

Reading Transcultural Cities

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSCULTURAL URBAN IMAGINARIES

Isabel Carrera Suárez

This volume derives from research carried out at the University of Oviedo on literary representations of the global, gendered city, and brings together theoretical and critical reflections on contemporary urban texts, with a special focus on transterritorial and transcultural exchanges.¹ Manuel Castells's definition of the global city as a fluid and ever-changing network, which combines a transnational, horizontal reach with internal disconnection, prompted the early structure of enquiry into features of transcultural urban representation. This city of fluxes, internationally connected while internally excluding, is confirmed by most of the texts analysed in the volume, many of them poignantly describing worlds of strict spatial segregation; however, there is also –parallel to this binary of the global/local– a regional, often national and postcolonial dimension to the cities discussed, that constitutes a powerful force behind some urban configurations. While many of the essays focus on European and North Atlantic geographies, all of the sites described are inextricably linked to other geopolitical

1. We would like to thank all the members of the research projects, and our extended research team, for the work and insights that support this volume, as well as all the participants in the related seminars held in Oviedo, and also in Mallorca and Havana. The research was enabled by the funding of two consecutive R&D projects, financed by the Spanish National Plan for Research, Development and Innovation: MEGAPOLIS (HUM2006-13601-CO2-01), and the current project, COSMOPOLIS FFI2010-17296.

axes, to neo/colonial routes or international displacements, often migratory or diasporic, sometimes sheerly exploitative. The individual experiences behind these displacements are, of course, greatly varied. The essays which follow take equally diverse perspectives on the urban, while sharing thematic and critical ground, not least because of the interweavings offered by the texts themselves. Although most of the writings discussed are very recent, and their settings fall fully within the Information Age, there is a remarkable persistence of the physical human body (racialised, gendered, desiring, too often violated), linked to the pervasive themes of social class and urban mobility or confinement. Many of the protagonists, as several authors point out, seem particularly apt examples of Liz Bondi's *embodied identities* or Elizabeth Grosz's *citified embodiments*. The materiality and the symbolic power of dwelling-places appears in forms that range from the iconic high-rise to the basement from which a Nuyorican girl catalogues the legs of passers-by, or, more extremely, the industrial refrigerator that becomes a makeshift home in the outskirts of Havana. Other repeated motifs in the volume are the communal power of private or semipublic meeting spaces, the gendered normativity of the streets, and the constant challenges to urban restrictions. Most texts find some urban redemption in transgressions, practiced or utopian, and present cities as ambiguous places of belonging and exclusion, of desire, and sometimes of escape, of empowering memory, solidarity and enabling transcultural encounters. The essays offer a world of shifting and contrasting urban experiences in dialogical contiguity.

Rashmi Varma's opening chapter, "Zone of Occult Instability: Theorising the Postcolonial City", reconceptualises the postcolonial city, reminding us of the erasure practised by excessively homogenizing theories of the "global city" and of modernity. Starting from Frantz Fanon's writing on the colonial town, the segregated urban formation he termed "the Manichean city", Varma reviews the historical creation of the postcolonial urban, from the old colonized cities ("prototypes of the late twentieth-century Third World city") to current postcolonial urban subjectivities, with their attempts to imagine a "socially just space

for all" through new social movements, subjects and collectivities. She invites readers to go beyond Fanon, beyond Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial desire as self-in-the-Other's place, beyond liminal identities, to envisage a re-possession of urban space, one that will not exclude analysis of sexual politics. Arguing the importance of the complex processes of provincialization and nativization in postcolonial cities, in tension and simultaneity with those of globalization, she emphasises the critique of binaries and potential subversion effected by the new understandings of postcolonial subjectivity, despite the material realities of city dwellers whom Mike Davis has described as the "*new* wretched of the earth". Varma's final illustration of her argument through the protagonist of Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* should be read in conjunction with the life-story of Teresita Roca told in the final chapter of this volume.

