

Judie Newman 2007: *Fictions of America. Narratives of Global Empire*. London and New York: Routledge. ix + 195 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-33384-9

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The volume *Fictions of America. Narratives of Global Empire* by Judie Newman is an illuminating contribution to the field of contemporary American fiction from the perspectives of globalization and transnational literatures. It joins other critical treatises on those topics, such as Michael Valdez Moses' *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture* (1995), Vinay Dharwadker's *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (2001) or James Annesley's *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market and the Contemporary Novel* (2006). The book focuses specifically on the effects of globalization on American literature, so that it can also be said to be an interesting addition to the growing list of titles that relate national literatures to global processes, such as Nathan E. Richardson's *Postmodern Paletos: Immigration, Democracy and Globalization in Spanish Narrative and Film* (2002), Lu Jie's *Dismantling Time: Chinese Literature in the Age of Globalization* (2004) or Miguel López-Lozano's *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in Recent Mexican and Chicano Narrative* (2008), to mention but a few. Moreover, by favoring a reading of American fiction that stresses its global qualities, the author points in the same direction as other critics who have recently written on the effects of globalization on the reception of American literature (Dimock 2006; Dimock and Buell 2007). Newman's book shares Dimock's premise about the recent changes in the field of American studies, which have shifted the view of the United States "from a discrete entity into a porous network, with no tangible edges, its circumference being continually negotiated, its criss-crossing pathways continually modified by local input, local inflections" (Dimock and Buell 2007: 3).

The book is structured into seven chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a brief conclusion. It includes a thematic index but no bibliography, as bibliographic references are given as endnotes. There is no claim to comprehensiveness or exhaustiveness as to its scope, so the author is free to focus on a corpus of very different texts and authors that covers a wide span of time and place. The fictions that articulate each of the chapters range diachronically from the nineteenth century to the present, although the stress is on works published from the 1980s onward. Geographically, the book covers narratives set in India, China, Greenland and, of course, the United States. *Fictions of America* offers readings of works by Bharati Mukherjee, John Updike, Emily Prager, Hannah Crafts, Zora Neale Hurston, David Bradley, Peter Høeg and Cormac McCarthy. The book's somewhat loose structure, nevertheless, is held together by several motifs that recur in all the chapters, such as the imagery of circularity and return associated with global phenomena, the search for roots and family history or the image of the surrogate or transplanted child. These

topoi, according to the author, work as micro-foci, providing a suitable metaphorical field for the analysis of globalization (169).

In her introduction, the author takes as her point of departure the concept of *globalization*, which is used as the main trope shaping the volume. Newman introduces her topic in a cautious way, noting how “globalisation suffers from an exceptionally fuzzy brand identity” (2). The term is on the way to becoming a cultural *shibboleth* and in this sense it may be noted that most authors dealing with it seem compelled to write an initial disclaimer for the inconsistencies and ambiguities derived from its use. James Annesley, for instance, states that “there is little doubt that globalization is a concept that is porous, unstable and increasingly overstretched” (2006: 4). In spite of her introductory warning against the vagueness surrounding notions of *globalization* and *empire*, Newman tends to use those two words indistinctly throughout the rest of the book, contributing to their terminological ambivalence. At times she seems to merge the notions of American imperialism and globalization into one undifferentiated notion, thus falling into the sort of terminological confusion Antonio Negri warned against in an interview with Danilo Zolo, talking about his book *Empire* (Negri and Zolo 2002: par. 15). After a succinct overview of the term and its history, Newman is able to overcome the terminological entanglement by arguing that “the vagueness of the definition is an opportunity as well as a danger” (3). She contends that the flexibility of the concept is the result of the way in which different economic, social and cultural practices associated with it have contributed to its transformation and expansion. The core of her argument, as she develops it in the introduction and in the subsequent chapters, is that global culture contributes to the understanding of globalization and its associated processes and phenomena, an idea which is also advocated by Annesley (2006: 5).

Turning to the scope and method of her book, Newman’s approach rests on the assumption that literary texts are constituent of the worlds they narrate, acknowledging their critical capacity to question and transform reality in ways usually attributed to theorists and critics. This conviction was already expressed in her previous book, *The Ballistic Bard. Postcolonial Fictions*: “Texts bring with them moral, social and political questions which must be faced” (1995: 192). As Malvern van Wyk Smith noted in a review of this work, Newman’s approach highlights the hermeneutic and performative dimensions of literature, “whereby the cognitive imagination constitutes reality” (1997: 424). Similarly, Newman argues in *Fictions of America*: “The study proceeds on the assumption that American fictions have in themselves the interpretive power more commonly attributed to the literary critic” (6).

