

## WOMEN WRITERS ON AMERICAN HISTORY AND SPACE

Ksenija Kondali: *Prepleti paradigmi: prošlost, pamćenje i prostor u američkoj ženskoj prozi* [Interbraiding of Paradigms: History, Memory and Space in Contemporary American Women's Writing], Sarajevo: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Sarajevu, 2017, pp. 261.

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The theoretical nodes of this American Studies monograph are: cultural turn, spatial turn, new approaches to the study of history, memory studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist theory. The central insight is the combination of the three axes – history, memory and spatiality – into a vibrant and effective approach that has generated numerous readings of a specific corpus in American literature: ethnic women writers. The representative texts illustrating the interweaving of the aforementioned themes are Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, Anne Proulx's *Postcards* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Kondali's approach is distinctive as it puts a spatial slant on the forms of representing methods in which the past has been inscribed in space through memory, remembering, and testimony, thus calling for a resemanticization of space and the rearticulation of (national) history.

It is no coincidence that the texts in focus range from the 1970s to 2004 by date of publication, precisely the time a number of ethnic women writers emerged. These women were often African Americans, whose contributions are duly noted but are not elaborated on. At strategic points, the African American

theoretical and literary contribution is integrated into the book's theoretical agenda, coming to the fore in its final part.

Chapter one lays out the complex, and at times overdetermined, array of textual approaches that mark the three principal theoretical concepts of the study: history, memory and spatiality. Even mentioning these makes it clear what an enormous critical feat it is to enumerate, let alone clarify, how these concepts have developed, circulated, and intersected in contemporary theoretical debates. Facing this daunting task, the author successfully and competently navigates the many points of her key approaches. The reader is taken on a (sometimes too) long journey through the labyrinths of contemporary theoretical articulations of the difference between the past, history, historiography, memory and remembering, memory, history and testimony, space, place, landscape, and the gendering of space. The introductory chapter would be more legible and palatable had it been divided into several separate chapters.

One thing that remains in the shadows, though, is how the minority (female) writer manages to bypass the accomplished deconstruction of the epistemological tenor of historical discourse, achieved by various powerful denunciations of postmodernity, but then succeeds in resuscitating history's potential to portend a collective past and a collective experience, once it signifies for a minority group. Since not even ethnic approaches or postcolonial theory have found a way out of this conundrum, it is left unresolved in this study as well. On the other hand, what women writers can take from the contemporary deconstruction or scaling down of historical discourse is narrativization in the form of narrative

perspective (who speaks/narrates), and narrative chronology (in what sequence events have been laid down, and how they connect [Kondali 2017: 8]). Rather than epistemological absolutism, ethnic women writers have learned the situational and communicative value of the discourses of literature and history, and have been using them to their advantage. In an aside, the book shows rather than openly asserts that the foregoing approach is more effective in rediscovering the potential of counter- or minority history than the assumption that a subaltern voice, by virtue of its liminal status, eschews the ravages of writing history or representing the past (Kondali 2017: 18).

The study refreshingly, and with great astuteness, applies the apparatus of theory onto the stuff of American culture, literature and history. More moments like these are wanting in chapter one – those invigorating passages in which theory comes to life, such as in the basic but illuminating and far-reaching observation that the past in American literature is generally inscribed in two ways: nostalgically or traumatically (Kondali 2017: 28).

The other, rather effective strategy of salvaging history from the clutches of deconstruction is the rise and blossoming of the memory discourse since the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, marking another theoretical turn (Kondali 2017: 31), the privileging of seeing and witnessing first-hand (testimony), which is precisely the etymology of history (Kondali 2017: 11; cf. Le Goff 1996). The study alerts us to a productive application of constructivist historicizing in the vein of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm: while pointing to the constructedness of a set of ideas and processes (from nation to tradition), it still undertakes a serious and highly

applicable analysis of what these concepts are expected to do in a culture. Further, it shows how they have been used to such an effect (Kondali 2017: 35). Here follows another interesting insight, which should have been emphasised more: the mnemonic value and role of the narrative, as suggested by Anne Rigney (Kondali 2017: 36). At this point, the book usefully elaborates on American specificity in the usage of cultural memory as a mnemonic tool for a particular group, rather than as its more canonical definition in European scholarship. This is a distinction that is sometimes missed by readers outside the US (Kondali 2017: 41).

The second part of the book analyses the poetic procedures of the four representative women writers, which correspond to the four principal concepts of the study. Leslie Marmon Silko and her early novel *Ceremony* (1977), which hails the Native American creative awakening that began in the late 1960s, is the first book to be presented. It illustrates the way Native Americans interact with space, to the extent that it is possibly particular to them, and unique in American culture. After clearing the way and navigating between past and present contentions in Native American studies, the author identifies two key points of Silko's contribution to the debate: one is that Silko bypasses the issue of authenticity of Native American/Indian writing by bringing together oral and written forms in a way that calls to and includes both native and non-native readers; the other is the narrative as a means of mapping local and tribal spaces (Kondali 2017: 113). Further reading reveals how the novel walks a fine line between capitulating before the invasion of space and erasure of the past effected by the encroachment of white society on Indian lands on one hand, and the enticing appeal of hybrid

forms of culture to resolve the conflict between the two civilizations (native and settler) on the other. This easy way out through hybridity is swiftly foiled when we think of how the topophilia the tribes evince for their places and landscapes translates into the political idea of sovereignty, and the ongoing land claims that were reactivated after World War II (Kondali 2017: 122). Juggling the generic expectations of the non-native reader with more obliging forms of oral and sacred history, the novel also nods towards more recent eco-critical perspectives. Kondali correctly contends that the protagonist Tayo's memory work in the novel, where he tries to make sense of the trauma of the war in which he fought, encapsulates the task of the entire nation, while simultaneously being deployed for specific native purposes. These include Tayo's individual memories as a veteran, and the tribe's collective memory of environmental depredations.

