

BOOK REVIEWS

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Women on the Move. Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk, eds.

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In a time of emerging walls and the rise of nostalgic nationalisms, *Women on the Move: Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing* constitutes a thought-provoking collection of articles written by European feminist scholars as well as a necessary critical project which showcases the relevance of global migrations today and women's crucial role in all types of migratory movements. As Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk—the editors to this volume—explain in the introductory chapter, women are especially vulnerable in migratory mobility yet, present-day phenomenon of transnational migration not only has disclosed patriarchal mechanisms that subjugate women world-wide but also has allowed many of them to escape their oppressive past and envision a more prosperous future (2019: 5). Further, despite the growing importance in Academia of themes like globalisation, migration and transnationalism, the gender approach to female migratory experiences is still scarce in scholarly work as evinced by late publications (Jay 2010; Castro Borrego and Romero Ruiz 2015; Martín-Lucas and Andrea Ruthven 2017) more focused on identity issues in our transnational and global era than

on the implications of migration for women. Precisely, the collection under review fills in the niche around women's role in migration since it explores diasporic fiction written by contemporary female authors from different continents and offers startling insights into the intersections between gender and diasporic mobility. Likewise, it also scrutinises how, through form and aesthetics, these authors render a feminine perspective of our transnational times.

First section

The collection is divided into five main sections with a total of twelve contributions which function as different but complementary parts offering a deep and kaleidoscopic notion of female diaspora. The first section introduces an idea that will be reiterated in other chapters, which is the loss of agency and voice provoked by the feelings of unbelongingness, dislocation and disillusion that immigrants suffer when they arrive to their adoptive lands. Cédric Courtois's article on Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chi-

ka Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) inaugurates this section. In it, Courtois aptly reveals how globalisation continues the tie between former colonies and empires through global sex trade by depicting how the diasporic movement for labour of Abani's and Unigwe's Sudanese and Nigerian protagonists to Belgium and Britain respectively, ends up turning into a contemporary version of transatlantic slavery which reduces these African women to body and deprives them from their voices. Nonetheless, although both writers denounce African women's travelling bodies as sites of abuse and exploitation, as the contributor thoughtfully demonstrates, they also break the traditional view of Africans as never-ending victims by depicting how their female protagonists are able to reappropriate their own bodies and voices and fight neocolonialism and patriarchy in the host land. In the second chapter, Merve Sarikaya-Sen proposes a pertinent analysis of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) as a trauma fiction which reflects the distressing feelings of uprootedness, entrapment and disillusionment that the young Zimbabwean protagonist goes through when she migrates to Michigan. However, although the approach to Bulawayo's novel from trauma theory is an original suggestion, arguably, the weakness of this essay lies in Sarikaya-Sen's application of a Western pattern—particularly, formal traits of romance writing—to a non-Western text so as to explore the protagonist's trauma, for in so doing she seems to reproduce and perpetuate the Eurocentric approach of classic trauma theory that many scholars like Michael Rothberg (2008) and Stef Craps (2012) have questioned in the last years.

Second section

The second section in this volume deals with transnational movements and identities of second and third-generation immigrants who, in spite of living in cosmopolitan cities, endure feelings of dislocation due to their hybridity. In the first article of this section, Beatriz Perez Zapata explores Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* (2016) and particularly focuses on the desire for rootlessness and movement of Smith's protagonist and narrator (a dislocated third-generation immigrant girl living in a (g)local but racist and classist London), who continuously feels her Jamaican-British hybridity as a burden. As this scholar cleverly indicates, only when the narrator gets acquainted with her African and colonial roots in a work trip to Gambia, she starts feeling liberated. I highlight Pérez Zapata's insightful analysis of the narrator's eventual homecoming and free-movement across the racialised suburbs and the white European centre of London after realising that, like this city, she is British but also a daughter of the Black Atlantic culture present in many of its neighbourhoods, as the ultimate step in her quest for identity and freedom. María Rocío Cobo-Piñero opens the second article of this section with an effective explanation of contemporary cosmopolitanism and the concept "Afropolitanism" which is followed by a rewarding study of Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013). In her analysis, Cobo-Piñero intelligently points out how Selasi's novel embodies "a critical Afropolitan fiction that complicates

and problematizes diasporic identities" (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2019: 90) as can be noted in her Afropolitan second-generation immigrant characters, who, in spite of their material success while living in the US, actually become frustrated due to their fragmented identities. Nonetheless, although this article nicely covers the diasporic and transnational formal and thematic aspects of the novel, I would have appreciated a more thorough study on gender and the intricacies of migration and Afropolitanism in Selasi's female characters.