Accordingly, her critical methodology is based on the close reading of the texts under scrutiny, allowing for their representation of cross-cultural complexities to emerge and foregrounding their specific textual strategies. This does not mean, however, that she refuses to use secondary or theoretical material. On the contrary, her use of theoretical sources is both pertinent and illuminating. The volume is highly informative on the issues under discussion in relation to each of the texts, offering brief preliminary surveys on topics such as transnational adoption, the role of translation in the global market or evolutionary theories and popular ethology, among others.

The first chapter, entitled 'Red Letters. Hester Prynne in India and Arizona', is devoted to two contemporary rewritings of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter: The Holder of the World* (1993), by Bharati Mukherjee, and *S.* (1988), by John Updike. Making use of dichotomies such as imagination vs. reason (30) or spirituality vs. economy (36), the author analyzes the ways in which both Mukherjee and Updike write back to Hawthorne's text, considered as a token of "emblematically colonial discourse" (14). The chapter explores, in Newman's terms, "the instrumentalisation of culture in the organisation of corporate and transnational workforces, the status of neohistoricist revisionism and the use of historical source material in the discussion of the 'long chronology' of globalisation in earlier imperial practices" (13). The author parallels Mukherjee's exploration of imperial practices and their effect on the Western perception of India as the embodiment of 'otherness' with Updike's parody of the appropriation of that 'otherness' for commercial purposes. According to her, both novels explore how cultural identities are transformed and manipulated to the advantage of transnational corporations, and they do so by means of a narrative strategy that foregrounds both the historical dimension of the problem and the cultural practices that contribute to it. A final interesting aspect of this chapter is the author's discussion of both novels as part of a tradition of rewriting or re-visiting of canonical works that has as its main feature the illumination of those aspects that were obscured in the pre-text, problematizing the ideological and cultural assumptions underlying their particular narrative strategies.

In the second chapter, 'In the Missionary Position', the author focuses on the thematic presence of China in two works by Emily Prager: the story 'A Visit from the Footbinder', included in the volume of the same title (1982), and *Wuhu Diary* (2002). In both texts, children and development are the two keywords for her reading, which is guided by a mainly sociological interest in the relationships between USA and China through transactions involving children. In her reading of 'A Visit from the Footbinder', Newman questions the tendency to categorize the story and the characters in terms of binary oppositions, such as innocent women vs. brutal men, symbolic East vs. functional West. This strategy proves particularly useful for her reading of *Wuhu Diary*, a text which resists binary categorization by playing with the ideas of development and underdevelopment, childhood and adult life in non-lineal ways. The author examines the issue of transnational adoption in connection to the Chinese process of modernization, showing the social and cultural price paid for development. More interesting still than the insightful sociological comment, however, is the author's account of how new economic phenomena (transnational adoption in this case) force writers to create and experiment with new narrative genres. In this sense, the author's reading of *Wuhu Diary* in terms of genre and narrative structure is one of the major achievements of this chapter.

Chapter three starts with a similar narratological analysis, in this case of the American slave narrative. The title of this chapter, 'Back Atlantic or Black Athena? Globalising the African-American Story', points to the contemporary reception of slave narratives, as well as to the rewriting and re-appropriating of the stylistic, structural and thematic features of this genre on the part of several contemporary authors. Newman warns against the risk of losing sight of the local aspects of narrative in favor of what

may be called an allegorical use of slave narrative for the global market, and uses Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as an illustration of how "it is possible for a novel to be both specifically local (authentic in terms of the folk) and globally significant" (98). The author's major concern in this chapter is the question of whether historical sources should be used by fiction to produce global literary models, unbinding history from its local specificity. The author refers to "neo-slave narratives" as part of the 20th century cultural tendency toward prosthetic memory, and associates it with the popular longing to "experience history" in a personal, even bodily way (78-79). She tests her arguments on two contemporary novels, Joan Brady's *Theory of War* (1994) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which dislocate the racial issue or transpose it to generic terms.