For Marilynne Robinson in the novel *Gilead* (2004), the locus of memory is a local site, a small town, which Kondali contends carries a strong semantic charge in American culture. The narrator's reminiscences, emanating from the titular small Mid-Western town and covering the period immediately preceding the Civil War to the 1950s, destabilises the underlying myths of American history and nation, refracted through the regional narrative of the West. They are embroiled in questions of slavery and race, and infused with a feminine gendered presence (Kondali 2017: 149). The intensely personal perspective of the narration (the principal character writing a letter to his son for him to read after his father's death), and its relay through communicational memory (Assmann qtd. in Kondali 2017: 139), acts as a salutary corrective to the monumental,

masculinized, and mythic version of the incorporation of the West: certainly one of the key national myths. Kondali shows that Robinson takes issue with the erasure of unpalatable details and events passed over in the sanitized version of the Western story, as she seeks to activate traumatic individual memories as vehicles of a different memory project enacted in a frontier town.

While Robinson revisits the past of the West in order to offer a version of national history, in *Postcards* (1992) Annie Proulx hovers closer to the present time, considering its embroilment in the questions of space, place, ecology, and regionalism, and adding her voice to the growing cohort of neo-realists, as Kondali clarifies at the beginning of this section (2017: 151). Proulx is an interesting author, particularly because of her deliberate and focused use of the historiographic methods of the Annales school, whose procedures the writer wishes to replicate (Kondali 2017: 154). The rambling and wayward trajectories of Proulx's characters are ciphers of the changes and shifts in national history, in the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that witnessed the depletion of the cherished notions of pastoralism and rural America as an antidote to rampant industrialization, urbanization, and the market economy, which tore apart nature and the countryside. Proulx's characters are caught up in grand historical processes, but are not simply victims of their inexorable logic (Kondali 2017: 158). Loyal, the unlikely hero of this anti-myth, plays "an ironic vision of a pioneer of the Western settlement" (Kondali 2017: 158), while his desultory journey across the country takes place in an automobile: a true icon of post-war American consensus, social and geographic mobility, and the economic

boom, all of which are foreclosed to Loyal. Proulx, even more presciently than Silko, enacts towards the end of her novel "a scene of ecological and societal catastrophe," an apt commentary on the destruction of landscape and space in (post)modern America (Kondali 2017: 165).

For Sandra Cisneros and Esperanza, the protagonist of her novel (or short story cycle) *The House on Mango Street* (1984), the experience of space and place is crucially refracted through gender, allowing Cisneros' vigorous and feisty questioning of the inscriptions of femininity made by her local Chicano culture and by the nation. As Kondali claims: "Gender is, therefore, just like ethnicity, deeply linked with the way in which we occupy space and place, and the ways we experience these, namely, as Doreen Massey claims, with the ways in which we are placed within the new relations of temporal-spatial compression" (2017: 90, translation mine).

Cisneros, as Kondali shows, is at pains to render an ethnic and gendered experience legible to a national audience, but not at the expense of Esperanza's emotional and memorial legacy. Kondali rightly points to the ethnic (woman) writer's dilemma of "selling out" or inadvertently exoticizing one's cultural milieu, which is, despite its shortcomings, still a vibrant place, as is the family house in a local *barrio* of Chicago. Cisneros uses the renowned generic format of the Bildungsroman to allow Esperanza's voice and her changing perspective to color our understanding of the Mexican American sub-culture, a significantly expanding segment of American society. Cisneros's great contribution, as Kondali reminds us, is that she was one of the first Chicana feminists to lay

some aspects of that culture open to the public. The poignancy of the book lies in the fact that Esperanza's development reflects Cisneros's coming into her own as a writer. In her reading of Cisneros' seminal novel (which was re-released as a special edition in 2009, marking its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary) Kondali invites us to savor the contradiction of the writer's feminist voice ranging over less palatable aspects of her ethnic culture, but finding resilience and strength in the past of her family, and the broader history of her group (2017: 204). Esperanza's longing for a house of her own is not simply a later variant of Virginia Woolf's famous claim, but a critical reinscription of both the nation's spatial logic and Chicano's historical appropriations of their own spatial imaginaries, which often sit uneasily with the dominant ones. To comprehend all these layers, we must mine the potential of the aforementioned interpretative models, whose capacity Kondali further exemplifies in the final part of the study.

Given that this is the first study of such scope and theme in the broader regional field of American Studies, we should only fleetingly note the theoretical overkill in the first part of the book, and gratefully acknowledge the ultimately successful and clever conjoining of the theoretical paradigms of space, memory, ethnicity and gender: the four pillars of this valuable study. The book will certainly find its place in the regional canon of American Studies, where it should be required reading, in the hope that it also will also be recognized in the context of the related disciplines of feminist, gender, postcolonial, and cultural studies.

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