

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Universidad de Valladolid****Ex-Centric Souths: (Re) Imagining Southern Centers and Peripheries***

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis (ed.)

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**U**rszula Niewiadomska-Flis, the editor of this volume, starts her introduction by stating that the US South is, and has always been, a product of the imagination. On top of that, this imagined South is not a single monolithic notion; rather, there are many Souths, different from one another. For example, the North has long imagined the South as its opposed and barbarous Other, while for Southerners there continues to be a sense of belonging and attachment to the—for them—exceptionalist region. Niewiadomska-Flis, then, presents the volume as an attempt to continue imagining the South, in particular in ways which debunk essentialised notions of the region. This volume is thus organised around three parts: “Transnational South: the Caribbean Connection”, “Transcending the Southern Sense of Place”, and “The Southern Urge to Tell.” The volume is an attempt to amalgamate and enlarge the vision of important voices on New Southern Studies, such as those of Larry J. Griffin and Barbara Ladd, following the transnational and postcolonial turn and through the perspective of many European scholars from different institutions. The articles included in this volume maintain the focus on the imagination anticipated in the introduction, thus drifting away from simply political and historicist approaches. To this end, they are centred on exploring the fictional representation of the US South,

considering fiction an essential actor in the perception of the area and in its very conceptual and emotional existence.

Part I examines several texts which allow for a reconsideration of the South as part of a broader region including the Caribbean basin. From a postcolonial point of view, these two areas, which are separated by the barriers of nation-states, in fact share a larger history of dispossession, marked most notably although not exclusively by the traumatic memory of slavery. In the first chapter of this section—“Imagining the South Through the Caribbean: Spatial Narratives of Liberty in the Novels of Holcombe and Livermore”—Deniz Bozkurt-Pekar invokes Immanuel Wallerstein’s conception of an “extended Caribbean” in order to argue that the novels she analyses show, despite their different approaches regarding the meanings of liberty, the historical connection of these two areas in relation to the slave-holders’ activity. Elizabeth Dorcas Livermore’s *Zöe; or the Quadroon’s Triumph: A Tale for the Times* offers, according to Bozkurt-Pekar, an alternative narrative of the South/North dichotomy by implying that it is the values from the Caribbean—epitomised in the Haitian revolution—from which the South should learn in order to transcend its slave-holding character. Differently, Lucy Holcombe Picken’s *The Free Flag of Cuba or The*

*Martyrdom of Lopez: A Tale of the Liberating Expedition of 1851* implies that the possibility for a strong Union lies in the North's embrace of filibusterism and, therefore, slavery in the Caribbean. In "Migrant Bodies and the Transnational South: Dissecting Colonial Presence in Ana Lydia Vega's 'Encarcanublado'", Paula Barba Guerrero explores how the mythical construct of the South, even if not representing all of its inhabitants, continues reproducing itself. While internal mobility may serve as the best way to contest such monolithic racist and old-fashioned connotations of the region, such social imaginaries act most cruelly against those who move unwillingly: economic migrants from its neighbouring Caribbean. As such, Puerto Rican Ana Lydia Vega's short story "Encarcanublado" depicts three Caribbean migrants from different nations who, having absorbed the social imaginaries of the US South, assimilate their own Otherness and aim to imitate traditionally Southern practices of discrimination against one another in order to gain a privileged position within the new nation. The message that Vega's story aims to transmit, in Barba Guerrero's view, is that such "inherited colonial mindsets" (63) in the end act against the Other's own integrity, as upon the migrants' arrival at the American vessel that saves them from shipwreck, they are homogenised with the same politics of alterity that they had previously enacted in their boat. The next chapter by Sofia Gkertzou—"Un-grounding Identity, Re-thinking Connections in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*"—examines a work which seeks to explore the cultural relationship between the Caribbean and African America. Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, according to Gkertzou, employs a hybrid genre (half fiction, half anthropology) in order to depict a multiplicity of black characters from different places who offer their personal perspectives and who, even though having gone through similar experiences of oppression, maintain heterogenous identities which resist uniform homogenisation—a cliché in the representation of black characters.