Aritha van Herk's "Infiltrating the Transcultural City: Fenestrations, Farthingales, and Factory Girls" is a creative meditation on the possibilities and limitations of the voyeuristic, relentlessly windowed, twenty-first century transcultural city, particularly for women (workers) and for the observant artist. In a text rich with allusion, alliteration and insights into urban homes and their thresholds, she uses the apparently unrelated images of the window and the farthingale to signify the glimpsed promises of city interaction and the imposed control which her female subjects challenge in their everyday occupations of city space ("factory girls" or women at work) or, alternatively, in the imaginative construction of women's stories. The representational *fenêtres* of the HBO *Voyeur* project, like the paintings of Edward Hopper, intimate the complexities of desire, as do the historically transnational farthingales, here ultimately compared to the binding architectural structures of the high rise: both items suggest contradictory, paradoxical desires and boundaries. The narrator's final criss-crossing of the transcultural, mercantile city-space of Calgary, is mapped through everyday interaction with the many transnational Canadian women workers who keep the city running, who defy public/private mandates, appropriating the streets and pursuing their wish; she moves between the practicalities and

the imaginative spaces of the city, discovered in the novels read and written by the women captured, gazed at, imagined. Her enabling, matrixial gaze records and invites urban appropriation.

In a bleaker perspective of the opportunities offered by the city, Gabriele Griffin's "Cosmopolitanism, Urbanity, Migration, Gender and Marginality: Views of the City", reflects on the ways in which the city, in its anonymising and atomizing force, and contradicting much theorising on urban opportunity, can act to contain women and debar them from prospects that may exist within very close proximity but may be effectively unavailable to them. Drawing on empirical data gathered while interviewing women from South Asian communities in the UK on their attendance to theatre performances, and using fictional texts and films as representational parallels, Griffin argues that the women interviewed, like the characters in fictive narratives such as Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003), Stephen Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) or Winsome Pinnok's play *Mules* (1996), exist in a parallel reality to the commonly celebrated diasporic, urban sites of opportunity, and inhabit a circumscribed space where opportunity is an illusion; their urban reality is a non-place created by the structural circumstances of their gendered and racialised lives.

The next three chapters focus on specific European cities and their position in shifting national imaginaries. Katherine O'Donnell's "... in the dim light of Dublin': The City in Keith Ridgway's *The Long Falling*" carefully historicizes the setting of novel (Monaghan and Dublin, February 1992, prior to the decriminalising of gay sexuality) to follow its tale of transition from "old Ireland" to the "modern" nation. By discussing the novel within contemporary events crucial to the Catholic Church and to Irish nationalism, and within the effects of the new consumer "modernity" (including the iconicity of gay men) on the city of Dublin, O'Donnell uncovers Ridgway's hopeful but ambiguous representation of the capital city as a transitional zone. Old Ireland (dark, poor, church-controlled, brutally misogynistic and homophobic, permeated by fear, violence and alcohol) is not simply and unproblematically contrasted to a liberating Dublin: although the city is posed as a site of escape, and as a venue for

solidarity and alternative communities, it is also the uncompromising town which imprisons a 14-year-old girl (the raped, pregnant girl forbidden to leave the country), and the space where Martin's psyche is unable to escape the "crude peasant and working class Irish, Catholic, masculinity" which prompts his reaction to his mother's tragic secret of domestic violence. O'Donnell shows that Martin's passages through Dublin's cosmopolitan spaces, gay saunas, historicised streets, juxtaposed with Grace's traversing of the open, inhabited spaces of Dublin, offer re-dings of the city as "a site of transition rather than rest, a place of upheaval, full of unsettling reminders and covert, unfinished business, a site for potential realisations, for possible redemption".

