

## Migrant Writings: North America

Fedora Giordano  
Università degli Studi di Torino  
*fedora.giordano@unito.it*

The contributions to the session on migrant writings in North America address women's cultural space in the U.S. and in its conflicted borders with Mexico and the Caribbean. The discussion centers on the literature by American women native speakers of Arabic, Bengali, Korean, French, Polish, Spanish, who have acquired English as a second or third language and are writing in English or hybridizing English with their national languages, and sometimes with more languages acquired in their international affiliations.

Papers in this panel address migrant discourse in North America of the past thirty years or so, a time of mass migration and of critically new discussions on feminisms, gender, borders, frontiers, nationalities, diasporas, ethnicities, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, which have brought to redefinitions of identities. James Clifford has challenged ideas of «pure» nations and cultures, foregrounding the necessity of looking comparatively at «specific dynamics of dwelling/traveling», *routes/roots*, bringing the bachtinian «chronotope of culture... to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence» (J. Clifford, 1997: 24-25). Definitions of exile, migration and diaspora have thus been re-discussed and shown as fluid, porous, to the point that travel has been posed as more suitable for embracing all those merging positions (*idem*). Cosmopolitanism, no longer understood as a dimension limited to the affluent few, to expatriate artists, intellectual élites and travelers, is being redefined to include migrations (S.S. Friedman, 2007). The discussion of different allegiances to roots and nations has brought, among others, to positions of transplant, «rooted cosmopolitan» and «cosmopolitan patriot» (K.A. Appiah, 1997). A nation founded on colonialism and immigration, the U.S. is moving from rigid ethnic distinctions to public recognition of multiple affiliations (as shown in the U.S. Census) and performative identities in what cultural historians are calling a «postethnic America» (D. Hollinger, 2000). New possibilities for global interconnectedness offered by the World Wide Web and the slow but constant narrowing of the digital gap, together with new possibilities of traveling back home and moving on to new destinations are

changing the ways in which migrants participate in local, national, and transnational communities, preserve their cultural roots, and use new forms of expression. While English has acquired the status of *lingua franca*, monolingualism has been challenged within the U.S. by the rise of Spanish to the public status of second language in a number of states. The U.S. politics of assimilation, «a powerful practice that reduces languages to one common denominator» (D. Sommer, 2007: 4), has been resisted by women writing in/across the borders of other cultures and other languages and opposed through hybridization in language practice and in literary texts. Fluidity of identity, resistance to assimilation, bilingualism and hybridity are characterizing more and more migrant literatures by women in North America (C. Mardorossian, 2002).

It is this new transnational, cosmopolitan position that our keynote speaker Marina Camboni foregrounds in the multilingual practices of contemporary American women poets. Her paper *Languages of Exile, Migration and Travel: A Cosmopolitan Perspective* discusses multilingual American women poets Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lebanese-French-American Etel Adnan, Syrian-American Mohja Kahf and South Korean American Teresa Hak Kiung Cha as examples of a new cosmopolitanism. Locating contemporary migrant women writings in the different contiguous positions that have been categorized as *nepantla* by Gloria Anzaldúa, as *exo* or «the outsider» by Toni Maraini, as *irreducibilité* by Assia Djébar and as *nomadic otherhow* by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Camboni foregrounds a common link in anglophone DuPlessis' statement that a poem «craves multilingualism», sees Adnan's multi-locality create «un langage d'un langage» (Glissant) and shows Theresa Hak Kiung Cha's multilingual epic *Dictée* positioning her in a cosmopolitan lineage of powerful rebel women with Jeanne d'Arc, Yu Guan Soon and her own mother. Camboni's essay opens and closes with quotations from *E-mails from Scheherazad* by Mohja Kahf; here the hybridization of English with Arabic and Brazilian, and images of food brought through the Internet across linguistic and cultural divides point not only to multiple border crossings but to the hope of cosmopolitanism.

Carmen Concilio further complicates the position of women writers of Middle Eastern origins in post September 11<sup>th</sup> New York. Her paper *New York: A Woman's Dream* shows how Zena El Khalil and Suhir Hammad had to renegotiate their position as New Yorkers after the terrorist attacks. Contrasting feelings of inclusion and exclusion, experienced within an awareness of world

conflicts, brought dramatic reactions. Zena El Khalil's *Beirut I Love You* voices her conflicted decision of leaving the U.S. and going back to Beirut, while Suhir Hammad's poem works through contradictory alliances towards a reaffirmation of cultural citizenship. Furthermore Concilio's paper foregrounds New York as space of contrasting positions in the novels of South Asian women writers. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* articulates the experiences of exile, language translation and cultural adjustment towards integration and citizenship, while Kiran Desai's *The Kitchen* foregrounds the colonial experience and interstitial position of contemporary illegal immigrant workers.

Among writers of South Eastern origin, Bharati Mukherjee insists on her position not as Indian but as American and transnational. Natasha Lavigilante's paper *L'esthétique transnationale: Etude de «Leave it to Me» de Bharati Mukherjee* discusses the novel's aesthetics as political act which problematizes the concept of nation. Hybridizing American literature and the protagonist's identity through Hindu and Greek mythology, Mukherjee gives shape to a transnational aesthetics and critiques American multiculturalism for its center/periphery opposition, taking a «cultural citizenship» stand.

The exilic position is the starting point for the discussion in *Exile, absence and memory in Azar Nafisi's «Reading Lolita in Tebran» and Eva Hoffman's «Lost in Translation»* by Gabriela Seccardini. Discussing the roles of absence and memory in her comparative reading of the two memoirs Seccardini foregrounds exile as condition for literary creation. Using Bhaba's «third space» in her reading of the two texts, Seccardini shows the processes of Nafisi's recreation of home and the past as a «portable world» and of Hoffman's overcoming their crystallization in the «amber» of nostalgia, hence the cathartic role of writing in English to create a new life in a new language.

The last two papers address the different border positions of Cuban-American and Chicana writers.

Daniela Ciani Forza's *Transience from «exile» to «belonging» in two Cuban-American women writers* offers the historical background for the fluid position of an hyphenated identity, situated both in the U.S. and in Cuban history and *cubanía*. Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters* and Ana Menéndez' *Loving Che* problematize history and stories, exile and the absent homeland through narratives of mother-daughter disruptions and consequent daughters' quests to unravel the secrets of their mothers' absence and the pattern of their own lives.

Belonging to Cuba is the end of a complex journey to a place, in Ciani's words, «of metaphysical fluidity».

The last paper, by Pauline Berlage, brings us back to the fluid space of *Nepantla* theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa, a space of «multicentric cosmopolitanism» (Camboni). Her paper on *Ana Castillo or the limits of immigration literature: Xicanisma and multicultural writing* challenges the definition of Chicana literature as immigration or migrant literature showing the fluidity of these definitions. Berlage's discussion of *Watercolor Women Opaque Men* foregrounds its Xicanisma position and multilingual language of *mestizaje*. Articulating Aztec myths and Mexican culture the novel hybridizes American literature and the English language opposing the multicultural fallacy of positioning Chicana heritage only as fragment in White discourse, working towards a transnational, cosmopolitan position.

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