Part II of the volume explores the "Southern Sense of Place," an endemic concept to the region which, nonetheless, becomes expanded by the authors contributing to this section. In "Hot Hot Heat: The US South in Benedict Andrews's Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" Julia Sattler explores the presence of American theatre in the London stage to conclude that the South is "a place that cannot be fixed, that is forever twisting, turning, fleeting" (112). Particularly, Benedict Andrews's 2014 version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* released by the Young Vic theatre in London does not change the play's setting—as described by the characters' words—but the stage design becomes closer to the contemporary audience's understanding of newness and decay, thus making them engage with the particular struggles of the original play dealing with the loss of the Old South. In her chapter "Revisiting Southern Home Places: Insider/Outsider Dialectic in Southern Short Fiction", Irina Kudriavtseva examines four short stories dealing with homecoming to tackle the stereotypes of the South promoted from outside the area, particularly by Southerners who have been away

for a long time. Kudriavtseva concludes that the stories she analyses restore the humanity and complexity of Southern individuals through the depiction of liminal and initially prejudiced characters and their eventual "renewed sense of self" (123). Szymon Wnuk argues in "A Mythical Interpretation of the Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction" for a reconsideration or expansion of the Southern Gothic genre to make it inclusive of more writers and styles. In particular, Wnuk analyses Cormac McCarthy's novels and suggests that they include a mythical Biblical component not usually explored in this author, thus situating certain aspects of his works outside the Southern realm. To finish this part, in "Between Radiance and Darkness: The South as Grotesque in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*", Elisa Coria examines Carson McCullers' oeuvre, in particular *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, to identify how its grotesque features, rather than pointing to oppressive elements, destabilise the myth of the American Dream and propose alternatives such as the rejection of gender and social class.

Part III of this volume, the final one, explores how Southern authors (and even publicists, as per the last chapter) have struggled and sometimes managed to explain themselves and their region. Continuing with McCullers' previously explored novel, Constante González Groba's article—"Revisiting *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*: Carson McCullers's 'Ironic Parable of Fascism'"—deals with the author's portrayal of the ideological confluence between Nazism and Jim Crow Segregation. Through an analysis of McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* as, in McCullers's words, "a parable of fascism", González Groba concludes that the novel's references to fascist logic evidence how alienation, loneliness, and uncertainty can easily derive into blind faith for God-like leadership. McCullers demonstrates that totalitarianisms can repeat themselves in different contexts across the modern world because of how often this world "creates anxious and isolated individuals" (177). Michał Choiński examines two so-called Southern social autobiographies in his article "But Why?: Racial Guilt and the Southern Paradox in Willie Morris's *North Towards Home* and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*." Choiński defines the genre as the staging of the narrative voice's gradual rejection of Southern racist ideologies and explains that these two novels are good examples of epiphanic narratives unveiling, through the use of idiom, the multiple existing Souths which the dominant ideology has managed to suppress. The next chapter—"The Night of the Hunter: The Storied South on Screen" by Marie Liénard-Yeterian—examines Charles Laughton's cinematic adaptation of David Grubb's novel *The Night of the Hunter* focusing on aspects relating to storytelling. The film manages to portray the importance of storytelling in the novel through a technique of "tell and show", as a narrative and testimonial voice accompanies the events, together with the inclusion of many acts of storytelling and singing performed by the characters themselves, which blur the reality and the imagination concerning the South. To finish with, in "Advertising the Deep South in 2018: An Analysis of Destination Image Through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and

Georgia Travel Guides” Giuliano Santangeli Valenziani offers an interesting analysis of the images of the South promoted by travel digital brochures (which the author calls “inspiration guides”). He concludes that, through a combination of image and texts, the four guides under scrutiny convey an image of local colour characterised by rusticity, timelessness, anti-modernity, (selective) historicity, and picturesqueness. On top of that, references to the Civil War are scarce in comparison with the big presence of information regarding the quest for Civil Rights. Furthermore, the guides seem to be addressed to whites because of their over-representation in the pictures featuring tourists.

In conclusion, this volume tackles issues so heterogeneous and diverse that it turns into a good overview for anyone interested in accessing a non-mythologised vision of the US South and its culture. Most chapters aim to show the contradictions and misunderstandings endemic to the Southern myth, many times expressed in literature and films through the use of the grotesque. As such,

while acknowledging the historical influence of white supremacy and conservatism in the area, the authors contributing to this volume also show the other side of the coin, namely that such values, which are often employed to define Southerners in essentialised ways, turn out not to be so monolithic and stable. The experience of migrants, racialised subjects, and African-Americans is also included in some chapters (though there is a clear white predominance in the objects of analysis), thus offering multiple perspectives of the Southern experience, as it cannot be homogenised. In turn, even the idea of an extended South is transmitted, not only including the Caribbean area (as the history of slavery and the plantation ties the two regions together) but also by making the Southern experience transcend its borders, as it conflates with larger experiences of modernity and modernisation. In conclusion, this volume is valuable because it is complete and complex: it offers the possibility to cross-read its several articles in order to obtain a non-essentialised vision of how this area is at the same time exceptionalist and universal.