Focusing on a pre Celtic Tiger, pre immigration Dublin, many of whose landmarks no longer exist, Luz Mar González Arias's "In Dublin's Fair City: Citified Embodiments in Paula Meehan's *Urban Landscapes*", analyses Paula Meehan's portrait of a female, working-class section of the city, distinct from the commodified Joycean cartography, which corroborates the repression and violence described by Ridgway, showing class and gender segregation, even if hinting at forbidden crossings. Using Elizabeth Grosz's concept of mutually constitutive *bodies-cities*, González Arias examines Meehan's "citified" embodiments, organising the poems and commentary into three sections –childhood, adolescence and mature life–, an arrangement which emphasises the continuum of patriarchal mandates for girls and women. Meehan's recording of disappeared urban landscapes, the author argues, confers archival value to her writing; through these, and through her representation of broken, abused and poverty-stricken bodies, Meehan creates an alternative cartography of named streets and corporeal realities, while proposing ethical approaches to art which address readers and artists beyond the limits of the Irish capital city.

"Faith and Conversion on Foreign Grounds: Urban Translocation in Leila Aboulela's *Fiction*", by Carla Rodríguez González, focuses on religious translocations effected in present-day urban Britain, a central feature in fictional texts by (once "Sudanese-Scottish") writer Leila Aboulela. The chapter reflects on the empowerment that religion

offers Muslim women in hostile urban contexts, here identified as London and Aberdeen: under the symbolic protection of the mosque's minaret, Aboulela's characters construct a space of safety and comfort, not through diasporic nationhood or hybridity, but through rooted, personal faith. The author discusses this empowerment through religion, its origin in translocation, and the way in which the processes of modern Orientalism are reversed by the female characters of *The translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005) and "The Museum" (2001); she also poses a parallelism between the characters' exile and the metaphorical exile of their religious beliefs in Britain. The final section analyses Aboulela's proposal of cultural translation as a process which may counteract the modern Orientalism present in the globalised *non-spaces* of western higher education institutions. Aboulela's characters are shown to effect a dynamic coding and decoding of urban spaces which is an integral part of the intercultural dialogue, with British cities acting as spaces of contact that trigger self-empowerment; this gesture may include the author herself, as articulate cultural translator who has found her *locus of enunciation* and has situated Khartoum (and, arguably, Islamic women) on the international literary map.

Aboulela's troubled but hopeful East/West dialogue finds a complement in Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian work, analysed by Elizabeth Russell in "From Embodied Spaces to Disembodied Places: Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and *Escape*". Russell begins her essay by surveying visual representations of the (masculine) body politic, from Abraham Bosse's rendering of Leviathan to its parody in the cover illustration of Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark* (1982), in order to reflect on the representation of absolute power, body/subject enclosures, and the relationship between bodies and the polis. Appealing, like González Arias, to Elizabeth Grosz's view of mutually constitutive bodies and cities, as well as to theories of the uncanny and violence, and to Spivak's *planetary* reading of texts, she examines two works by the Indian author Manjula Padmanabhan, the play *Harvest* (2003) and the novel *Escape* (2008), which deal with dramatic effects of globalization and national policies on citizen's bodies. The first "like Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*,

analysed by Griffin" concerns the *harvesting* of organs and body parts in the Third World (Bombay) for the benefit of the first world (the USA); the second is set in a future society which has consummated the elimination of women, today partially practised in India (though not exclusively) through infanticide and foeticide. In both texts an all-male society imposes by force and/or persuasion an appropriation of the bodies of others, and the abjected protagonists are confined to enclosed, suffocating spaces, submitted to intense surveillance, in danger of losing their bodies/lives. Russell relates these fictions to the chain body-city, city-nation, nation-world, held together through production and reproduction, and to attitudes of violence and fear of women, fear of the Other, as well as to exclusionary practices in the conception of cities.

