

**WOMEN ON THE MOVE: BODY, MEMORY AND FEMININITY IN  
PRESENT-DAY TRANSNATIONAL DIASPORIC WRITING**

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk, eds.  
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**VIOLETA DUCE SARASA**

Universidad de Zaragoza  
violeta.ducesarasa@gmail.com

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The publication of *The Age of Migration* by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller in 1993 confirmed what scholars, sociologists and journalists had been discussing for some time: international migration was affecting all regions of the world and the new culturally diverse panorama was challenging physical frontiers and questioning national identity. This volume updated theories of migration and reflected on the turn of the century's globalization and appearance of new identities. The attention to people in transit's identity led to a serious consideration of gender as an essential variable in these transnational movements (Boyd and Grieco 2003). Though women's migration had always been an important component of international migration, the United Nations Population Division estimated that in the year 2000, 49 per cent of all international migrants were women, the numbers reaching 51 per cent in more developed regions (2006: III). These numbers reinforced the need of analysing migration from a gender perspective and exploring how gender inequalities affect female migrants around the world. *Women on the Move: Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing* by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk examines the role of migrant women in the twenty-first century globalized world. This collection of critical essays compiles articles written by European feminist scholars who analyse the literary works of diverse diasporic female authors that bring into focus female experiences of migration and globalization. From a gender perspective, these researchers address topics such as trauma, displacement, memory, identity, violence and empowerment,

which they identify as representative of contemporary literature and the current social paradigm.

In a detailed introduction, Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk provide the reader with a general overview of the current situation in terms of migratory movements and globalization, pointing out the assets and liabilities of “a new global consciousness” (1-2) — a concept they adopt from Susan Friedman— of our contemporary multicultural society, which unquestionably can no longer think in other terms. Taking into account the increasing number of women in migration flows, the authors of the volume wonder whether migratory processes can contribute to reinforcing women’s inferior position (when women migrate in categories such as domestic work) or, by contrast, whether the journey and new location may offer an opportunity for women to develop autonomy and independence. Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk finally manifest their belief in diasporic literature as a space to recover the memories and stories of silenced women. Interestingly, they show awareness of the controversy of the relationship between identity and voice and, by discussing Spivak’s groundbreaking “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), among other related works, the authors express the commitment of the volume and its contributors to reflect on their privileged European position to speak and be heard. This promising introduction ends with the latest trends of feminism, those of transnational feminism or ecofeminism, and theories such as Baumann’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000) and Rushdie’s ‘imaginary homelands’ (1992) as methodological tools to carry out an inclusive analysis of the experiences of diasporic women in the suggested stories.

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The first section of the collection, entitled “Unbelongingness and Displacement in the Diaspora: Finding a Voice through Narrative”, aligns with the collection’s main aim of recuperating a lost voice through narration and explores whether traumatized migrants can truly accomplish this. By exploring the notions of “travelling bodies” (28) and “silenced minorities” (38), Cédric Courtois addresses the vulnerability of African females in Europe, where patriarchal systems attempt to consume their bodies and voices. The author concludes that female characters in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2009) take advantage of displacement to finally turn their bodies into a place of resistance, reappropriate them and make themselves heard. However, the fact that it is by experiencing violence and death that these female protagonists are able to make their statements makes oneself wonder if this is the only way in which these displaced female subjects can reclaim their voice. Merve Sarikaya-Şen discusses Zimbabweans’ “(un)belongingness” (48) in the diaspora in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), examining the loss of identity the protagonist suffers when she leaves her homeland and her inability to define herself

in the host land. By employing the anti-linear nature of romance writing, Sarikaya-Şen analyses the repetitive structure of traumatic experiences for Zimbabwean migrants and completes her analysis by making a call for international attention to the status of traumatized migrants who cannot leave their past behind. This dystopian view of contemporary migration makes the reader cast doubt on the likelihood that minorities can regain their voice in a globalized world.

The second section of the volume, titled “Globality, Locality and Cosmopolitanism”, addresses the diaspora as a disorienting space where the notion of home is complicated by different movements and locations. In the first chapter of the section, Beatriz Pérez Zapata analyses Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time* (2016), where a female protagonist with the background of the transatlantic slave trade tries to find her identity by travelling to different locations: London, Gambia and New York. Alluding to the dancing profession of the protagonist and her movement as migrant, Pérez Zapata finally states that ‘home’ does not necessarily mean a place where we are grounded. Pérez Zapata’s analysis looks beyond diasporic displacement and sees in Smith’s novel a promising possibility of finding identification in migrants’ journeys and transnational movements. In this line, María Rocío Cobo-Piñero explores cosmopolitanism and more specifically Taiye Selasi’s concept of “Afropolitanism” (78) to discuss the complexity of African diasporic subjects in Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013). Cobo-Piñero’s analysis ends by addressing the controversy of the umbrella term Afropolitanism as a name for a new generation of diasporic Africans and, more reasonably, she suggests considering locality and unique experiences as identificatory characteristics of people in transit.

