanness" (27). Despite Gersdorf's arduous attempt in the opening section of the book to situate her argument within the (supposedly) critical framework of eco-criticism and transnational American studies, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* reads like an uncanny offspring of the myth-and-symbol tradition (with a twist).

The United States' "encounters" with the "desert" or rather its "translations" (as Garden, Orient, Wilderness and Heterotopia) are used to explain how the nation has gradually disentangled itself from its connections with European identity. As Gersdorf reminds us, the United States is, in its origins, "a European idea" born out of "European topographies" subsequently projected onto what has been deliberately misconstrued as a "blank slate." But when the author states from the outset that "the desert functions as the topographical manifestation of difference" (14) and that the United States in its dominant mythology was and still is meant to be a verdant and pastoral land of plenty in the image of Europe, she straitjackets her

argument in the exclusive point of view of the so-called "Euro-Americans." It is "their" poetics and "their" politics that is evoked in this book, not that of the "desert" as the title suggests.

In place of "conquest" and "appropriation," the privileged term used throughout the book is "translation." This is where the Eurocentric position of the book is most striking. This act of translation consists in saying that "it is not a desert," it is something else that can *become* a garden, or should be *preserved* as a wilderness, or that *looks like* the Orient or that can *function* as a heterotopia. The acts of "translation" identified by the author are imbued in Eurocentric references. The Garden is of course European through and through; its discursive connections with the fear of scarcity and the notion of progress are directly linked to the work of European social philosophers and political economists from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth. The Oriental desert begins with Columbus (98) and is reduced to pure aesthetics, an eco-spatial category which maintained, rather than conflated, "differences between the Orient and Europe" (106). The origin of Wilderness is grounded in Christian culture and associated with an ethical and self-evaluating dimension. In all these premises, the persistence of "a master subject, or Self, who in America, is white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and middle class" (77) is explicitly denounced as an American flaw. Paradoxically, the very same argument maintains the idea of Europe, to use Schmitt's words, as the "nomos of the earth." Listing the different forms of "translation" always reaches the same conclusion that something went wrong, that the "desert" has not been properly understood or treated with respect.

Could it be possible that the Americans are unworthy desert dwellers? Even Austin "exhibits signs of an imperial mentality" (259). Why is the American desert still discussed at the metaphorical level? Why does it need to be "translated" and who demands that it should be translated in idioms and images that make sense to a European sensibility and a European mind? With each individual author discussed in the book, Gersdorf constantly returns to the same premise that any reference to the arid regions of the United States constitutes an "encounter," as if to preserve a conceptual threshold between a normalized site of dwelling and a contingent or accidental geography. The desert is always being encountered (even as we speak), while the only immutable premise, the one that never changes no matter how many encounters take place, is "the dominant national narrative … the aesthetic and ecological sensibilities of a culture whose values are infused by an ideology of pastoralism and whose ideal social form was the Garden City" (120). In this book, the "desert" remained ambiguous, unknown and unrecognized; an eternal novelty waiting to be translated and endlessly encountered only to be missed. Speaking on behalf of the Americans, the author claims, "it is part of 'our' political geography but … we don't own it culturally" (127).

In the final section of the book, titled "Heterotopia," the "desert emerges as the matrix for a critique of the cultural, social, and epistemological conditions of modern, metropolitan America" (240). Heterotopia, as (mis)used by Gersdorf, has been endowed with a critical dimension with regard to a dominant social order while the meaning of "discipline and control" that are entailed in the notion (at least in its Foucauldian origin) seems to have been totally lost or overlooked. The "desert" becomes an excuse to evoke a wide range of grievances against the United States' expansionist and imperial history. In that sense, the book is worth reading for its

implicit Eurocentric assumptions, for its unwavering premises (about the eternal foreignness of the desert), and more importantly for its repulsion–attraction towards "the idea of America" which is a symptomatic trend in European scholarship in the field of American studies. Behind its fine distinctions between a European geography and culture and an American geography that includes a non-European element, it is possible to identify a sense of anxiety particularly in the references in the beginning and epilogue of the book to the United States' "occupation of the extraterritorial deserts of the Arabian world" (15). Now what or where is the "Arabian world"? This is perhaps a discussion of a different nature. But it is worth noting in this respect how the book ends with a discussion of Misrach's nuclear desert, and then it ventures even further towards the US–Mexican border to discuss selected texts from Chicano/a literature. This is where Gersdorf finds yet another "imaginative space leading to an Other America" (329). At that point, her line of argument seems to have assumed a life of its own in so far as it turns against the author's renewed attempts to anchor her reading in a Eurocentric perspective. As Edmond Jabès once wrote, "there is no possible return if you have gone deep into the desert. Come from elsewhere, the elsewhere is your twin horizon."

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David Critchley, *The Origin of Organized Crime in America: The New York City Mafia, 1891–1931* (London: Routledge, 2009, $95.00). Pp. xiv + 347. ISBN 978 0 415 990030 1.

In an ideal world, every writer, whether academic, professional or popular, should consult David Critchley's book before repeating assertions about the history of organized crime in New York in particular and the United States as a whole. His research shows conclusively the early twentieth-century Mafia groups were localized and diffuse in their processes and structure, and that ties to Mafia groups in other parts of the country were loosely defined and operationally devolved. Despite countless claims to the contrary, the Mafia was not centrally organized, did not become rich and powerful during Prohibition, and did not control or come to control organized crime in New York, let alone America.

Critchley's early chapters contextualize early American Mafia history by outlining the immigration backdrop. He makes clear that while there was an interchange of members between American and Sicilian Mafia families there was no grand plan for Sicilian "men of honour" to export their brand of organized crime to the United States. His research challenges many received wisdoms on organized crime. Donald Cressey's influential *Theft of a Nation* (1969), for example, made the claim that the Castellammare War between gangsters associated either with Salvatore Maranzano or with Joseph Masseria "determined the present order of things," i.e. "the Italian-Sicilian domination of 'American illicit syndicates and the confederation integrating them'" (14). Countless true-crime writers have made similar assertions about the pivotal importance of the war, beginning with Hickman Powell's claim in *90 Times Guilty* (1940): "Where once there had been small and isolated neighbourhood gangs,