

Reading Transcultural Cities

Edited by

Isabel Carrera Suárez

Emilia Durán Almarza

Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo

COL·LECCIÓ ESTUDIS ANGLESOS

Universitat de les Illes Balears

Directores de la col·lecció:

Maria Juan Garau

Patricia Bastida Rodríguez

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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

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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