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REVIEW

Eva Pelayo Sañudo

American Migrant Fictions. Sonia Weiner. 2018 141

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American Migrant Fictions. Sonia Weiner. **Leiden: Brill: Rodopi, 2018, 243 pages**

Sonia Weiner's *American Migrant Fictions* (2018) concentrates on a lesser-known yet varied corpus of migrant writers in the US pertaining to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a wave which was fewer in numbers than the previous "great migration" and also substantially different regarding national origins: rather than immigration arrived from Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Weiner approaches more recent waves predominantly from Latin American, Asia and a slight European portion from the former Soviet Union. Specifically, the author focuses on post-1965 migrants as an effective turning point when the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act opened the door to immigration after the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act had banned it since 1924. Weiner also argues that another significant change perceived in the artists examined is the transition from cultural anxiety to the celebration of diversity. While earlier migrants were concerned with assimilation, discrimination and the uncomfortable state of in-betweenness, later representatives of the so-called "Literature of the Arrival" emphasize difference and multiplicity, "benefit from an excess of roots and propose new visions of American selfhood" (6–7). The book is an enlightening study of core notions relevant to the fields of migration and diaspora studies about the ever-going construction of identity and the growing relevance of space as a tool of social and cultural analysis (Brady 2006). These concepts are particularly refreshed by shifting attention to the question of narrative form, with the tentative claim that this is intimately related to the identity issues reflected in the works.

Weiner's study presents a familiar structure that makes it easy for readers to follow as the book is neatly divided into separate sections each corresponding to one of the five authors discussed: Bosnian Aleksandar Hemon, Vietnamese GB Tran, Dominican Junot Díaz, Russian Boris Fishman, and Indian Vikram Chandra. In the "Introduction: The Spatial Aesthetics of Transnationalism and Translingualism," Weiner presents a coherent corpus in an otherwise disparate array of writers by presenting her theoretical and methodological approach (transnationalism, space,

identity) based on works which share a strong transnational dimension and a heightened spatial sensitivity mostly resulting from an increasingly globalized world. Yet the study lacks a more detailed discussion regarding the selection of the primary works in terms of women's representation given that all of the authors are male and gender is also generally missing as an analytical category. For a study interested in the plurality of spaces and perspectives, feminist theory, no doubt, would have proved invaluable supporting material. Specifically, immigrant and ethnic women writers have usually been at the forefront of contesting dominant power structures and paradigms of representation, as well as (re)imagining alternatives for cultural transformation including altering conventional narrative forms towards more suitable expressions of identity (Karafali 1998).

The first chapter, "Double Visions and Aesthetics of the Migratory: Aleksandar Hemon's *Lazarus Project*," deals with the effect of concrete visual expressive means such as photographs to reflect migrant identity. They are commonly privileged "as tangible configurations of space they endorse an ontological status that differs from that of words" (34). For this reason, this is an apt choice in which aesthetics informs content through a "dual-verbal and visual storyline" that is "indicative of a consciousness that embodies multiple perspectives, typical to the migrant" (39). By combining text and image, Weiner demonstrates the aforementioned emphasis on excess and difference (or here "doubleness") to successfully capture immigrant experience such as the fracture of time and space, the link between the past and the present, the fact that migratory phenomena often entail the persistence of "'other' spatial and temporal dimensions" (40). Accordingly, Weiner also discusses the essential usefulness of photographs to the deconstruction of history and (re)construction of identity inasmuch as these are primarily understood as "elaborately woven fictions" (43) and thus challenge the authority traditionally exerted by conceptions of photographic referentiality and truth through their overpowering role as faithful "documents" (Sontag [1977] 2001: 6). The second chapter, "Cohesive Fragments: GB Tran's Graphic Memoir *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*," similarly addresses the function of images to reflect a double consciousness which is aimed at integration after the experiences of war, dislocation and migration. This visual narrative is here crafted using the comic, a genre that "eschew[s] linearity and two-dimensionality by employing techniques that have the effect of conflating, bridging, expanding, condensing and intensifying space and time" (35). Importantly, Weiner is again acute in signaling not only the ontological but also the creative power allowed by images, emphasizing constructiveness and questioning traditional limited claims of objectivity and accuracy. In this way, rather than simply being tools of unequivocal referentiality, images can also work to activate equally valuable processes such as memory or storytelling.