An imagined and diasporic India will return in sections of the next two chapters, which are set in gateway North American cities, Vancouver and New York. In "This girl, where does she belong?: Gendered Diasporas and Translocal Spaces in Vancouver Writing" Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo explores the ways in which localities intersect and overlap in diasporic texts set in Vancouver. Two books from geographically diverse origins, Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2007) and Carmen Rodríguez's *And a Body to Remember With* (1997), provide examples of a city inhabited socially, spatially and imaginatively by migrant women who create translocal places, alternative sites of encounter, of citizenship or political activism. These spaces often blur the public/private boundaries, while incorporating other urban landscapes into the Vancouver imaginary: the overlapping cityscapes of their Indian or Chilean *home* town, more poignantly remembered in forced political exile. The Delhi Junction Café, the Taj Mahal home, the solidarity events where Chilean *empanadas* are sold, serve various purposes of subject formation in the shuttle between *abroad* and *home*. The essay discusses liminal existence, daily migrations, and the psychic construction of urban place.

A similar effort to explore gendered urban experience in an already defined diasporic space inspires Esther Álvarez López's analysis of Nuyorican writers in "Down the Mean Streets of the Barrio: Gendering the Transcultural City in Nuyorican Literature" a chapter

which bridges the geographies of previous sections and the two to follow, centred on movement between Cuba and the United States. The author focuses on the patriarchal gender regimes that configure the (Puerto Rican) *barrio*, and the private and public transgressions of the women who people this most essentially transnational, but lingeringly colonial and segregated, urban space. Contrasting the work of male writers, like Piri Thomas or Abraham Rodriguez, with writing by Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Nicholasa Mohr and Marta Moreno Vega, Álvarez López shows the intracommunity gender segregation and repression imposed by the streets, but also the women's daily struggle to overcome such limitations via the spaces which constitute their dwellings, meeting points, and transgressions: the semi-public refuge of the *bodegas* and *botánicas*, the spaces of music and dance, the incursions outside the *barrio*: trespassing for driving lessons, English lessons, beauty shopping, and ultimately, the sometimes dangerous walk to the school which, through its empowering education, will ultimately allow escape. Álvarez López's analysis shows how the texts reflect the curtailment of city promises, yet also the degree of freedom stolen from contiguous, forbidden spaces, a fragile opportunity to overcome patriarchal community mandates and social exclusion.

Luisa Campuzano's "Cristina García: Narratives of the National and the Postnational" also deals with a Hispanic community in New York, but a different and more privileged one, that of Cuban exiles or Cuban New Yorkers, whose history, as the author demonstrates, is much older than is usually recalled: the Cuban fetishisation of shopping at Lord & Taylor existed long before its cameo in García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, just as the politically charged, intense Cuba-USA connection long predates 1959. Situating Cristina García in this context of overdetermined bilateral relations, and within the generation of Cuban-American writers of the 1980s, Campuzano examines the evolution of the novelist's positioning towards Cuba, from the search for roots and origins, present in her early bestselling novels, to an acceptance of biculturality and, more recently, a transcendence of national barriers, exploring a broader Latino

framework and postnational condition. García's latest novels present unusual itineraries and mappings: the Chinese quarter of Havana, in *Monkey Hunting* (2003), seen through Chen Pan's rhizomatic life, voyages and descendants; the interconnected and postmigratory spaces of *A Handbook to Luck* (2007) and *The Lady Matador's Hotel* (2010). These texts' narratives are inextricable from the complexity of transnational urban flows, migratory, pecuniary and criminal.

The volume closes with an extraordinary life-story by gLoria Caballero Roca, "A Woman's Journey of Transgression from Santiago to Havana", which conveys the realities of migratory moves triggered by poverty, and marked by gender and colour. Teresita's journey from Eastern Cuba to the post-revolutionary capital city, her determined occupation of a more than precarious living space, her family's life as *illegal* fringe-dwellers and their later insertion into the city, into Old Havana, into the sanctified space of a named and numbered street, an official address, a myriad of (women's) jobs and an education for her children, is indeed a story of extraordinary achievement; but it is also one of dramatic struggle, which speaks worlds of the material, basic need for dwelling space. It acts as an exceptional coda to our theorising on space, gender, difference.