

## BOOK REVIEWS

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# ***Ex-Centric Souths: (Re)Imagining Southern Centers and Peripheries***

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis (ed.)

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In literary texts it may seem that, starting with the early writings by European settlers, “the American South has been characterized as a rural region, one in which the pace of the agricultural life largely dictated the mores of civilization and its literature” (Guinn 2000, 1). Recent studies have shown that this characterization is too simplistic and the study of Southern fiction, written since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, needs to take into consideration the traumas of slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow and segregation. To do that, the study of fiction might need to work interdisciplinary together with Transnational American Studies, as Bone argues (2018, 1-2). In her introduction to the volume under discussion, Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis reflects on this issue and observes that “there have always been many Souths, overlapping and/or contradicting each other” (13), so her book aims at shedding some light on new routes to explore diverse Southern identities and realities. *Ex-Centric Souths: (Re)Imagining Southern Centers and Peripheries* is published by the University of Valencia as part of the prestigious collection Javier Coy’s Library on North-American Studies, in which Niewiadomska-Flis already published her book *The Southern Mystique: Food, Gender and Houses in Sothern Fiction and Films* in 2012, a work that explored myths and representations concerning southern womanhood. In her latest volume, Niewiadomska-Flis interrogates the Southern imaginary

and addresses fragmentation, misrepresentations, and distortions in different texts, bringing to the fore voices that have been darkened.

*Ex-Centric Souths* contains a total of eleven contributions and is divided in four parts. The first one is “Transnational South: The Caribbean Connection” and deals with cultural and literary relationships between the Southern states and countries in the Caribbean Sea. For example, in the first chapter, “Imagining the South Through the Caribbean: Spatial Narratives of Liberty in the Novels of Holcombe and Livermore” (35-52), Deniz Bozkurt-Pekar studies two opposite representations of the South by antebellum writers, namely Livermore’s *Zoë* and Holcombe’s *The Free Flag of Cuba*. The former employs the motif of a shipwreck in the Caribbean to tackle the “peculiar institution” and calls for revolution, whereas the latter is a pro-slavery novel that depicts black slaves as happy and submissive characters in their sugar plantations. In Chapter 2, “Migrant Bodies and the Transnational South: Dissecting Colonial Presence in Ana Lydia Vega’s ‘Encancaranublado’” (53-76), Paula Barba Guerrero ponders how the South turns into a utopian destination for migrants, since it mirrors an American dream that will be contradicted upon arrival. Her chapter studies Caribbean Diaspora narratives—particularly the short story collection *Encancaranublado*

y otros cuentos de naufragio by Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega—and chronicles the misadventures of Caribbean migrants to the American South, as well as their traumatic experiences as the Other, an alterity that is not assimilated into the normative Southern space. Part 1 closes with “Un-grounding Identity, Re-Thinking Connections in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*” (77-96), a chapter by Sofia Gkertzou that discusses the mentioned novel’s structure, which blends poetry and folktales from the South and Jamaica. This contribution emphasizes the Jamaican author’s achievement at portraying a multiplicity of black voices, producing the effect of crossed texts and creating a multi-perspective narrative that replaces the more traditional and chronological ones.

The second part, titled “Transcending the Southern Sense of Place,” leaves aside the Caribbean and begins with Julia Sattler’s contribution. In “Hot Hot Heat: The U.S. South in Benedict Andrews’s Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*” (97-114), she analyzes the Australian director’s version of Tennessee Williams’s play, which was performed at the Young Vic in London in 2014 and starred Gillian Anderson. Interestingly, all characters were played by British actors in American Southern accents and the contemporary stage design allowed the audience to engage in the play and take part in Blanche’s descent into madness, underlining the image of the South as a place of passion, anger, and frailty. This is followed by Irina Kudriavtseva’s “Revisiting the Southern Home Places: Insider/Outsider Dialectic in Southern Short Fiction” (115-134). Chapter 5 takes a close look at short stories by four writers—Peter Taylor, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Bobbie Ann Mason. In their four different scenarios of leaving and coming back to the South, the protagonists see this region as both home and a strange land. The return to the American South works as a starting point to explore regional identity and to underline that the connection to your familiar environment is re-established in spite of distance and time.