The fourth chapter continues along similar lines. Entitled 'Local Life, Global Death. David Bradley's Surrogate Stories', it is devoted to Bradley's 1981 novel *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981). Newman's reading of this text is articulated on "the relation of slavery to modernity, particularly figured in communication systems and in the relation of local to global" (100). As in previous chapters of the book, she builds anthropological and sociological arguments on death and slavery around a binary opposition. In this case, global modernity is allied to death, while the local is described as "life-giving" (105). Newman seems here to accept the neat distinction between global and local without exploring the complex ways in which those concepts operate and interrelate in the novel, assuming that their interpretive potential derives from the prioritization of one over the other. The most brilliant aspect of the chapter, however, is the author's examination of digression as a narrative mechanism deployed by Bradley in order to question a notion of history as a closed, factual referent. "The point", she argues, "is that miscommunication, the wrong story, precedes the delivery of the right story" (102). Newman's narratological analysis provides an illuminating explanation of the structure of the novel as a series of stories that displace each other. Bradley thus creates several narratives that may correspond to the *incident* mentioned in the title, contributing to the reader's feeling that the historical referent it alludes to is unstable and endlessly deferred.

The fifth chapter is the only discordant note in the book, for it deals with a novel which does not exactly fit in the field of American literature. In fact, Peter Høeg's *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1992) was not even written in English, but in Danish. The international success of this novel leads Newman to discuss issues such as translation and its role in the creation of a global cultural market. The 'American connection' for the novel comes, in any case, from the fact that its plot is partly set in a US military base in Greenland. Newman uses the political and scientific background for this thriller as the basis for a rhetorical and anthropological analysis of pollution and the idea of the parasite. The theoretical sources in this chapter are mainly Michel Serres' *The Parasite* and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. It may be claimed, however, that her contention about the ambiguity of the host-guest relationship (126) is close to the deconstructive analysis of the same problem in J. Hillis Miller's celebrated essay 'The Critic as Host' (1977). Another interesting aspect of this chapter is the analysis of different fields of imagery in terms of information theory: on the one hand, images related to interference and the interruption of the information flow are recurrent in the novel; on the other

hand, the symbolic value of snow is described in terms of emptiness and absence of information.

Chapter six, under the title of 'Southern Apes. McCarthy's Neotenous Killers', discusses Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) from the point of view of evolutionary theories and popular ethology. Newman contends that most readings of this novel have seen it as a critique of American imperialism, perceiving its depiction of extreme violence as a condemnation of Manifest Destiny ideology. In its belief in evolutionary, technological progress and determinism, she claims, Manifest Destiny may be assimilated to contemporary globalization. Her reading of the novel, however, avoids the imperialist debate, and focuses instead on "the exculpatory attraction of a genealogy of violence" (147). The author offers a sophisticated reading that traces the shifting hunter-hunted relationships between characters, displaying an outstanding knowledge of secondary literature on evolution and anthropology. Newman examines the interchangeability of hunter-hunted positions at different stages in the novel, which she considers to work as anthropological universals. She emphasizes, therefore, the global nature of predation over the historical specificity of the setting chosen by McCarthy to tell his story.

The last chapter of the volume proposes an interesting reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002). The chapter opens with a reflection on the role played by narrative in a world of broadband internet connections and instant access to information: "Is there a use for the novel when primary myths have been superseded by internet connections and software writers?" (151). From this stance, Newman builds an argument on how globalization (and broadband technology as a metonymy for it) affects the way stories are told. In a world of increasingly competing narratives, a narrator has to struggle with many other potential narrators in order to deliver his or her story successfully to its audience. Family history, international terrorism, software programming or worldwide media are some of the competing narratives which Tara, Mukherjee's narrator, has to beat in order to tell her story. The web becomes, in Newman's reading, a trope to explain particular narrative strategies that bring forth issues of connectivity and simultaneity. Mukherjee's novel, according to Newman, operates horizontally as a set of short passes from one story to a competing one: "the narrative passes from one controller to another, at times appearing to be misdirected or displaced, with the story moving forward through changes of direction, side-passes, misdirections and feints" (156).

In her conclusion, Newman goes back to her argument on competing narratives in order to extend it to the global reception of the works she has analyzed in the preceding chapters. Global fictions, she claims, demand complex readings which take into account their multilayered structures and problematic connections with the traditions from which they emerge, and invite provisional interpretations, open up for future revisiting and re-reading: "The reader recognises him- or herself as a surrogate in an endless chain, not a 'first reader', perhaps, but emphatically not a last reader, either" (171).

The book is undoubtedly a welcome contribution to the study of American literature in the wider framework of global culture, as it offers informative accounts of relevant phenomena in connection with globalization and the ways they are represented and discussed in contemporary fiction. Another of its strengths is definitely its attention

to narrative structure and technique, which results in brilliant analyses of the textual mechanisms used by authors in the works under scrutiny. The author's insightful, substantiated readings of the chosen texts make it a valuable source for scholars interested in the issues of globalization and transnationalism in general, as well as for researchers on the work of the specific authors included in it.

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