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**Caroline Rosenthal (2011), *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban*.
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Caroline Rosenthal's interesting and well-researched study *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* focuses on two Canadian and two American urban novels, all published after the year 2000, in an attempt to demonstrate a shift in the representation of the urban environment in 21st century North American novel. Placing the texts in their national contexts (social, cultural and literary), and discussing them in the context of contemporary redefinitions of and new approaches to the concepts of space, race and gender, the author foregrounds the underlying nation-specific mythologies and the role the urban as a symbolic space plays in the national narratives. The comparative effort is then directed not at comparing contemporary representations of the urban experience in Canada and the United States, but rather at stressing the role of "national notions of symbolic spaces" (5) in the final shape of the novelistic representations. New York and Toronto have been selected by the author as exemplary settings for the US and Canadian contemporary representations of urban spaces, because of their symbolic import in the respective national contexts.

Rosenthal starts with distinguishing between city fiction, which she relates to modernist aesthetics and *weltanschauung*, and urban fiction. The latter term embraces texts exploring the urban in its contemporary variety. In urban fiction, claims the author, the city is not a mere setting of the text but rather 1. "inform[s] the mode of representation in some way"; 2. functions as "a vital means in creating the characters as well as the plot"; and finally 3. constitutes, under the guise of "the specific urban condition [,] ... an underlying discourse of the text" (2). Instead of the generalising and universalising impulse of the modernist city novels, urban fiction looks at the individual and the specific, at

particular modes of urban life, often making a link between “identity formation processes” and “the making of urban space” (2). Apart from the above mentioned features and an active engagement with issues of representation, space, race and gender the four texts selected for discussion – Siri Hustvedt’s *What I Loved* (2003), Paule Marshall’s *The Fisher King* (2000), Carol Shields’s *Unless* (2002) and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005)—employ strategies characteristic of contemporary literary realism. Rosenthal stresses in particular the fact of the narrative awareness of modern and postmodern critiques of realist representation that the novels display; and the fact that they focus on relationships and “affective forces that make urban space” (4), at the same time privileging corporeality and stressing significant links between urban spaces and embodied human subjects. These features are contrasted with what the author perceives as the postmodernist focus on the city as indifferent and somehow abstracted from the human; and the nebulous, abstract, decorporealized nature of postmodern discourses on identity, sex, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. She thus places the four texts “after postmodernism” (3), which seems rather premature. It is also questionable whether the approach to “representations of the urban” she defines as described above is indeed “decisively new” (3). The Canadian example proving to the contrary that comes to mind is, for example, Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987): a Toronto novel which, if classified (as many critics have done) as postmodern blatantly denies Rosenthal’s generalising claims concerning urban postmodern novel; and when defined as an example of contemporary literary realism blatantly denies her claims as to the radical nature of the “new” trend in urban fiction that she discusses in her book. Likewise, Ondaatje’s novel focuses on the vital link between the urban in its symbolic dimension and the narrative of the nation: another feature of the four novels Rosenthal analyses. Admittedly, Ondaatje does not describe contemporary urban experience, and while a single example cannot perhaps invalidate Rosenthal’s claims, her corpus is likewise too limited to prove the points she makes beyond any doubt, which the author openly admits. (264)

While I have doubts about some of the claims the author makes in order to delimit her research field and justify the choice of corpus, I find her comparative approach and stress on the divergent ways Canada and the US have defined themselves through symbolic spaces innovative and inspiring. The issue, which informs also her textual analyses, is discussed at length in the first chapter of the book titled “Imagining National Space: Symbolic Landscapes and National Canons,” in which the writer addresses the link between relevant elements of the national narratives, canon formation and the tradition of urban fiction in Canada and the United States. While these issues have been extensively explored by critics in relation to the United States, they have been, until very recently, neglected by critics of English-Canadian literature, which privileged wild, open spaces and the small town as settings, to the detriment of urban

fiction. Interestingly, Rosenthal, contradicting Frye, sees the root of the textual and cultural neglect of the urban in the lack of a clearly marked pastoral tradition in canonical Canadian literature, in which, she maintains, in contrast to the United States, the pastoral did not amalgamate with the idea of the nation. The author concludes that “nature-culture paradigms do not primarily occur in contemporary novels [written in Canada and the United States] in the sense that they use pastoral-urban divisions again, but in that they metatextually reflect on their history and their function for national cultures” (25).

Nation-specific ways of the semiotization of space are placed against the broader context of contemporary reevaluations of the concept of space, in particular urban space, in chapter 2: “Articulating Urban Space: Spacial Politics and Difference.” Here Rosenthal skilfully discusses major developments in the area, focusing on the contributions of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja, but also many others, and stressing the interrelatedness of the spacial and the social that the urban exemplifies. In this context, she foregrounds the multicultural, diverse nature of contemporary cities and the significance of the spacial organisation of the urban and its fictional articulations as symbolic of the ways nations deal with difference and of contemporary national identities. Contemporary city, criss-crossed by competing discourses, is critically perceived in its multistranded variety, as a non-unitary space that is realised through individual articulations by specific groups. Urban public spaces are defined not only by whom they include, but even more so by whom they exclude. Metropolises as cultural spaces inhabited by a variety of diasporic cultures, the author posits, share a number of characteristics of “the diaspora experience” (64). It is the diasporic experience that provides another focal point for her discussions, as she perceives it as a dynamic space of cultural innovation, which allows for transcending both minority discourses and the binaries of postcolonial theories. Similarly, the discourse of *flânerie* is used both by Rosenthal and the writers whose novels she discusses as a useful tool for the exploration of the shimmering and fluctuating nature of boundaries within contemporary cities, especially that, claims Rosenthal, contemporary women writers significantly reconfigure the discourse in their texts. The figure of the *flâneur* in its contemporary version is used to mediate between the symbolic and mundane aspects of the city, between the public and the private, and to transcend a number of dividing lines related to gender, sex, sexuality and race.

The two background chapters are followed by four well-researched and exhaustive analytical chapters, each devoted to one novel. In fact, in the study as a whole it is clear that the author has done an extremely thorough research. She clearly finds her sources so compelling that it is difficult for her not to share with the reader. Hence, I presume, extensive descriptive endnotes following each chapter, which contain interesting, but not necessarily vital

information, and constitute a significant interruption if perused while reading the text proper.

The literary texts discussed in the analytical chapters have been selected both for balance and variety, and I regret that they have not been discussed in a more thoroughly comparative way, though Rosenthal does provide in each chapter links to previously discussed texts. Her major findings are summed up in the short conclusive chapter aptly titled "Synthesis." The most important of those is that the novels deny earlier, modernist, and to a certain extent, postmodernist, depictions of the urban space as a space of coldness and spiritual homelessness. This is achieved by focusing on the affective dimension of the city, on the private and everyday, which are, nevertheless, not idealised; by stressing corporeality; and by focusing on the production of a variety of urban spaces by intimate interactions of embodied subjects.

Overall, reading Rosenthal's study is a rewarding experience. The solid research that forms the basis of the text, the clarity of argument, the novel nature of the selected topic, and the comparative aspects of the text make it worthy of recommendation and I have no doubt fellow Canadianists in particular will appreciate this contribution to the study of the urban novel.