The third chapter, "Shape Shifting and the Shifting of Shapes: Migration and Transformation in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," discusses the infinite possibilities in the experimentation with form, varying from the

continuous shift of narrative genres – comic, sci-fiction and fantasy– to the alteration of conventional techniques – de-centering narrator omniscience in favor of marginal voices or including “‘underground’ storytelling modes, such as hearsay, footnotes and silences” (117). The aim of this intense formal experimentation, labelled as “intertextuality to an extreme,” is again to reflect issues grounded on the experience of migration, the author’s “transnational and transatlantic make-up” (123–124). In particular the writer’s explicit concern lies in preventing his work “from being authoritarian,” which is explained as being due to the traditional equation between authorship and authority as well as his own familiarity with dictatorship (117). Regarding literary theory, certain narratives are imbued with notions of truth and completeness that do not necessarily correspond with the plurality of perspectives and accounts intrinsic to most events and people. Particularly, the migrant condition shows that no story can be finite as, for example, Dominican historical accounts are full of erasures, silences and competing versions. In this vein, since identity is also a kind of narration, formal strategies are appropriately heightened in that they are “not merely playful aesthetic tools” but a declared means “to combat the claustrophobic notion of One Story” (121).

The fourth chapter, “Weathering the Divide between There and Here: In-between Spaces in Boris Fishman’s *A Replacement Life*,” focuses on the intense spatial awareness of the migrant subject which provokes the perception of boundaries in all type of everyday locales and encounters, thus undermining the traditional clear-cut distinction between the spaces and times allotted to the act of migration: the past and the old country (Russia) versus the present and the host country (US). As a consequence, this chapter develops a similar questioning of dominant means of expression or cultural understandings, in this case the map as an instrument that “creates and maintains boundaries,” “a system that communicates a social order, which is then experienced and reproduced by those who use it” (151). Contesting maps’ traditional associations with authority (e.g. for the creation of states), accuracy and objectivity means destabilizing the “spatial hierarchies” which guarantee social inequalities (152). Precisely, although the border’s materiality exerts a strong power, it is essentially a construction that can also be transgressed and reconfigured due to the very “porousness of boundaries” (153). In other words, the characters analyzed are again resisting marginality and seen as capable actors who shape their multiple worlds through both a visual aesthetics and ethics.

The final chapter, “Translation and Transcreation in Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth* and *Pouring Rain*,” returns again to storytelling to explore different temporalities and the representation of spatiality. Using the form of an epic through embedded stories that constitute the visual image of a labyrinth and by borrowing themes or techniques from filmic spectacle, Weiner sustains that these aesthetic strategies of genre crossings and the interweaving of traditions serve the purposes of mediation and translation inherent to the migrant condition. Stories rather than linear history are thus located within a cultural tradition based on exchanges,

mutual influence and re-appropriation, and are therefore reflective of transnational lives. Storytelling is the expressive means that can usefully capture not only the multiplicity of individual identity but also the collective imagination of a given nation due to the possibilities of reinvention (the act of retelling and rewriting) that such narrative form enables.

On the whole, *American Migrant Fictions* points towards the conciliation of different cultural backgrounds. As a consequence, the state of in-betweenness is celebrated as a particularly positive critical and ontological framework that can lead to transformation, as is emphasized by Weiner from the outset by quoting from Salman Rushdie's well-known belief that migrants can bring newness into the world. This is not to imply that resistance and subversion are always embraced or that satisfactory narratives are ever finally reached. Departing from simplistic approaches, Weiner rightfully acknowledges that identity is never finite but a never-ending process and usefully foregrounds that the migrant experience may need further accommodation particularly through the possibilities of manifold expressive means. Although the study would have benefitted from a more comprehensive analysis in terms of a gender balance, it is an engaging and inspiring book that establishes an insightful interpretive framework by delving into the tripartite relation between form, space and identity, opening up new avenues for the analysis of migrant narratives in our increasingly plural and shifting times.

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