In “A Mythical Interpretation of the Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction” (135-146), Szymon Wnuk focuses on three novels—*Outer Dark*, *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*—and argues that they feature characteristic themes of the Southern Gothic genre, such as grotesque characters, scenes of cruel violence, social transgressions and an atmosphere of utter decay. These novels are imbued with mythical and biblical themes and can be read as the characters’ progression from the South to the Southwest and, eventually, to a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The notion of the grotesque is approached, too, by Elisa Coria in Chapter 7, “Between Radiance and Darkness: The South as Grotesque in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*” (147-164). This scholar surveys the use of space in Carson McCullers’s novel, stressing its depiction of the South as a region marked by poverty, decadence, violence, and loneliness that turns into a gothic nightmare revealing what is often repressed, unspoken of, and forgotten, since the protagonists are outcasts who represent what the old idealized South is

not. In her thought-provoking chapter, Coria concludes that “McCullers’s South emerges, in its provincialism, racism, and opposition to change, as a gothic prison, old, rotten and decaying, mired in routine, and where alterity can be controlled and normalized” (159).

The third and last part in Niewiadomska-Flis’s volume is “The Southern Urge to Tell,” which comprises four more contributions. In Chapter 8, “Revisiting *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: Carson McCullers’s ‘Ironic Parable of Fascism’” (165-180), Constante González Groba steers away from Coria’s article and centers on the figure of Singer, a deaf-mute character that is the ideal confidant for the protagonists. Next, Michal Choinski leaves fiction aside and delves into social autobiographies in “‘But why?’: Racial Guilt and the Southern Paradox in Willie Morris’s *North Toward Home* and Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream*” (181-194). This chapter points out how these autobiographies tackle growing up in the racially segregated South. Choinski comments on the way that Morris and Smith turn to autobiographical writing to explore a new perspective on the issues they took for granted as children, i.e., they write to liberate themselves from the shocking racist episodes that shaped their identities as Southerners.

Moving on to Film Studies, Marie Liénard-Yeterian writes about Charles Laughton’s 1955 adaptation of Davis Grubb’s 1953 novel in “*The Night of the Hunter*: The Storied South on Screen” (195-210). She argues, quite convincingly, that the film asks the question whether to tell or not to tell secrets and displays every protagonist haunted by a story, even the Preacher played by Robert Mitchum is obsessed with his cellmate’s treasure and will not rest until the children tell him where the money is hidden. In the last pages of Chapter 10, Liénard-Yeterian contrasts the novel and the film and criticizes the Hollywood ending, because “the fairyland atmosphere results in a supernatural element that redeems the decadent South suggested through Preacher’s character, the South created by the screen version remains one of gentility and morality” (208). The final chapter analyzes four different travel guides from the Southern states and is titled “Advertising the Deep South in 2018: An Analysis of Destination Image Through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia Travel Guides” (211-230). Its author, Giuliano Santangeli Valenzani, explains that tourism has become a key industry for the South in the twenty-first century, with millions of visitors in search of leisure, historical landmarks, and natural landscapes. They seem to be interested in the history of the Civil Rights movement, and the booklets analyzed in this chapter show that allusions to the Confederacy and the Civil War are left out of travel guides to avoid potential conflicts with tourists.

On the whole, *Ex-Centric Souths: (Re)Imagining Southern Centers and Peripheries* is a valuable addition to the Javier Coy’s Library on North-American Studies as it considers different representations of the South and ponders its complex presence in novels, short fiction,

autobiographies, film, and even tourist booklets. The volume includes three outstanding contributions by Wnuk, Coria, and Liénard-Yeterian on, respectively, Cormac McCarthy's Southern Gothic, the Grotesque in McCullers's novel and *The Night of the Hunter*, which take previous studies as a starting point and offer thought-provoking insight. Nevertheless, this reviewer feels that Niewiadomska-Flis's volume may not be very cohesive or unified, given the diverse topics and works it covers and the absence of a guiding thread, apart from the aforementioned notion of the co-existence of many Souths. It may lack some contributions dealing with African American perspectives on Southern fiction—for example, neo-slave narratives like Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*—since quite often Black

writers “tunnel through the history of slavery to explore different possibilities for existence, resistance, and survival in the cultured hell of the South” (Harris 2009, 62). Additionally, Niewiadomska-Flis's book may be expanded to include chapters observing the interesting contributions to Southern fiction by some contemporary Dixie writers, such as Harry Crews, Ron Rash, and Chris Offutt, among many others included in the volume *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today*. As expressed in this book, which also featured essays by international scholars, “what makes the narratives of new Southern writers essentially different is the reclaiming of forgotten, or hidden, historical events, the claiming of ignored events in the present” (Gretlund 2010, 10).



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