Third section

The third section tackles the effects of diaspora in a more limited space traditionally related to women: the kitchen. In the chapter which opens this section, Cronne Bigot sagely studies selected stories by female authors of diverse origins—Edwidge Danticat (Haitian), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Indian) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigerian)—in order to explore the host land home as a diaspora space which evidences the female protagonists' successful journey to the Promised Land, but also embodies their homesickness, dislocation and disillusionment. The strongest point of this chapter is indeed Bigot's exploration of the three authors' use of food as a trope which renders the protagonists' identity conflict and cooking as well as the kitchen and cooking as tropes which on the one hand reflect these diasporic women's entrapment in their new domestic space, and on the other, their gaining of self-empowerment to confront patriarchy. This point is also tackled by Chiara Battisti and Sida Fiorato in their illuminating essay on Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009), wherein they interpret the kitchen of the hotel where part of the narrative action develops, not only as a microcosm of global and transnational London but also as a mirror of the pervading colonial exploitation of immigrants in Britain and of patriarchal stereotypes on domestic and professional cooking that the female protagonist continuously fights.

Fourth section

The fourth section of the collection is nicely articulated around European diasporic females who struggle with the consequences of their mobility, their liminal identities and the patriarchal societies in which they live. In the first chapter of this section, María Amor Barros-del Río particularly deals with Irish female migration, a diasporic movement which as she indicates, "challenged the traditional representation of Irish womanhood and her place within Irish society" (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2019: 141). Likewise, this scholar carries out a comparative and intersectional analysis of Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006) and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009), two novels set in the 1920s and 1950s, respectively, which share many points in common. It is worth mentioning her exploration of the protagonists' role of caretakers both in America and Ireland and how their homecoming not only entails their

reunion with their Mother Land but also their return to the oppressive patriarchal post-WWI and WWII Irish society. This compelling essay gives way to Selen Aktri-Sevgi's article on Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), in which this scholar convincingly reshapes the understanding of mobility in her analysis of the women of a contemporary Irish family. In contrast to the other articles in this volume, this one explores a more psychological and liminal mobility related to ageing, mothering and disease, which allows these women to resist the patriarchal structures of Ireland's society in the Celtic Tiger period (1990–2008). In the remaining chapter of this section, Julia Tofantšuk uses a multidirectional approach to offer a thought-provoking analysis of the third-generation British-Jewish protagonist in Charlotte Mendelson's intertextual Bildungsroman *Almost English* (2013), who feels so uncomfortable with her hybridity that she decides to leave her diasporic home behind. Tofantšuk ascribes the protagonist's troublesome relation with her origins to her lack of knowledge about her family due to her grandparents entombing of traumatic exile memories. However, as this scholar aptly notes, food, "rituals of cooking and hospitality" and "the power of mother-daughter relation" (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2019: 196) enable the protagonist to fill in the gap in her identity and, like the prototypical hero(ine), return home.

Fifth section

The last section of the collection has a wide geographic scope for, in it, Paul Rüsse and Maialein Antxustegui-Etxarte Aranaga analyse *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000), a short story collection by US-Mexican author Ito Romo, Carolina Sanchez-Palencia explores British-Caribbean writer Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín closes the section with her approach to Jewish-British author Micheline Wandor's work *False Relations* (2004). Moreover, these scholars focus their study on the spatial and temporal dimensions of the female protagonists' diasporic identity in a very compelling manner. In Rüsse and Antxustegui-Etxarte Aranaga's article—which starts with

a clarifying brief contextualisation of Chicano/a literature from its origins until our days—these two contributors examine the fluvial border between US and Mexico—Río Grande—that Romo's female characters must cross daily in order to go to or come back from work. In fact, both scholars establish an environmental link between those border women and the river and pay particular attention to the bridge connecting the US and Mexican sides, which as they sagely suggest, works as "a confrontational setting" in terms of class, race and gender, but also as a place of interaction which symbolises these women's "crossing of social boundaries" (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2019: 212). In her article on *Small Island*, Sánchez-Palencia offers an illuminating analysis not only of the socio-political and cultural dislocation of a Windrush immigrant couple after their crossing of another liquid border—the Atlantic ocean—but also of the racialised and gendered body as a space of geographical negotiation. Interestingly, just as this scholar remarks the variety of points of view and polyphonic voices in Levy's novel which counter the linearity of narratives with an imperialist and patriarchal discourse, Pellicer-Ortín highlights how multivocality in Wandor's collection of formally and thematically interconnected short stories set in a wide variety of places and epochs, reveals the survival of stereotypes and racism against the Jews throughout history. In fact, it is precisely Wandor's use of female narrators and the mixture of mythical and historical characters which epitomise the struggles faced by Jewish women throughout the centuries that leads Pellicer-Ortín to offer an insightful reading of this collection as a liminal narrative in which Jewish female characters are able to reconstruct their fragmented identity "through a cross-cultural dimension" (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2019: 239).

In conclusion, this engaging collection offers an interesting multi-angled approach to the current global issue of female diaspora in contemporary world literature. Lastly, the editors are to be congratulated on the effective selection and dialogic arrangement of such a wide range of original and insightful contributions which clearly infuse Diaspora and Migration studies with an urgent feminine viewpoint.



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