“Defining Feminine Spaces: Home, Self, Identity and Food” is the title of the third section of the volume. Corinne Bigot as well as Chiara Battisti and Sidia Fiorato explore the limiting ‘feminine’ space of home and, more particularly, the kitchen as a place to acquire belongingness for displaced diasporic female subjects. By using the tropes of home and traditional food, Bigot analyses the short stories of Edwidge Danticat, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to conclude that diasporic women can make sense of their complex diasporic identities by making connections with their homeland. Similarly, Battisti and Fiorato study Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen* (2009) as an innovative approach to contemporary cultural identity and globalization. Food and female agency through cooking are presented in this analysis as empowering alternatives to traditional gendered and national identification for diasporic women. The fact that this section turns feminized places into empowering spaces reminds the reader of the permeability of labels and the opportunity for women to take advantage of it.

The two chapters in the fourth section of the volume, entitled “Femininity, Spatiality and Liminality”, present an in-depth analysis of what constitutes a

diasporic female, focusing on the female body and its connection to the land. Maria Amor Barros-del Río addresses contemporary Irish female migration in her analysis of Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006) and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009), which, according to her, challenge the representation of 'Mother Ireland' and the role of Irish women as protectors of Irish values. Barros-del Río ends her chapter by pointing to the need of a plurality of migratory experiences of women to transform traditional female identification. Selen Aktari-Sevgi studies how the intersection of liminality and mobility can contest traditional aspects of female subjectivity in Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015). Affective mobility is finally suggested as an alternative for Irish women to go beyond dislocation and in-betweenness. In the same vein, Julia Tofantšuk uses different notions related to history and memory, such as Julia Kristeva's notion of "women's time" (179), to examine the different and complex "skins" of female diasporic subjects in Charlotte Mendelson's *Almost English* (2013). The various (dis)locations and the absence of memory are eventually analysed as distinguishing features of the protagonist's identity, therefore revealing displacement as a positive element for the self-awareness process of diasporic subjects. This section optimistically suggests a favourable outcome of transnational movements through inclusion and self-recognition of female migrants, or at least European migrants.

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"Crossing Borders: Female Bodies and Identities in Transit" is the last section of the volume and, as suggested by the title, the three chapters study the relationship between borders and identity with a greater focus on the temporal and spatial dimensions of the latter. In the first chapter, Paul Rüsse and Maialen Antxustegi-Etxarte Aranaga employ Anzaldúa's concept of 'la Frontera' as an in-between space of interaction to examine Ito Romo's short story collection *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000). By way of conclusion, the authors find the crossing of physical frontiers, as well as the conceptual borders that diasporic subjects must face in the US, as representative of Chicanas/os' identity, something that can become a powerful instrument to subvert their discriminated position. Britain as a globalized but racialized place is the topic of Carolina Sánchez-Palencia's analysis of Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004). The notion of "bodies in transit" (233) serves Sánchez-Palencia to come to the conclusion that multicultural societies still struggle to acknowledge diasporic subjects whose permeable identities attempt to break with hegemonic and patriarchal systems. Lastly, Silvia Pellicer-Ortín chooses Michelene Wandor's *False Relations* (2004) to prove that transnational links can help Jewish women to comprehend and make the most of their dislocated history, memory and identity. By employing transnational feminism (and borrowing a term by Nelson), Pellicer-Ortín analyses these Jewish retellings as "counterstories" (239) capable of destroying patriarchal and racist borders, finally offering diasporic writings as decolonizing tools to achieve equality. Although the notion of border

crossing is not a new one, this section reminds us of the importance for and responsibility of women, regardless of their class, ethnicity and origin, to cross borders and approach one another.

In conclusion, *Women on the Move: Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing* is an illuminating feminist volume which draws our attention to the important implications of gender in contemporary transnational movements. Though the corpus of analysis is varied and points to the plurality of female experiences of migration, the reader is left wondering what other theories and different voices coming from non-European authors would make of these experiences. Nevertheless, this collection of essays stresses the importance of listening to the narratives of women's experiences 'in transit' and the need to question biased social constructions. For this reason, the volume succeeds in making the reader continuously reflect on their position in the world. Moreover, Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk put forward diasporic literature as a space for recognition and a powerful means to accomplish the decolonization of hegemonic systems and unequal hierarchies in our contemporary globalized world. Unquestionably, this thorough analysis is an exceptional contribution to the fields of gender and transnational studies, which attempt to make sense of today's interconnected, global and ever-changing society.

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